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# Backchannels in Tigrinya

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***Abstract***

This paper aims at describing the system of backchannel and how it is linguistically marked in oral face-to-face interaction in Tigrinya, which is a North-Ethio-Semitic language. Though the language is used by its speakers at all regional domains, its conversational structure is not explored in depth. The data employed in this study was established from audio-recorded sociolinguistic interviews, recordings of authentic conversations, field notes, introspective data and data from previous studies. The data generally totals 300 minutes oral data, 612 sentences from fieldnote and examples form empirical studies, and 115 introspective examples. The findings reveal that Tigrinya speakers use fillers, particles, phrases, pronominals, and clauses. These language expressions are used as asides (encouraging an interlocutor to proceed speaking), to seek attention, to request for confirmation, to confirm attention, and to mark understanding of an information. Besides, some of the backchannel dives, for example, the verbs contain number, gender, and tense agreement in them. The linguistic expressions that used as backchannels in Tigrinya, therefore, are not necessarily only short or monosyllabic words.

**Keywords**: backchannel, continuer, confirmation, call attention, stating information

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This section introduces the sociolinguistics aspect of Tigrinya, its grammatical features, description of related works and how the concept backchannel is used in this article.

### 1.1. Tigrinya

Tigrinya /*tɨgrinja*/ (also spelled as Tigrigna /*tɨgriŋŋa*) is classified under the Northern Ethiopian Semitic language family. It is spoken by the inhabitants of the Tigray regional state of Ethiopia and Eritrea. The language is used at home, school, market, office, media, education, literature,

and religion domains. The language is a medium of instruction and is being offered as a subject for grades one to eight students in Tigray, and is given as course from grades nine to twelve in the same regional state. Curricula in diploma, first degree and second-degree levels are active for those who wanted to specialize in Tigrinya at a college and university level. Currently, Addis Ababa University also has BA and MA degree curricula though there are no students enrolled in either of the programs.

Synchronically, Tigrinya has thirty-seven consonants though the voiceless bilabial stop /p/, the ejective bilabial stop /p'/ and the voiced labio-dental stop /v/ are commonly observed in borrowed lexicons (Dagnew, 2019; Tesfaye, 2002). Additionally, Dagnew (2019) notes that the velar consonant segments /χ/ and /χ'/ and the labiovelar consonant segments $\chi^w$ and $k^w$ are variants of /k/ and /k'/ respectively. Tigrinya does not permit word and syllable initial and final consonant cluster. Despite variations in its varieties, Tigrinya has seven vowel segments that are a high front unrounded /i/, mid front unrounded /e/, high central unround /ɨ/, mid central unrounded /ə/, low central unrounded /a/, high back rounded /u/, and mid back rounded /o/ (See Dagnew, 2019; Nigus, 2021; Tesfaye, 2002). The word order of simple declarative sentence in Tigrinya is S-O-V.

### 1.2. Empirical Studies in Tigrinya

In his work aimed at providing a grammatical description of Tigrinya, Tsehaye (1979) included glosses of some linguistic expressions that are considered as backchannels in this paper. For example, Tsehaye (1979) glossed *ʔɨkko* as 'focus marker'. Blejer (1986) glossed the enclitic *=do* as 'emphasis' marker. Kogan (1997) *ʔɨwwə* as 'yes', *ħɨrrajbələ* and *ʔɨʃʃibələ* as assertive focus markers.

Dagnew (forthcoming) has described the basic features of self-repair in Tigrinya. He has observed, for example, how fillers like ʔɨm can be used to initiate self-repair. In his attempt to describe the linguistic features of Tigrinya discourse markers, Dagnew (2019) has described particles and fillers such as *hɨm*, *ʔɨhɨm*, *ʔɨʃʃi*, *tʃəllə*, etc. are used as backchannels. These linguistic devises, according to Dagnew, are used to encourage a main speaker to proceed talking, to state the understanding of the listener, to call and confirm attention. Although the aforementioned

works have attempted to demonstrate some of the functions of linguistic devices used as backchannels, none of them have thoroughly discussed the notion of backchannel in Tigrinya. The current article therefore focuses on describing linguistic features of backchannels and their contribution in facilitating interaction.

### 1.3. Backchannels

This paper aims to discuss how speakers of the language use different language devices to indicate backchannels in various contexts. Backchannels are linguistic expressions that convey brief messages such as 'yes' and 'uh-huh', without interrupting the speaker's turn (Onodera, 2004; Yngve, 1970). Backchannels can serve as continuers, attention confirmation seekers, confirmation attention markers, or markers of stating information. They include response cries and 'non-lexicalized, discrete interjections' that serve different purposes in socially situated events.

