

Backchannelling In Film Dialogue: A Pragmatic Analysis of *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck*

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Abstract

Backchannelling has an important role in making film conversations sound natural and emotionally meaningful. This study discusses the use of backchannelling expressions in the film *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck*. Backchannelling refers to short responses produced by listeners, such as “uh-huh,” “yeah,” “right,” and “I see,” which indicate attention, understanding, agreement, emotional reaction, and active participation during interaction (Yngve, 1970). This research aims to identify the types of backchannelling expressions found in the film, explain their communicative functions, and examine the frequency of their use. This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach. The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings show that the characters in the film frequently employ four main categories of backchannelling, namely minimal responses, agreement tokens, emotional responses, and continuers (McCarthy, 2003; Ward, 2006). Among these categories, agreement tokens appear most frequently, followed by minimal responses, emotional responses, and continuers. The analysis also indicates that backchannelling functions as a conversational strategy to express attentiveness, comprehension, empathy, emotional engagement, solidarity, and encouragement for speakers to continue their utterances. Furthermore, this study contributes to the fields of pragmatics, conversation analysis, and media discourse by emphasizing that backchannelling is not merely a linguistic feature, but also an interactional strategy that supports effective communication and strengthens interpersonal relationships in conversation.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only used to convey ideas and information, but also serves as an important medium for maintaining social interaction and building interpersonal relationships. In spoken communication, listeners actively participate in conversations through verbal and non-verbal responses that show attention, understanding, agreement, empathy, and emotional involvement. These responses are commonly known as backchannelling. The term backchannelling was introduced by Victor Yngve (1970), who describes it as listener feedback produced while the speaker is still talking without interrupting the ongoing interaction. Expressions such as “mm-hmm,” “yeah,” “right,” and “I see” function as signals that the listener is paying attention and remains engaged in the conversation. Schegloff (1982) further explains that backchannelling plays an important role in

conversational organization because it helps maintain interactional flow and supports turn-taking during communication.

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning in relation to context and situation during communication (Levinson, 1983). In spoken interaction, meaning is not formed solely through utterances, but also through listener reactions and contextual interpretation. Backchannelling reflects interpersonal meaning because listener responses may indicate empathy, attentiveness, comprehension, and agreement throughout communication. Gardner (2001) explains that backchannels represent the listener's stance and emotional engagement in conversation.

Backchannelling has become an important area of study in pragmatics and conversation analysis because it reflects how speakers and listeners cooperate in constructing meaning during interaction. Pragmatics emphasizes that meaning is influenced not only by utterances, but also by context, speaker intention, and listener interpretation (Levinson, 1983). In addition, Conversation Analysis explains that interaction is systematically organized through pauses, turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and listener responses (Sacks et al., 1974). Recent studies also highlight the complexity of backchannelling in communication. Paierl et al. (2025) explain that the timing of backchannel responses is closely connected to intonation, pauses, and conversational rhythm. Likewise, Blomsma et al. (2024) state that backchannelling also involves multimodal elements such as eye contact, gestures, head movements, and facial expressions.

Films can be used as valuable sources of conversational data because film dialogue is intentionally designed to reflect natural communication. Kozloff (2000) explains that cinematic dialogue often includes pragmatic features such as pauses, hesitation, interruptions, and backchannel responses in order to create realistic and emotionally engaging interactions. The film *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck* presents many emotionally intense conversations between characters, making it relevant for pragmatic analysis.

Throughout the film, the characters frequently use listener responses to express agreement, empathy, concern, support, and encouragement. These responses contribute significantly to the emotional atmosphere and the development of interpersonal relationships within the story. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the types, functions, and frequency of backchannelling expressions used in the film.

Backchannelling in Pragmatics

Conversation Analysis proposed by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) examines how interaction is systematically structured within social communication. Within this framework, backchannelling functions as an interactional strategy that enables listeners to participate actively while still supporting the speaker's turn without interrupting the flow of conversation.

