



Okay as a Marker for Coordinating Transitions in Joint Actions: a Cross-Linguistic Comparison

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July 20, 2021

**Okay as a Marker for coordinating Transitions in Joint Actions: A cross-linguistic
Comparison**

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The authors declare that there no conflicts of interest with respect to this preprint.

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to offer a better understanding of how *okay* is used in naturalistic dialogue. We examined the use of *okay* in a French job interview corpus and in a German research interview corpus. We found that the interviewer was more likely to use *okay* than the other participant; he or she was also more likely to use *okay* as a vertical marker. The effect of age as well as changes in the use of *okay* during the interaction were also examined. The findings contribute to understanding the overarching functions of backchannel utterances in coordinating conversations.

Keywords: dialogue; okay; backchannel feedback; joint activities; French; German

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Introduction

Backchannel utterances (aka acknowledgment tokens) like *okay*, *uh-huh*, *yeah* or *right* are important signals in coordinating conversation. In particular, the use of *okay* has been extensively researched (Gaines, 2011). This research often consists of conversation-analytic studies of naturalistic, spontaneous data in specific contexts like classroom lectures or service encounters (Betz, Deppermann, Mondada, & Sorjonen, 2021). Three main issues stand out in research on *okay*. First, *okay* is used in many languages other than English, however, there is less work on these languages. Second, there is little research comparing the uses of *okay* in different languages. Third, an overarching theoretical framework is lacking. This is problematic because it leads to potential inflation of identified uses or functions. Bangerter and Clark (2003) proposed that *okay* is part of a system for marking transitions in joint actions (see also Col, Bangerter, Knutsen, & Brosy; 2019; Petit & Knutsen, 2019). They suggested that in coordinating joint actions, participants use backchannels systematically to mark either *horizontal* transitions (successive steps *within* the same action or task) or *vertical* transitions (larger shifts *between* different actions). Progress in understanding *okay* pivots on understanding the role it plays in coordinating joint action, independently of specific contexts. A promising rationale for the study of *okay* is to compare speakers of different languages doing comparable tasks, i.e., experimental tasks. A similar rationale consists of comparing similar naturalistic tasks in different languages.

In this paper we thus examine the use of *okay* in two corpora of interviews, one in French (job interviews) and one in German (research interviews). We investigate whether *okay* is used similarly in both corpora, that is, whether it is mainly used as a marker of vertical

transitions between phases of the interview. We also investigate generational effects and role effects: *Okay* should be used more by younger participants (reflecting processes of linguistic diffusion over time), and more by interviewers, especially as a vertical marker, consistent with the interviewers' role in managing interactional progress.

Methodological overview

The French corpus includes 80 dialogues of job interviews (47,025 speech turns) involving one candidate and at least two recruiters. The interactions are structured in the sense that each interview featured several phases (e.g., introduction, candidates' self-presentation, explanations about the position), which correspond to vertical transitions. The German corpus includes 87 dialogues (28,227 speech turns) of research interviews involving one participant and one interviewer. The participants were interviewed about their life course and the interviews are also structured into several phases. Thus, while the interviews are not identical in terms of topic, they feature comparable structure (phases corresponding to different blocks of questions) and roles (the interviewers are responsible for managing progression through the phases).

All dialogues were transcribed. We coded all transitions between phases for the French job interview corpus (we did not do this for the German corpus, as the structure of each interview tended to vary across speakers). We then coded all *okays* based on their function in the discourse. We specifically distinguished between cases where *okay* was used as a backchannel (horizontal) marker and cases in which it was used as a vertical marker (i.e., to switch from one phase to another). We also coded other, less frequent functions of *okay*, such as reported speech (*and he said, okay, now this is complicated*) and agreement (*This is okay for me*), but discarded these from further analysis. All coding procedures showed high interrater agreement.

We then used logistic mixed models to answer the following questions:

(1) Does status (interviewer vs. other person) influence the probability of producing *okay*?

Does status also influence the probability of using *okay* as a vertical marker, as opposed to a horizontal marker?

(2) Does the use of *okay* change as the interaction unfolds? That is, do people tend to produce *okay* more (or less) as the interaction unfolds, and do they favour the use of different functions (vertical or horizontal) at different moments?

(3) Does the speaker's age influence the probability of saying *okay* and its function?

Key findings

Our main finding was that the interviewer was more likely to say *okay* than the other person. What is more, the interviewer was also more likely than the other person to use *okay* as a vertical marker than a horizontal marker.

The likelihood of using *okay* increased as the interview unfolded. What is more, people were particularly likely to say *okay* at the beginning and at the end of interviews. The use of *okay* also changed as the interview unfolded: people were more likely to use *okay* as a horizontal marker towards the beginning of the interaction, and to use it as a vertical marker towards the end of the interaction.

The German corpus suggests that both interviewers and participants used *okay* more often when interviewers were younger, suggesting an effect of diffusion of *okay* into the French language over time.

Finally, in the French corpus, older people were more likely to use *okay* than younger people. They were also more likely to use *okay* as a vertical marker. This finding might seem surprising, but it may be related to most recruiters being older than candidates. Thus, the effect was probably due to their status in the interaction rather than to their age.

Discussion

These findings support the framework proposed by Bangerter and Clark (2003). We found that *okay* was consistently used as a vertical marker in both French and German. We also found that *oOkay* was also mainly used as a vertical marker by interviewers, whose role it is to manage the interaction (in contrast, it was mainly used as a horizontal marker by the other person). We also found (mixed) evidence of diffusion over time into French and German. These findings suggest that *okay* has spread in use in these languages, but also that its function for coordinating joint action is similar in both of these languages. The findings contribute to understanding the overarching functions of backchannel utterances in coordinating conversations.

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