Effects of Native-Language and Sex on Back-Channel Behavior

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1. Introduction: Back-Channeling Between Genders and Cultures

To the present day, much feminist sociolinguistic research has focused on the controversial issue of male-female differences in language. Many authors claim to have found significant differences in the speech of females as opposed to that of males (Maltz & Borker 1982, Tannen 1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, and 1994, Cameron 1998). For example, it is a widespread claim that "women's language" is, in general, more friendly, interactional, relational, participatory, and collaborative than that of males. A major disagreement among researchers on this issue has been about the best way of explaining the many differences, which have been claimed to be found. However, numerous feminist scholars have voiced serious disagreements about the nature and significance of gendered styles of speaking.

One position on this issue is taken by many researchers who believe that there is not necessarily any core of gendered behavior which cannot vary and change. Those who support this position prefer to talk about gender as something fluid, which men and women may perform differently in different contexts. West and Zimmerman (1987:140) support this concept of performing gender when they discuss gender as a social construct: "A person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others." Deborah Cameron (1998:258) also supports the idea of gender performance when she writes, "I suspect that in conversations with their superiors men use what has been regarded as women's conversational style...The underlying issue here is likely to be hierarchy, not simply gender." If men can use a women's conversational style, then they are performing the female gender.

Numerous linguistic researchers, such as Mott (1995), have examined the effects of gender on the production of back-channel responses. Forbes and Cordella (1999:282) define back-channeling in the following way: "...a participant communicates agreement with the speaker without interrupting their turn. These short utterances reflect appreciation of what is being said." Frances R. Bilous (1988:186) defines back-channel responses as follows: "...brief vocal responses ('uh-huh', 'yes', 'I see', etc.) by the nominal listener, which do not constitute an attempt to take the conversational floor." In his study, Bilous (1988:188) finds that female undergraduate students at Columbia University have a higher frequency of back-channel responses than do male undergraduate students at Columbia University.

Rather than examining the effects of gender on the production of back-channel responses, Maynard (1990:397) examines the effects of Japanese versus American culture. For Maynard (1990:397), "Back-channel expressions examined are limited to *uh-huh's* and the like, brief comments, punctuated head movements and laughter." Maynard (1990:397) concludes, "...that in Japanese casual conversation, listener's response such as brief comments and head movements occur far more frequently than in comparable American situations. Relevant contexts for listener back-channels in each speech community are found to differ significantly."

Ron White (1997) also examines the effects of Japanese versus American culture on the production of back-channel responses. White (1997) finds that fundamental cultural differences between the United States and Japan, regarding politeness and face concerns, are responsible for the differences he finds among the usage and functions of back-channel responses by the members of the two cultures.

2. This Study

In the present study, I employ CCA (Contrastive Conversation Analysis) to study back-channel responses occurring in conversations among both native-English and native-Spanish speakers of both sexes. Maynard (1990:400) describes the CCA, "In CCA, the first step requires data collection in two contrasting speech communities...The second step is data analysis...In the third step the results of data analysis are brought into focus. The fourth step involves actual contrast and comparison between the analyzed results."

In this study, I attain knowledge regarding:

1. the comparative usage of back-channel responses between native-English speakers (from the United States and Canada) and native-Spanish speakers (from Chile and Argentina) in conversations conducted by interlocutors with the same native language

2. the comparative effects of gender on the production of back-channel responses among native-English speakers (from the United States and Canada) and native-Spanish speakers (from Chile and Argentina) in conversations conducted by interlocutors with the same native language

4. Methodology
4.1 Participants

This study presents the back-channel responses of a convenience sample of eight participants, consisting of four native-English speakers from the United States and Canada, two of whom are male and two of whom are female, and four native-Spanish speakers from Chile and Argentina, two of whom are male and two of whom are female. Below, I have numbered the eight speakers from one to eight. The capital letters, "S", "M", "A", "I", "J", "N", "D", and "B", represent each of the participants.

1. Female Spanish speaker (S)
2. Female Spanish speaker (M)
3. Male Spanish speaker (A)
4. Male Spanish speaker (I)
5. Female English speaker (J)
6. Female English speaker (N)
7. Male English speaker (D)
8. Male English speaker (B)

The female, native-Spanish speakers, S and M, are friends. Also, the male, native-Spanish speakers, A and I, are friends. The other participants recorded having conversations together did not know each other. Before having their conversations recorded, all participants completed a short questionnaire, providing such information as age, place of origin, time spent in English and Spanish-speaking countries, and self-ranked language proficiency levels in English and Spanish.

The participants' ages range from nineteen to forty years of age. Regarding place of origin, the native-English speakers hail from Toronto, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky. The native-Spanish speakers are from Argentina and Chile. For native-English-speaking participants, the total amount of time spent in Bolivia or Spain ranges from zero to one year and ten months. For native-Spanish-speaking participants, the total amount of time spent in the United States ranges from two months to eight years.

Among the native-English speakers, two participants have no proficiency in Spanish, one participant claimed to have a good level of proficiency in Spanish, and one claimed to be fluent in Spanish. Among the native-Spanish-speaking participants, one participant has a good level of proficiency in English, two report to be fluent in English, and one claims to have the fluency in English of a native-English speaker.

These eight participants are not homogeneous in all respects reported on the questionnaire. However, I believe that they have enough in common so as to compare them within distinct categories.