In everyday interactions, participants demonstrate their 'listenership' to maintain smooth communication. When a speaker is speaking, a listener shows their cooperative attitude by expressing interest in the topic or affirming their attention to what the speaker is saying. This also conveys the listener's interest in the content and how the speaker presents and organizes their ideas. Utilizing linguistic expressions in general and backchannel devices specifically, assist in achieving this cooperative atmosphere (Lee, 2020). In natural language interactions, participants use linguistic, paralinguistic, or nonverbal devices to cooperate with one another. During everyday conversations, listeners often desire speakers to feel assured that their attention is being received. Discourse markers, among other ways, are used to signal confirmation and demonstrate attentiveness to the speaker. Thus, *ʔɨh*, *ʔɨʃi*, *hɨh*, *hɨm*, *hɨ*, *hɨʔ*, *ʔɨwwə*, and *ʔɨhɨm* aresome discourse markers that are used to mark a confirmation of attention. In most cases, these are uttered while the person who is speaking is still speaking. However, there are rare instances when the speaker may seek confirmation to ensure that the listener is still paying attention to them. Therefore, the listener may use discourse markers to confirm that they are actively listening to the main speaker and to facilitate the interaction.

The linguistic devices that indicate a request for attention, seek confirmation, and state understanding are often challenging to translate into other languages such as English. Therefore, when translating, the author focuses on their function within the given context rather than their structure. In these instances, the author discovers that most markers for requesting attention, for example, take the form of interrogative sentences.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The data used in this paper were collected at various points in time using different data collection tools: audio recording of sociolinguistic interviews that allows fieldworkers to collect large size linguistic data "from interviews that are as usual and natural as possible" (Schelling 2013: 107-108), fieldnote recordings of authentic conversations, and introspective. The data was collected from Mekelle, Maichew, Aksum, Abyi Addi and Adigrat during a fieldwork between 15 January 2018 and 26 May 2018.

Initially, a mini oral corpus was utilized to analyze the linguistic features of Tigrinya backchannel devices in detail. Additionally, introspective data was incorporated to provide further examples. To ensure data validity, two university teachers, who are native Tigrinya speakers and trained in linguistics, provided their judgment on the data annotation and glossing. Overall, this study employed five hours audio recorded data, written fieldnotes and data from secondary sources that comprises 612 sentences, and list of 115 introspective sentences to examine how Tigrinya speakers employ linguistic backchannel markers in interactions.

The method used to analyze data is exploring the functions of the identified backchannels that are used by the interactants through conversation analysis framework. The data was first transcribed in an ELAN software. Then, the possible backchannel devices were manually identified by the author.

## 3. DATA ANALYSIS

From a total of 300 minutes recorded oral data, 1047 frequencies of backchannel markers are identified. As shown in Table 1, the sources of backchannels are verbs, nominals, particles, fillers, phrases, and clauses.

Table 1: Backchannel Sources, Examples and Frequencies

| S.N. | Backchannel sources | Examples | Frequencies |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Verbs | *wɨdɨʔ* 'finish', *bɨlɨʕ*'eat', *zəbit'wo*'he hit him' | 13 |
| 2 | Pronominals | *ʔɨssu* 'he', *baʕɨlu* 'himself', *getatʃəw* 'Getachew', *ʕaddi* 'house' | 37 |
| 3 | Particles | *ʔərə, ʔɨwwə, bək'k'a, ʔɨkko* | 399 |
| 4 | Fillers | *ʔɨh, ʔaha, ʔɨhɨm* | 493 |
| 5 | Phrases | *laʔadɨsʔabəba* 'to Adis Ababa', | 70 |
| 6 | Clauses | *baʕɨlukəmzujʔilluka*? 'Did he himself told like that?', *hamʔudɨjju*? 'Is it like that?' | 35 |

### 3.1. Asides

One of the functions of backchannels is to signal an aside. Asides are examples of continuers that are used to display "understanding of content, support toward the speaker's judgment, agreement, strong emotional response, and minor addition, correction, or request for information" (Onodera, 2004: 130).

In Tigrinya, most of the summons (continuers) that are used to signal aside not only indicate that the speaker should still hold the floor, but they also serve as devices to urge the speaker to maintain the turn. Urging a speaker to hold the floor can mean either encouraging them to start talking or to return to a turn after a digression. Urging allows the speaker to continue developing a topic of interaction.

*(1)* [Extracted from an interview between a data collector and a man who is a teacher in a school found in Abyi Addi that was recorded on 27 January 2018.]

***T-DC2-01*** *kɨstaj ʔɨziʔom səbʔut ʔagajuʃ ʔɨjjom ʔɨmmo*

| kɨstaj | ʔɨzi-ʔ-om | səb-ʔ-ut | ʔa-gajuʃ | ʔɨjj-om | ʔɨmmo |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3SM\DM_PLNPRC | PRX-Ø-3PL | man-Ø-PL | PL-guest | COP-3PL | DM_FOC |

'These individuals are guests.'

***T-TR2-01*** *s'ɨbuχ'*
**s'ibuχ'**
**DM_CNFATN**
'I am glad to hear that, please go ahead.'

***T-DC2-02*** *bɨzaʕɨba tariχ tənben gəllə ħabəreta dəljom nəjrom*

| *bɨ-zaʕɨba* | *Tariχ* | gəllə | *ħabəreta* | *dəlj-om* | *nəjr-om* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| about-businss | history | something | information | want-3PL | exist:PRV-3PL |

'About the obelisk and related things…'

***T-TR2-02*** *ʔɨh*
**ʔɨh**
**DM_CNFATN**
'I am listening to you, go on talking please.'

The particle *s'ɨbuχ'*, which literally means 'good' is an aside (see T-TR2-01 & in example 1). Asides are short signals inserted by a speaker to indicate that they are willing to listen to the interlocutor. These backchannel devices, help support the main interlocutor in maintaining their turn and also encourage the main speaker to continue speaking. In most cases, these language features overlap with the utterances of the main speaker, allowing them to retain the floor without giving it away. Therefore, the particle *s'ɨbuχ'* that used as a filler in this particular context does not signal a claim for a turn, but rather yields the turn to the main speaker.