Types of Backchannelling

McCarthy (2003) and Ward (2006) categorize backchannelling into several main types, which are described below.

a. Minimal Responses

Minimal responses refer to short expressions such as “mm,” “uh-huh,” and “hmm.” These expressions generally indicate that listeners are following the conversation and paying attention to the speaker.

b. Agreement Tokens

Agreement tokens include responses such as “yes,” “right,” and “exactly.” These responses are commonly used to express approval, acceptance, or alignment with the speaker's ideas or statements.

c. Emotional Responses

Emotional responses consist of expressions such as “oh no,” “wow,” and “oh my God.” Such responses are produced to convey emotional reactions including surprise, sadness, fear, or empathy.

d. Continuers

Continuers are responses such as “yeah,” “okay,” and “go on,” which encourage speakers to continue talking and help maintain the continuity of interaction.

Functions of Backchannelling

According to Gardner (2001), backchannelling performs several communicative functions during interaction.

1. Showing Attentiveness

Responses such as “mm-hmm” and “yeah” demonstrate that listeners are paying close attention to the speaker. The researcher believes that attentiveness is especially important in emotional conversations because it creates a sense of involvement, support, and interpersonal connection.

2. Signaling Understanding

Expressions such as “I see” and “right” indicate that listeners understand the speaker’s message. In the researcher’s view, responses showing understanding help minimize misunderstanding and strengthen emotional communication between participants.

3. Expressing Agreement

Agreement tokens such as “yes” and “okay” function to express acceptance and alignment with the speaker’s viewpoint. The researcher found that agreement responses frequently appear because many scenes involve cooperation and shared decision-making among the characters.

4. Expressing Emotional Reaction

Responses such as “oh no,” “wow,” and “oh my God” are used to express emotions such as fear, shock, sadness, and empathy. These emotional reactions strengthen the emotional intensity of interaction and help audiences understand the seriousness of the situations experienced by the characters.

5. Encouraging Continuation

Continuers such as “go on” and “yeah” motivate speakers to continue their utterances. The researcher argues that these responses are important for maintaining conversational flow and avoiding awkward silence during interaction.

Recent studies on backchannelling reveal that listener responses are not merely simple conversational signals, but also important elements in emotional and interpersonal communication. O’Keeffe (2021), Tanaka (2020), Rühlemann (2021, Böttcher and Rossi (2025), Kobuki et al. (2024), Tran, Cha, and Jeong (2025), Ortega et al. (2023), Amer et al. (2023), Blomsma et al. (2024), Haugh and Watanabe (2022), Lin et al. (2025), Tartory, Al-Khawaldeh, Azieb, and Al Saideen (2024), Ondáš, Kiktová, Pleva, and Juhár (2023), Paiarl et al. (2025), found that features such as pauses, intonation patterns, and speaker behavior often create opportunities for listener feedback.

Within computational communication studies, Ortega, Li, and Vu (2023), Wang et al. (2025), Inoue et al. (2025), Weinberg et al. (2025), Blomsma, Skantze, and Swerts (2022), Mereu, Cangemi, and Grice (2024), Müller et al. (2022), Krepsz et al. (2022), Gerigk (2024), Kosmala (2025), demonstrate that the occurrence of listener feedback is associated with identifiable linguistic and acoustic characteristics. Their findings suggest that conversational environments provide cues that make backchannel responses more likely to occur. This supports the notion that listener feedback emerges systematically as part of interactional processes.

Overall, these recent studies reinforce the understanding that backchannelling is an important pragmatic strategy in spoken interaction. Within film discourse, backchannels contribute significantly

to emotional expression, conversational continuity, interpersonal relationships, and cinematic realism.

