

"Ja... " or "...ya" ?

---A comparative study of Chinese and Swedish Feedback systems

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1. Introduction

When people talk to each other in face to face interaction or in telephone communication, it is very important for both the speaker and the listener to know whether the communication is going on well; whether the listener has heard what the speaker says; whether the listener has understood what has been said and what reaction the listener has on what has been said. We notice that these kind of information are very often carried by a special kind of small words or speech sounds such as "yeah" "mm" in English, "ja" "mm" in Swedish and "dui" "mhm" in Chinese. These words are small and therefore easy to be neglected, yet communication cannot go smoothly without them. We call these words "feedback words". We can imagine that when we talk to someone by telephone, if we don't hear any feedback from the listener now and then, we might start asking the listener, "Are you there?" or "Are you with me?" or if we don't ask, we'd probably think that the listener is not interested in the conversation any more and it's high time to stop the conversation there. Theoretical and empirical studies have shown that without feedback mechanism, communication management becomes very difficult. (e.g. Ahlsén, Allwood, and Nivre, 1992; K. Mayumi 1991, Gudykunt, 1991).

Besides, it is not only the listener who needs to give such information but also the speaker sometimes makes use of similar words to elicit feedback in order to check how the communication is going on. Thus we distinguish between feedback from the listener and feedback from the speaker by calling them "eliciting feedback" respective "giving feedback".

There are not only verbal channels through which the listener and the speaker can exchange such information, non-verbal channels such as gestures, head movements or eye contacts are also frequently used together with verbal feedback utterances to elicit or give feedback information. When feedback is given through speech sound, we name it "verbal feedback". When feedback is given through gestures, eye contacts or head movements, they are termed as "non-verbal feedback." In face to face communication, verbal and non-verbal channels are in most cases simultaneously use to complement one another for feedback purpose.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how feedback is used in speech communication. Three aspects of feedback use are studied and analysed to find out how often feedback is used, in what position of an utterance feedback is distributed and how feedback units are internally structured. The data used in this study include two transcribed audio-recordings, one in Chinese and the other in Swedish. The purpose of choosing data from two different languages is to find out what aspects of feedback phenomena show similar or different patterns in communication when different languages are concerned. Of course, we are aware that it is not enough to make any definite conclusion of universality or language / culture specificity just by looking at two languages represented by two conversations. However we hope that this study can present some interesting discovery of facts about feedback use in these two languages and thereafter more interest in study of feedback use in other languages can be aroused and be compared with one another.

2. Method, Data, and informants .

Comparative method is the main method used in this study. The comparison is made between two languages, Chinese and Swedish. By investigating whether and in what aspects feedback in communication show similarity and difference, we expect to discover some general patterns of feedback use in both languages as well as different patterns related to specific languages.

The collected data used in this study include two tape-recorded conversations, one in Swedish and one in Chinese. Both conversations are transcribed in standardised coding categories. The Swedish transcription is made by an

undergraduate student and checked by myself with the original audio-tape. The Chinese transcription is made by myself.

Comparability of the two conversations.

Comparability is very important in such a study if a high degree of reliability and validity of results should be guaranteed.

Theoretical and empirical studies on social activity and communication have shown that language production and communication patterns are closely related with different types of social activities. (Hymes 1972; Allwood 1976; Levinson 1992;) Factors such as goal of the social activity, individual roles in the activity, physical and social environment, individual physical, social and psychological state during the communication are also important for shaping communication patterns.

Comparing the data we choose for this study, a few factors are not easy to be controlled to be completely equal. (See table 1 in appendix) These factors might influence, to some extent, the true validity of the study results. However, we might also take the advantage of this inequality to increase the validity of the results.

Among factors which might influence the comparability of the data, we find the following to be the most important for a mention.

a) The activities in which these two conversations are involved are different.

The Chinese conversation is a lunch conversation while the Swedish one is a free talk in a studio. Eating was a major activity in the Chinese conversation which is to influence, for example, topics, sub activities, the moving of articles during the talk. The Swedish talk was not equal in this sense.

b) The number of the participants in the conversations are different. There are two participants in the Swedish talk and three in the Chinese conversation.

c) Sex and age factors. Both participants in the Swedish talk are females while there are two females and one male in the Chinese one.

d) The individual physical conditions, individual moods and attitudes of the participants in the conversation are not possible to control in this case.

e) Information of non-verbal feedback communication is not available in the transcriptions. But they surely influence how feedback signals are understood.

All these unequally controlled factors have reduced the comparability of the data which, to some extent, is likely to reduce the validity and generalizability of our conclusions to be drawn from this study. We'll come back to this again in later parts of this study.

3. Definition and Categorisation of Feedback

Experiences tell us that a clear definition and taxonomy of the object we are to study is very crucial to a reliable result of any empirical analysis of any language material. In this part of the paper, we'll try to define the notion of "feedback", make categorisations of different types of feedback in relation to its function in communication.

3.1. Definition of the notion of "feedback"

Criteria of a valid and clear definition can differ depending on the specific purpose of a specific study. In empirical studies, it is more important for us to require that the definition should help us make a good understanding of the object defined as well as easily pick up members of the study object from those that are non-members of the study object. With this motivation, I choose the following definition based on the functions of feedback in communication.

Feedback definition :

By feedback we mean the regular linguistic mechanisms whereby a speaker and a listener keep each other informed about the following four basic communicative functions: (i) maintenance of contact and interaction; (ii) perception; (iii) understanding; (iv) attitudinal reactions. (Allwood 1988 a)