In example (1), we can see that the speaker uses the filler *ʔɨh* (T-TR2-02) even though there is no explicit urging from the interlocutor. The other participant, T-TR uses the backchannel device ʔɨh (T-TR2-02) to confirm that he is attentively following the main speaker's utterances (T-DC). In this case, ʔɨh indicates how T-TR is ready to listen to the narration and wants T-DC to continue speaking, without having a question.

Another important point to note is that linguistic expressions like *ʔɨh* and *hɨh* are commonly used to confirm attention in two situations: when seeking attention is explicitly marked, and when it is not marked. Since *ʔɨh* and *hɨh*, along with a flat intonation, convey the meaning of "I am listening, please continue" or "I am surprised by what I am hearing, please proceed because I want to hear more", they are used as aside markers in spontaneous speech.

### 3.2. Attention Seeking

Language units like terms of address, courtesy phrases (e.g., "Pardon me"), and physical gestures (e.g., tap on the shoulder) are known as attention-getting devices. In a natural language interaction, participants use these verbal or nonverbal devices to cooperate with each other. Call attention devices are used to seek attention and direct focus to the upcoming part of the conversation. They typically occur before introducing new information. For example, calling a hearer's attention to what the speaker is about to say can be anaphoric, reinforcing, questioning,

or suggesting the validity of the given information. Call attention language devices can also be used simultaneously as both anaphoric and cataphoric, pointing both backward and forward.

During every day interactions, listeners sometimes want to ensure that the speaker knows they are attentively following along. Similarly, speakers want to assess the relevance of their propositions to the addressee. Linguistic devices such as interjections and particles are used to determine if an interlocutor is actively engaged in listening. Just as calling someone's name, occupation status, social status, and titles can capture their attention, vocative pronouns are employed to capture the listener's attention or serve as signals for call attention.

*(2)* [This extract is taken from an authentic conversation, which was recorded on 12 February 2018, between two relatives in Maichew]

***M-BD-16*** *ʔatta ħajali taχojniχa jɨʔu dəjtɨt'ijχ'əni*

| ʔatta | ħajali | ta-χojn-iχa | jɨ-ʔu | dəj-tɨt'ijχ'-ə-ni |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2SM\DM_ATN | Hayali | WH_Q-become:PRV-2SM | COP-3SM | NEG-ask:IMP-SJ:2SM-OJ:1S |

'You, Hayali, what is your reason that you do not visit me?'.'

In example (2), the noun phrase "*ʔattaħajali*", which means 'You, Hayali, is used as a device to call attention. However, there may be cases where 'Hayali' and 'you (2SM)', represented by *ħajali*and *ʔatta* respectively, are independently used to call attention. The vocative pronoun for 2SM, which is ʔatta shows that pronouns can also be used as attention-calling devices. On top of that, Tigrinya speakers use *ʔajja*, which can be glossed as 'you (2sm.h)' that is used to indicate to formally call the attention of an old man (Dagnew 2019: 157). Besides, titles like *ʔajtə* 'Mr', *wəjzəro* 'Mrs', *wəjzərit* 'Ms', *gojtaj* 'lord' *ʔɨmbəjtəj* 'madam' are used either by themselves or along with proper names are used to call the attention interlocutors.

There are also instances where a speaker may request for attention confirmation without relinquishing the turn. The other interlocutor, with no intention to take away the turn, will confirm that the listener is attentively following the development of a discourse. Translating linguistic devices that indicate a request for attention is particularly challenging in languages like English. When translating, the author considered their function in the specific context in which they were used. In many cases, the markers for requesting attention were found to be similar to interrogative sentences.

Interjections are the other types of language expressions that serve as attention-calling devices. They can also be used to express the speaker's emotional reaction, respond to questions, and indicate that the speaker wants to continue speaking.

*(3)* [S, the main speaker, is narrating how to make *s'əbħi ʃiro* that is a common Ethiopian stew to the researcher who is one of the listeners of the main speaker Dagnew 2019: 158.]

***MS-S-23*** *kaʔu ʔarijχa jɨfuχ'foχ'*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| kaʔu | ʔarij-χa | jɨ-fuχ'foχ' |
| then\DM_CHR | clean:CN-SJ:2SM | IPV:PASS:SJ:3SM-boil |

'Then, after you clean it, it will boil.'

***MS-S-24*** *ʔɨ?*

**ʔɨ**

**DM_ATNR**

'Are you following me?'