This study is guided by three principal research questions: it seeks to ascertain the types of backchannelling expressions employed in the film *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck*, to examine the communicative functions performed by these expressions within the dialogues, and to investigate the frequency with which they occur throughout the film. Correspondingly, the objectives of the study are to identify and classify the various forms of backchannelling, to analyze the pragmatic functions they fulfill in interaction, and to quantify their occurrence in the cinematic discourse. Theoretically, the study is expected to enrich the scholarship of pragmatics, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and media discourse by providing a deeper understanding of the contribution of backchannelling to the construction of meaning and interpersonal dynamics in filmic communication. Practically, its findings may serve as a valuable resource for English language learners by increasing their awareness of authentic conversational practices and fostering the development of effective communicative competence in everyday interaction.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design within a pragmatic framework to investigate the occurrence and communicative significance of backchannelling in the dialogues of *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck*. The design is particularly appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of naturally occurring utterances, their interactional functions, and their contextual meanings. Drawing upon insights from conversation analysis, the study systematically identifies, classifies, and interprets backchannel expressions in relation to the sequential organization of talk and the interpersonal dynamics among the characters. Through this approach, the research aims to provide a comprehensive account of how backchannelling contributes to conversational coherence and emotional expression.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data was taken from the film of *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck* with total duration of film is 2 hours 49 minutes. This film content of 29 scenes. The researcher analyzed all scenes and found 77 tokens. The researcher saw this film 7 times to make sure backchannelling were identified. This study uses the qualitative data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). The analysis consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

Data Condensation

The researcher selected and reduced dialogue data from the film *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck* that contained backchannelling expressions such as “yeah,” “mm-hmm,” “right,” and “oh no.” The data were then classified into several categories based on the theories of McCarthy (2003) and Ward (2006), including minimal responses, agreement tokens, emotional responses, and continuers.

Data Display

The data were displayed in the form of dialogue excerpts, tables, and classifications of backchannelling types and functions found in the film. Through this process, the researcher identified how listener responses support conversational interaction between characters in *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck*.

Conclusion Drawing and Verification

The researcher interpreted the findings and verified the consistency of the data. The researcher concluded that backchannelling in *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck* functions to show attentiveness, agreement, understanding, emotional reaction, and encouragement during interaction.

Trustworthiness

In this investigation of backchannelling in *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck*, trustworthiness is ensured through a rigorous and transparent analytical procedure. The film is viewed repeatedly to facilitate prolonged engagement with the data and to ensure that all relevant instances of backchannelling are comprehensively identified. Each transcription is meticulously cross-checked against the audiovisual source to preserve the accuracy of the verbal content, prosodic cues, and interactional context. The coding and classification of backchannel expressions are carried out systematically and consistently in accordance with the selected theoretical framework, while the resulting interpretations are subjected to theoretical triangulation through comparison with established scholarship in pragmatics, conversation analysis, and backchannelling research. Furthermore, the findings are continuously verified against the original data to ensure that the conclusions faithfully represent the interactional patterns portrayed in the film. Together, these procedures enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and overall integrity of the study.

FINDINGS

Types of Backchannelling

Based on the analysis of the film *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck*, the researcher found four major types of backchannelling expressions used by the characters during conversations. These types include minimal responses, agreement tokens, emotional responses, and continuers. The use of these backchannels shows that listeners actively participate in conversations even when they do not take over the speaker's turn. Here are the examples:

Table 1. Type of backchannelling

Type of Backchannelling	Timestamp in the Film	Dialogue Example	Function	Researcher's Analysis
Minimal Responses	01:15:48	A: "I should have listened to you earlier." B: "Mm-hmm."	Showing attentiveness and active listening	The response "Mm-hmm" indicates that the listener pays attention without interrupting the speaker. The researcher interprets this response as emotional support and empathy during a reflective conversation.
Agreement Tokens	01:02:30	A: "We need to leave the ship before it's too late." B: "Yes, you're right."	Expressing agreement and alignment	The expression "Yes, you're right" reflects trust and cooperation between characters. The researcher found that agreement tokens strengthen solidarity during critical situations in the film.
Emotional Responses	00:45:12	A: "The storm is getting worse. I don't think we can survive this." B: "Oh no..."	Expressing fear, shock, and empathy	The emotional response "Oh no" intensifies the dramatic atmosphere and shows the listener's emotional involvement in the dangerous situation.