In the middle of storytelling, the narrator (S) wants to check if she is being clear to her interlocutor (D), or if D is following her narration attentively. Instead of using phrases like *rɨdəʔəkallodɨjʔu*? 'Is that clear to you?', *mɨsʔanədəχa*? 'Are you with me?' or *tɨsəmʕəniləχadə*? 'Are you listening to me?', the speaker prefers to use ʔɨ, along with its interrogative pitch (high pitch). The interlocutor (D), in turn, confirms that he is attentively following the other participant (S) by saying *ʔɨffi* which means 'Sure, I understand you'. The particle ʔɨ, along with high pitch, in most cases appears at the end of an utterance.

In this case, *ʔɨ*, along with high intonation, is an attention-getting device, or "summons" as Schegloff (1972) calls it. It functions to make the listener aware of the previous part of the discourse (anaphoric) and it also draws the attention of the other participant to the following utterance (cataphoric, as it appears before the new information). The interjection ʔɨ is interpreted as both anaphoric and cataphoric because it signifies a question about whether the previous example was clear and it directs the listener's attention to the next part of the discourse. The interjection *ʔɨ* that functions as a filler is an interjection that points in both directions, backward and forward, simultaneously.

Thus, the linguistic expression ʔɨ, along with the interrogative pitch, indicates a positive confirmation attention-seeking. In that case, it can be translated as 'I am sure it is clear?'. For

such explicitly asked confirmation request, the listener may confirm that they are clear the way the discourse is developing using backchannel marker *ʔɨhɨm*, which means 'I have got new and surprising information', 'stating information' or 'miritativity', which is a cognitive process.

This linguistic device has a similar reading although it is in a different context. It indicates that the speaker knew she was providing very relevant information and felt happy because she caught her interlocutor's message.

*(4)* [In her house located in a small village around Maichew, a grandmother is telling how she felt bad about the condition of her farmland, as it was recorded on fieldnote on 21 May 2018]

***M-GM1-55*** *ħanti ʔissa ħizəjja siʔan ħagazi misʔan s'om ħadra*

| ħanti | ʔissa | ħiz-ə-jj-a | siʔan | ħagaz-i | misʔan | s'om | ħadr-a |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| one:F | 3SF | hold:IPV-SJ:1S-ø-OJ:3SF | due to | help-3SM | absence | fasting | spend a night:PRV-3SF |

'It was not sowen due to the absence some one who helps.'

***M-GM1-56*** *ʔɨ?*

**ʔɨ**

**DM_CERT**

'I am sure you understand how sad I am.'

***M-GM1-57*** *bɨdsʼəbħə katiχʼalutuni hamħarəsχumləj ʧʼəllə nevru*

| bɨd-sʼəbħ-ə | ka-ti-χʼalt-u-ni | ham-ħarəs-χum-ll-əj | ʧʼəllə | nevr-u |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| after-season out-3SM | instead of-IPV-help-SJ:2PL-BEN-OJ:1S | if-tilth-SJ:2PL-BEN-OJ:1S | good | exist:PRV-3SM |

'It would have been good if you could tilth it instead of helping me next year.'

Thus, *ʔɨ*, along with the high pitch, signals that the speaker is conveying messages in a way that it expresses her feeling, albeit not certain, are relevant. Therefore, she is not expecting confirmation from her interlocutor.

Sometimes, however, even if the main speaker uses a linguistic device seeking confirmation, the listener may not provide a response confirming their attention. Thus, when an interlocutor takes his/her turn to speak, he/she may choose to ignore the confirming device used by the main speaker. This is particularly evident when a listener has a question and is seeking an explanation, as seen in example (5).

*(5)* [This example is extracted from a dialogue between two brothers in Adigrat.]

***AD-HM-188*** *χulχum ʔabtaj ʕajnət navra hamlələχu ʔajtɨfəltʼuj ʔɨmbəj*

| χulχum | ʔab-taj | ʕajnət | nabra | ham-lələ-χu | ʔaj-tifəltʼ-u-j | ʔɨmbəj |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| all of you | on-WH_Q | kind | life | as-exist:IPV-1S | NEG-know:IPV-2PL-NEG | rather |

'All of you rather do not know the kind of life I am leading.'

***AD-HM-189*** *hɨh?*
**hɨh**
**DM_ATNR**
'Are you following me?'

***AD-DM-65*** *taj χojnɨna ʔinna zəjnɨfəlɨt'*
Taj χojn-ɨna ʔi-nna zəj-nɨ-fəlɨt'
what become-1PL COP-1PL NEG-1PL:CNV-know
'How dare you say that we donot understand that?'

Even though the narrator asks if the interlocutor is attentively listening and understanding her narration, the interlocutor immediately jumps to asking for an explanation. The interlocutor (DM) asks a question and then confirms that everything is clear. This shows that (1) the speaker confirms that they are paying attention and clear with the narration if only the idea is clear, (2) the interlocutor poses a question if there is anything unclear, and (3) the narrator who asks hɨh? 'Are you following me?' knows her interlocutor can ask for an explanation if there is an unclear point at any time during the interaction. This implies that the narrator is concerned and wants to make things very clear to her listener.

A rising intonation (interrogative pitch) accompanies linguistic expressions to invite the listener's confirmation and agreement to the message of a segment the speaker wants to know if the hearer understands. However, if the backchannel device is accompanied by suspended intonation, it means the speaker is trying to buy time to plan how best to express an upcoming idea.

### 3.3. Confirmation Seeking

Confirmation seeking markers, also known as committal markers, are linguistic units used to request confirmation, seek agreement, or express wonder. However, these markers convey agreement with the forwarded message. They are employed to seek agreement, confirmation, or suggestions, with the speaker expecting a positive response to their expectations. In this context, confirmation refers to the speaker's desire to determine whether the interlocutor agrees with the statement made. Confirmation seeking, in general, is expressed through phrases such as *ʔajkonəndɨjju*? meaning 'Isn't it?' and *ħakəjdo*? or *namanəjdo*? meaning 'Am I right?'.

*(6)* [This example is extracted from a dialogue between the author and a restaurant owner in Shire town; this was recorded on 01 May 2018.]

***SH-KW-14*** *kab ʔadis ʔabəba ʔiχa məs'iʔka ħak'əjdo?*

| kab | ʔadis | ʔabəba | ʔi-χa | məs'iʔ-ka | ħak'-əj=do |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| from | Addis | Ababa | COP-2SM | come:IPV-2SM | **true-1s=DM_Q** |

'I think you are from Addis Ababa. Am I right?'

***SH-D-06*** *ʔɨwwə*

ʔɨwwə

DM_CNF

'Yes, you are right.'

The particle *ħakəj*, which means 'I am right', is used in conjunction with the question enclitic *=do* to seek positive confirmation. When using this particle, the speaker wants the addressee to agree with their claim. In this specific instance, the speaker (SH-D-06) has asked if their understanding of the topic being discussed is correct. The interlocutor (SH-KW-14) has confirmed the speaker's claim. Therefore, confirmation-seeking devices require confirmation from the participants in the conversation. This function can also be achieved using particles and interjections, which are rarely replaced by phrases and clauses. These particles are translated into full interrogative sentences.

*(7)* [This extracted from a longue dialogue between a young man and his friend's mother and were talking why the woman's son left for Mekelle. This was recorded on 22 May 2018.]

***M-FR-72*** *ʕarkəj sɨmma ləbəj χəjdom?*

| ʕark-əj | sɨmma | la-ʔabəj | χəjd-om |
|---|---|---|---|
| friend-1SG | FOC | to-where | go:PRV-3SG.H |

'Where did my friend go?'

***M-MR-156*** *ləməχ'ələ*

la-məχ'ələ

to-Mekelle

'He went to Mekelle.'

***M-FR-73*** *ʔərə?*

**ʔərə**

**DM_CNFSK**

'Really?'; 'Are you sure?'

***M-MR-156*** *ʔiʔɨm*

ʔiʔɨm

DM_CNF

'Yes, it is like that.'

The interjection *ʔərə*, meaning ‘really?’, is used with an interrogative pitch to seek assurance about what the other speaker has said. In response, the interlocutor confirms the truth of their statement using the particle *ʔɨʔɨm*, meaning ‘Yes, it is like that.’

The confirming linguistic expression *ʔɨwwə*, meaning ‘yes’, which is commonly used as a particle meaning 'yes' is used to confirm an interrogative sentence that seeks confirmation. In example (8), the speaker (B 02) asks ‘Are you ready to record?’ to the interlocutor (D) and receives the response ‘Yes, I am ready to record.’ (AS-D-07). In both AS-D-07 and AS-D-09, the function of ʔɨwwə ‘yes’ is the same.

*(8)* [This example is extracted from a narration on how to prepare Shire that was recorded in Addisho, Maichew (Dagnew 2019:163-164]

***AS-S-10*** *tɨħza dəjʔu?*
tɨ-ħz-a də=jɨ-ʔu
IPV-hold-SJ:2SM-OJ:3SF DM_Q=COP-3SM **{{DM_SKINF}}**
‘Are you going to record her narration?’ (lit.: Are you going to catch her?)

***AS-D-07*** *ʔɨwwə*
**ʔɨwwə**
**DM_CNF**
‘Yes, I am ready to record her speech.’

***AS-S-11*** *tɨħzəni dɨju?*
tɨ-ħz-ə-ni də=jɨ-ʔu
IPV-hold-SJ:2SM-OJ:1S DM_Q=COP-3SM **{{DM_SKINF}}**
‘Are you going to record my speech?’ (lit.: Are you going to hold me?)

***AS-D-08*** *ʔɨwwə*
**ʔɨwwə**
**DM_CNF**
‘Yes, I am going to record your speech.’

***AS-B-04*** *bɨχ’alujja kɨʔabɨjjo jɨʔu*
bɨ-χ’al-u=jja kɨ-ʔabɨj-j-o jɨ-ʔu
INST-oral-3SM=DM_EVD IPV:SJ:3SM-defy-OJ:3SM COP-3SM
‘It is difficult for him to remember what you will tell him orally.’

***AS-D-09*** *ʔɨwwə*
**ʔɨwwə**
**DM_CNF**
‘Yes, he is right.’

Nonetheless, the confirmation particle *ʔɨwwə*, which means 'yes', serves multiple functions as a discourse marker. It can be interpreted in two ways: confirmation and evaluation. This can be observed in the example provided below.