Continuers	01:28:10	A: "When the ship hit the reef, people started to panic..." B: "Yeah... go on."	Encouraging the speaker to continue talking	The continuer "Yeah... go on" maintains conversational flow and encourages the speaker to continue the narrative. The researcher argues that this response creates smoother and more natural interaction between characters.
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Pragmatic Function of Analysis

The findings show that backchannelling expressions in the film serve several important communicative functions.

Table 2. Pragmatic Function of Analysis

Pragmatic Function	Example Backchannel	Main Communicative Role
Attentiveness	"Mm-hmm"	Serves as a signal of sustained listener attention and active involvement, assuring the speaker that the message is being followed and appreciated. By refraining from taking the conversational floor, it allows the speaker to continue uninterrupted while simultaneously conveying empathy, encouragement, and interpersonal support.
Understanding	"Aku mengerti" ("I see")	Communicates both cognitive comprehension of the propositional content and affective recognition of the speaker's emotional state. Such responses validate the speaker's perspective, reduce the risk of misunderstanding, and strengthen rapport by demonstrating sensitivity to the speaker's experiences and feelings.
Agreement	"Ya, kamu benar" ("Yes, you're right")	Expresses explicit alignment with the speaker's viewpoint or proposed course of action, thereby reinforcing solidarity and mutual trust. Agreement tokens also facilitate cooperative decision-making, minimize potential conflict, and contribute to the establishment of shared understanding and common ground.
Emotional Reaction	"Oh tidak" ("Oh no")	Functions as an immediate and spontaneous display of emotional involvement, revealing the listener's empathy, concern, or alarm in response to the speaker's utterance. In addition to conveying affect, such responses enhance the authenticity and dramatic intensity of the interaction by making the listener's emotional stance overtly visible.
Encouragement	"Ya... lanjutkan" ("Yeah... go on")	Invites the speaker to elaborate further and indicates a genuine interest in the ongoing narrative or explanation. By supporting the speaker's continued turn, it maintains conversational momentum, promotes discourse coherence, and underscores the collaborative nature of meaning-making in interaction.

Contextual Use of Backchannelling

Tabel 3. Contextual Use of Backchannelling

Contextual Dimension	Illustrative Example	Contextual Analysis
Emotional Context	A character expresses grief, and the listener responds with "Mm-hmm."	In this emotionally charged situation, the backchannel signals attentive listening and empathy while allowing the speaker to maintain the floor. Its meaning derives not only from the expression itself but also from the speaker's vulnerability and the supportive relationship between the interlocutors.

Social Context	A younger character respectfully replies, “Yes, I understand,” to an elder’s advice.	The backchannel conveys comprehension and deference, reflecting the social hierarchy and reinforcing interpersonal harmony.
Situational Context	During an emergency, one character says, “You are right; we must leave now.”	Here, the agreement token facilitates rapid coordination and shared decision-making, which are essential in a high-stakes situation.
Narrative Context	As a character recounts a painful memory, the listener says, “Please, go on.”	The continuer encourages elaboration, sustaining the narrative flow and enabling further character development.
Cultural Context	A brief nod accompanied by “Yes” occurs during a formal exchange.	The backchannel aligns with culturally appropriate norms of politeness and attentiveness, illustrating how social conventions shape listener responses.

Dominant Patterns of Backchannelling

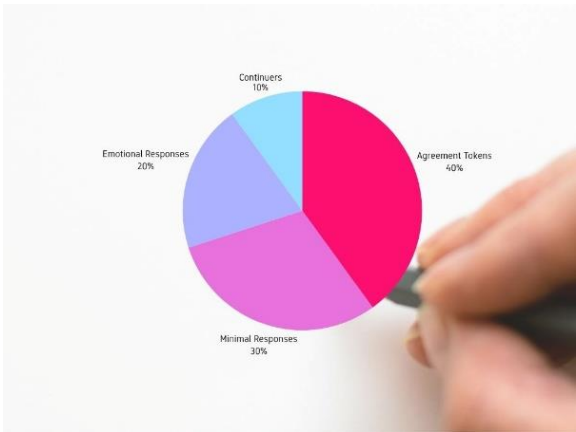


Diagram 1. Frequency of Backchannelling

Based on the findings, agreement tokens are the most frequently used type of backchannelling in the film. The researcher interprets this dominance as evidence that the characters prioritize solidarity and interpersonal support during communication. Minimal responses appear frequently because they help create natural conversational flow without interrupting the speaker. Emotional responses are also significant because the film contains many dramatic and emotionally intense scene’s. Continuers appear less frequently, but they remain important in supporting interaction and encouraging speakers to continue expressing their thoughts and emotions.