*(9)* [This is extracted from an interview on how to cook traditional food; it was recorded on 02 May 2018 in Shire town]

***SH-GB-36*** *kəmti zɨnəgərχuka tɨgəbɨr*

| kəm-ʔɨti | zɨ-nəgər-χu-ka | tɨ-gəbɨr |
|---|---|---|
| like-DEM:PRX:3SM | that-tell:PRV-SJ:1S-OJ:2SM | IMP-do:IPV:2SM |

'You do as a told you to do.'

***SH-GR-12*** *ʔɨwwə*
**ʔɨwwə**
**DM_STINF**
'I understand.' (lit.: Yes.)

The particle *ʔɨwwə* 'yes' in example (9) (GR-12) functions as an information management marker. It indicates that the interlocutor (GR) understands the message of the utterance because they remember it from the previous language context. It serves as a marker for stating information that was explicitly given in the previous discourse. Additionally, *ʔɨwwə* is interpreted as signaling how the speaker (GR) evaluates a text. However, the speaker (GR) refers to the text in the previous discourse, making it redundant. The particle *ʔɨwwə* 'yes' is also used to indicate that the speaker remembers an old passive idea. In the sentence, *ʔɨwwə* 'yes' in *ʔɨwwəʔɨmanəjʃamijɨʔudɨməsɨʔə* 'Yes, I am sure it is last year that he came' confirms the internal thinking process in the speaker's mind.

*(10)* [This is extracted from an animal tale and contains the final turns of that tale]

***M-MA-10*** *ʔannadidatto gədida*

| ʔa-nnadid-a-tt-o | gədid-a |
|---|---|
| CAUS-disappiont:PRV-SJ:3SF-ø-OJ:3SM | worse:CN-3SF |

'It (the ape) disappointed him (the lion).'

***M-SM-3*** *ʔɨwwə*
**ʔɨwwə**
**DM_CNFATN**
'Sure, go on.'

The particle *ʔɨwwə* 'yes' in example (10) (SM-3) indicates that the speaker (SM) understands the message of the interlocutor and wants the speaker (MA-10) to continue speaking. In other words,

the particle signals that the speaker expected the lion to be disappointed by the actions and words of the ape. The speaker may understand the message based on the general context, their knowledge, and their perception of the tale's message. Thus, the background information was implied, rather than explicitly stated.

Generally, *ʔɨwwə*, along with *=do*, which is a question marker, is used to form a question that seeks confirmation from the listener. The next speaker can respond with their 'yes' or 'no', but interrogative sentences with *ʔɨwwədo* 'Is that?' expect the listener to confirm in the affirmative. The speaker is asking for confirmation while also leaning towards their belief in the conveyed message. Linguistic expressions with such functions are expressions that seek confirmation.

### 3.4. Confirming Attention

Linguistic expressions, among other different linguistic expressions, are used to indicate confirmation of attention to the speaker. In rare cases, a speaker may seek confirmation if they suspect that the other person is not following the conversation. The listener employs discourse markers to confirm that they ae paying attention and to facilitate interaction. Confirming attention serves two purposes: it enables the speaker to seek attention and can also be initiated by the listener themselves. Both methods are beneficial in fostering dialogue between participants.

*(11)* [This text is extracted from a sociolinguistic interview on how to build a local house in a rural area around Tembien; this was recorded on 29 January 2018.]

***TH-GH-210*** *kab gojtaj ʔikko ʔijjə təmahɨrəjjo*

| kab | gojta-j | ʔikko | ʔɨ-jjə | təmahɨr-ə-jj-o |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| from | loard-REL:1S | FOC | COP-1S | learn:PRV-SJ:1S-Ø-OJ:3SM |

'I have learnt it from my father.'

***TH-DM-120*** *ʔərə?*

**ʔərə**

**DM_CNFSK**

'Really?'

***TH-GH-211*** *ʔiʔ gojtaj nɨfuʕ ʔijju nəjru*

| **ʔiʔ** | gojta-j | nɨfuʕ | ʔɨ-jju | nəjr-u |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **DM_CNF** | loard-REL:1S | clever | COP-3SM | exist:PRV-3SM |

'Yes, my father was clever.'

In the example above, the use of *ʔɨʔ* 'Yes, my father was clever', (GH-211) confirms a question seeking confirmation that was forwarded from (DM-120). This was done by using the interjection *ʔərə* 'really?', along with the interrogative pitch, 'Is that?'.

### 3.5. Stating Information

Stating information involves associating new information with existing knowledge, indicating your level of understanding, and acknowledging whether the information is new or already known. Backchannel language devices are used by speakers to indicate their familiarity with the information being shared and their level of interest. These devices allow the listener to interject without interrupting the main speaker.

*(12)* [This extract portion of a dialogue between a research assistant (TD) and a man who narrated the story of Rayya; this was recorded on 15 February 2018.]

***AL-TD-07*** *ʔɨhɨm ʔɨ ʔaħna ʔagajɨʃ jənamma*

| **ʔihim** | **ʔɨ** | ʔaħna | ʔa-gajɨʃ | jə-na-mma |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **DM_STINF** | **DM_PLNPRC** | 1PL | PL-guest | COP-1PL-DM_FOC |

'I see… We are guests.'

***AL-TD-08*** *naʕadɨna tariχ nəsɨniʕ jəna məs'ina*

| na-ʕadi-na | tariχ | ʔɨnna | na-s'ɨniʕ | jə-na | məsiʔ-na |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| POSS-country-POSS:3SM | history | and | IPV:1PL-study | COP-1PL | come:PRV-SJ:1PL |

'We are here to study our histoy.'

***AL-KB-003*** *ʔɨhɨm*
**ʔihim**
**dm_cnfatn**
'I see, it is a good job.'

In example (12) above, the particle *ʔɨhɨm*, meaning 'I see' (TD-07) refers to a state of understanding. It indirectly conveys the speaker's realization that the listener (KB) is unwilling to assist. The listener (TD-07) acknowledges this indirectly as well and proceeds to present compelling reasons that persuade KB to help. In the interaction (KB-003), the listener (KB) says *ʔɨhɨm*, indicating that the reasons provided by the speaker (TD) were convincing and she recognizes that he truly needs her assistance.

There are other discourse markers that serve to convey the cognitive process of understanding. The particle *ʔɨwwə*, meaning 'yes' is one such marker, as shown in example (13) below.

*(13)* [In this extract, Wg is defending that she has no much to talk about for she is forgetting the history of the locality while the researcher is explaining the purpose of the recording.]

***C-Wg-30*** *ʔizom χ'oluʕula bɨ...wədi balt͡ʃa ʔɨna ʔagnɨnajjom*

| ʔiz-om | χ'oluʕa-u-lə | bɨ...wədi | balt͡ʃa | ʔɨ-na | ʔa-gnɨj-na-jj-om |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PRX-2PL | boy-PL-AND\DM_FOC | PERL-son | Balcha | COP-1PL | CAUS-find:PRV-SJ:1PL-Ø-OJ:3PL |

'We met these boys with the help of Balcha's son.'

***C-Wg-31*** *ʔɨwwə*
**ʔɨwwə**
**DM_STINF**
'Sure, I understand that.'

***C-D-24*** *ʔɨnna... ʔɨ ʔizi hamzi ʕajnət naj maħɨbərəsəβ... fɨlt'ət dəmmo la-χ'arəjə jɨʔu lɨχədɨllo*

| ʔɨnna... | ʔɨ | ʔɨz-i | ham-ʔɨz-i | ʕajnət | naj |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| and\DM_PLNPRC | DM_PLNPRC | PRX-3SM | like-PRX-3SM | type | POSS |

| maħɨbərəsəb... | fɨlt'ət | dəmmo | la-χ'arəj-ə | jɨ-ʔu | lɨ-χəd-ll-o |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| society | Knowledge | DM_FOC | PROG-absent | COP-3SM | PROG-go-AUX:IPV-SJ:3SM |

'Such kind of social knowledge is being forgotten by the community.'

***C-Wg-32*** *ʔɨwaj ʔɨwwə lat'əfʔə jɨʔu*

| ʔɨwaj | **ʔɨwwə** | la-t'əfʔ-ə | jɨ-ʔu |
|---|---|---|---|
| DM_STINF | **DM_STINF** | PROG-cease:IPV-3SM | COP-3SM |

'I understand that, you are right, it is ceasing.'

The particle *ʔɨwwə*, meaning 'yes' in this example, indicates that the information provided is accurate and reliable, as the interlocutor has verified it.

*(14)* [The example is extracted from a history of the war between TPLF and Dergue that was recorded in Chercher town; the extract explains the severity of death of the soldiers.]

***C-Wg-64*** *lawəs'aχa jɨʔu lɨχ'ɨbər*

| la-wəs'aʔ-χa | jɨ-ʔu | lɨ-χ'ɨbər |
|---|---|---|
| PROG-out:CN-2SM | COP-3SM | REL-grave:IPV:OJ:3SM |

'Everybody participated in the funerals.'

***C-D-43*** *ʔɨwwə*
**ʔɨwwə**
**DM_STINF**
'I understand, please go on.'

***C-Wg-65*** *tɨχ'alasi jɨʔu ʔɨzi wə.. naʕadɨnna hɨzβi*

| tɨχ'alasi | ji-ʔu | ʔɨzi | wə.. | na-ʕaddi-nna | hɨzbi |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| fighter | COP-3SM | PRX:3SM | DM_CNVRPR | POSS-country-1PL | people |

'Our people are fighters.'

***C-D-44*** *ʔɨwwə*
**ʔɨwwə**
**DM_STINF**
'I know that.'

In the free translations of the particle *ʔɨwwə*, which means 'yes' as shown in example (14), its meaning in segment (D 43) differs from the reading in segment (D 44). Both functions are used to signal the cognitive processes in the speaker's mind, but their interpretation varies depending on the context. In segment (D 43), *ʔɨwwə* 'yes' means 'I understand that', while in segment (D 44) it means 'I know that' because I have known it. Therefore, both general and linguistic contexts play a role in interpreting the meanings and functions of backchannels in Tigrinya specifically.