DISCUSSION

In Tenggalamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck, backchannels help create emotional realism, maintain the flow of conversation, and strengthen relationships between characters. This finding supports Gardner (2001), who states that backchannels show listeners' attention, understanding, and involvement without interrupting the speaker. Similarly, Schegloff (1982) explains that backchannels help organize conversation by allowing listeners to show they are engaged while the speaker keeps the floor. The dominance of agreement tokens suggests that the characters often use them to express trust, empathy, and emotional support, especially in difficult situations. These responses strengthen interpersonal relationships and encourage speakers to continue talking. This finding is consistent with Gardner (2001), who argues that agreement tokens express involvement and alignment with the speaker, and with Schegloff (1982), who explains that such responses help maintain smooth interaction.

The researcher also found that minimal responses, such as "mm-hmm" and "hmm", make conversations sound more natural. Although these expressions are brief, they show that listeners are paying attention. According to Gardner (2001), minimal responses are common listener signals that indicate active listening without taking the speaker's turn. Likewise, Schegloff (1982) argues that these responses help speakers continue talking while showing that the listener is following the conversation.

Another finding is the emotional role of backchannelling. Expressions such as "oh no" and "wow" increase the emotional impact of the film and help audiences connect with the characters. This supports Gardner's (2001) view that backchannels can express emotions such as surprise, sympathy, and concern. In addition, Schegloff (1982) explains that emotional responses show the listener's involvement while allowing the speaker to continue the interaction. Continuers such as "yeah" and "go on" help keep conversations flowing smoothly by encouraging speakers to continue. This finding agrees with Schegloff (1982), who describes continuers as signals that invite speakers to keep talking. It also supports Gardner (2001), who states that continuers show sustained attention and active participation in conversation.

The researcher concludes that backchannelling in *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck* functions as a linguistic, emotional, and interactional strategy that strengthens communication effectiveness, emotional engagement, and cinematic realism.

CONCLUSION

Backchannelling plays a significant role in maintaining conversational interaction in the film *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van Der Wijck*. The findings reveal that the film contains four major types of backchannelling: minimal responses, agreement tokens, emotional responses, and continuers. Among these categories, agreement tokens appear most frequently with a percentage of 40%, followed by minimal responses (30%), emotional responses (20%), and continuers (10%). This indicates that the characters frequently use listener responses to show agreement and interpersonal alignment during interaction. The analysis also shows that backchannelling expressions function as signals of attentiveness, understanding, agreement, emotional reaction, empathy, and encouragement for speakers to continue talking. Expressions such as "mm-hmm," "I see," "right," and "yeah" help maintain conversational flow and emotional connection between characters.

The findings suggest that backchannelling plays a vital role in making conversations in the film more realistic and emotionally engaging. Emotional responses, such as "oh no" and "wow," enhance the emotional impact of the dialogue, while continuers help maintain the smooth progression of interaction. These findings also enrich pragmatic theory by demonstrating that backchannelling is a key interactional strategy through which listeners express attention, comprehension, emotional support, and involvement during communication. Furthermore, the study provides practical implications for language teaching, emphasizing the importance of integrating backchannelling into the development of learners' pragmatic competence. Familiarity with appropriate listener responses can help learners participate more confidently and naturally in spoken interaction. Therefore, backchannelling should be viewed not merely as a supporting conversational feature but as an essential element of effective communication that fosters interpersonal relationships and promotes meaningful interaction.

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