## 4. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Summary

This article describes how Tigrinya backchannel devices are used in interactions to cooperate with the speaker for a smooth flow of conversation. They are used as asides, to seek the attention of an interlocutor, seek confirmation, confirm that due attention is given, and demonstrate how provided information is cognitively processed. The language expressions used to mark these conversation management aspects are fillers, particles, phrases, pronominals, clauses, and verbs. The clauses and verbs used as backchannel devices show gender, number and tense agreement since Tigrinya is an inflectional language. This implies that backchannels are not only monosyllabic words; in Tigrinya, speakers also use constructions that can be translated into complete sentences in other languages like English.

Linguistic devices like ʔɨh and ʔɨʃʃi are used as asides or continuers. Uttering such linguistic devices does not imply interruption or an interest to take a turn; it simply implies that the speaker is happy to hear what the other participant is discussing. Some backchannel markers signal that the speaker seeks attention. The filler ʔɨ, along with interrogative intonation, means the speaker wants to check if the addressee is following their narration.

Sometimes, a speaker seeks the addressee to agree with what they are asserting, seeking confirmation. The construction ʔɨwwədo ‘Am I right?’ is used for this purpose. Though the response to such confirmation-seeking can be positive or negative, the speaker's intention is to lead the addressee to agree with what is being stated. When the main speaker seeks attention, other participants confirm attention. ʔɨwwə ‘yes’ is common example of this function. Additionally, participants express how they associate new information with their experience. The

particle ʔiħim 'I see', for instance, functions to show the speaker has understood the presented information.

Backchannels help listeners understand how the interlocutor associates the information given to them, uncovering the hidden world of the speaker. These responsive utterances aid in comprehending a speaker's thoughts, assisting the interlocutor in accessing the unexpressed knowledge of the speaker. Additionally, backchannels help manage conversation turns and the flow of discourse development, in addition to cultural norms like age and other social statuses. The data and description in this research article may aid in making a comparative analysis of backchannels across languages.

### 4.2. Discussion

In Tigrinya, backchannels, first introduced by Yngve (1970), such as ʔiħ (attention confirmation marker), ʔɨ, along with interrogative pitch 'what?', hiħ, along with flat intonation 'attention confirmation marker', ʔiħim, along with flat intonation 'knowledge management marker', ʔɨwwədo 'Is that?', and ʔərə 'really?' are language units that correspond to responsive utterances or as described by Kawamori et al. (1994), "interjectory responses". These language units help listeners understand the speaker's covert thinking process (Onodera 2004).

Specifically, interjections like ʔɨ and hiħ, with their high pitch 'Are you following me?' are used as 'call attention' devices, as expressions to disclose 'speaker's emotional reactions', as 'responding' devices to questions, and to signal if a speaker wants to hold on a floor (Martin 1975 cited in Hinds (1986) and Onodera (2004). In daily interactions, backchannels like ʔiħ and hiħ, along with their flat intonation, also signal as continuers. This corresponds with what Maynard (1989b) study of Japanese ongoing conversation (also cited in Onodera (2004)) mentioned that one of the functions of backchannels is to signal a continuer. They are used to display the "understanding of content, support toward the speaker's judgment, agreement, strong emotional response, and minor addition, correction, or request for information", and to urge a speaker to hold a floor (Onodera, 2004: 130). After Chafe (1994), urging, in this study, means to let the speaker "move on in the development of a discourse topic" (cited in Maschler, 2009: 52).

In other words, such backchannel devices are used as confirmation seeking linguistic devices in Tigrinya; they mark an explicit interest of a speaker for a "mutual agreement and understanding" as Yang (2006: 274) identified such functions of DMs in Mandarin Chinese. Some other DMs in Tigrinya are used to signal a hearer's "corresponding feedback or backchannels as expressions of understanding and interest" that are confirmation attentions as also identified in Mandarin Chinese's spontaneous conversations (Yang 2006: 274). To sum up, though Tigrinya backchannels include listener signals used to support ongoing conversation and signals understanding and agreement (Wehrle, et al., 2024), they are also used to signal a speaker's request for attention confirmation and agreement. This aligns that backchannels inform and function across languages and cultures (Zellers, 2021). In relation to this, this study may contribute to make a comparative analysis of backchannels among Ethiopian languages.

**Transcription Conventions and Symbols**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| - | morpheme boundary | PRX | proximal |
| = | clitic boundary | PL | plural |
| .. | cut off | COP | copular |
| … | significant pause | FOC | focus |
| : | fused glosses under one morph | CNFATN | confirming attention |
| | | EVL | evaluation |
| \ | Meaning extension | ATN | Attention |
| ? | high pitch | PLTR | polite request |
| {{…}} | Full turn assigned to a function | IMP | imperative |
| | | SJ | subject |
| lit. | literal translation | H | honorific |
| S | singular | OJ | object |
| M | masculine | CHR | coherence |
| F | feminine | CN | converb |
| DM | discourse marker | PASS | passive voice |
| PLNPRC | planning process | STINF | stating information |
| PRV | perfective | JUSS | jussive |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| IPV | imperfective | INST | instrumental |
| NEG | negation | EVD | evidential |
| MAL | malifactive | HST | hesitation |
| CAUS | causative | POSS | possessive |
| SNG | singulative | PERL | perlative (through) |
| CNFSK | confirmation seeking | AUX | auxiliary |
| Q | question | PROG | progressive |
| CNF | confirmation marker | REL | relative clause |
| SKINF | information seeking | | |

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