4.2 Setting

I recorded my participants' conversations in empty classrooms on the second floor of the Cathedral of Learning, University of Pittsburgh, during a fall Sunday afternoon. The participants whose turn it was to be recorded sat alone in a classroom, across from each other, in student desks. The recording equipment sat on top of a third desk, located next to the two interlocutors being recorded. I recorded conversations in three rooms at a time, as I had three mini-cassette recorders at my disposal. When all three classrooms were filled, the two participants not being recorded at that time sat with me in the hallway outside of the classrooms.

4.3 Recording

I tape-recorded a total of eight conversations, of fifteen minutes each, among my eight participants, totaling two hours of recorded conversation. I paired my participants in the following way, where the numbers one through eight below correspond to the speakers listed above, numbered one through eight:

Same sex and same native-language pairs: 1,2   3,4   5,6   7,8
Different sex and same native-language pairs: 1,3   2,4   5,8   6,7

Each of the eight participants of my study had two fifteen-minute conversations, totaling one-half hour of recorded conversation per participant.

4.4 Topics

Participants were instructed to have a conversation based on one of the following two topics below, appearing in both English and Spanish translation:

1. What do you like or dislike about the University of Pittsburgh? (Conversation in English)
1. *¿Cuáles son las cosas que les gustan y que no les gustan sobre la Universidad de Pittsburgh? (Conversación en español)*

2. Where have you traveled in the past? If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you travel and why? (Conversation in English)
2. *¿Adónde han viajado? Si podrían viajar a cualquier lugar del mundo, ¿adónde viajarían y por qué? (Conversación en español)*

Same-sex, same native-language pairs had conversations based on topic 1, while mixed-sex pairs had conversations based on topic 2. As most of the participants were meeting each other for the first time during their recorded conversations, I believe that having these general topics of conversation felt natural for the interlocutors. However, each conversation recorded strayed far from the assigned topic. I believe that, instead of focusing on the assigned topic, most conversation pairs carried out conversations with the purpose of getting to know each other. For example, most pairs discussed what they study and where they're from, along with the assigned topic of conversation.

4.5 Transcription

During each pair's fifteen-minute conversation, both interlocutors held the conversational floor at some point during the course of the conversation. As the topic of this study is back-channel responses, I chose to transcribe excerpts of conversation in which one or the other of the interlocutors was clearly

holding the floor. In these excerpts, I analyzed the back-channel responses of the interlocutor who was clearly not holding the floor.

In seven of the eight conversations studied, the interlocutors each hold the floor for at least 2.00 minutes. For these conversations, I transcribed exactly two minutes while one interlocutor held the floor and exactly two minutes while the other interlocutor held the floor. Therefore, of each fifteen-minute conversation, I transcribed a total of four minutes. Transcribing four minutes of each of the eight conversations totals thirty-two minutes of transcribed conversation. In one conversation, that between the male native-Spanish-speaking interlocutors, neither of the interlocutors held the floor for the minimum of 2.00 minutes. For this conversation, I transcribed a four-minute excerpt, in which the interlocutors share the floor.

4.6 Tabulation

As mentioned above, I examined the back-channel responses displayed by interlocutors who were clearly not holding the floor. I categorize these back-channels as being one of two kinds, "In-Between" or "Overlap". The "In-Between" back-channels are inserted during pauses in the speech of the interlocutor who holds the floor. In other words, these are not uttered until the interlocutor who holds the floor has stopped speaking. The "Overlap" back-channels, on the other hand, are uttered while the interlocutor who holds the floor is still speaking. Therefore, the "Overlap" back-channels (Overlap BC), overlap with the speech of the interlocutor holding the floor. Both In-Between and Overlap BC consist of a variety of types of utterances. These may be nonverbal (i.e.- "Mmm-hmm", "Uh-huh", "Ah-hah"), short comments (i.e.- *No me digas"(No way)*, "That's awesome."), sentence fragments (i.e.- "So, your own personal advanced Quechua", *"con su carrera"(with his career),* "right in the middle of"), and short questions (i.e.- "How about the writing?", "You planning on doing anything this summer?", "like, mountain bike?", "How did you find Quechua?", "*Y ¿estudiaste medicina en Argentina?"(And, you studied medicine in Argentina?)*.

Below, I include an excerpt of conversation between "S" and "M", the two female, native-Spanish speakers, which illustrates use of the In-Between BC. M holds the floor and S inserts BC during M's pauses. These BC are written below in parentheses. Also, the translation appears under the excerpt, in English.

M: *Los alumnos son unos.... ¿Qué sé yo? Nunca saben nada (Sí) y como que nunca tampoco van a saber nada. (Sí) Son experiencias que tenía en la universidad. Mi experiencia fue terrible realmente. Yo creo que he quedado marcada para todo el resto de mi vida con la universidad. (No me digas.) Y bueno...Yo estuve en una época en que Argentina...este...vivía un momento que era bastante feo, que era la época del Proceso.*
The students are such… How should I put it? They never know anything (Yes) and like they will never know anything. (Yes) They are experiences that I had at the university. My experience was really terrible. I think that I have been effected for the rest of my life with the university. (No way.) And, well… I lived in Argentina during a time in which… um…I lived during a moment that was quite ugly, that was the time of the Proceso.

Below, I include an excerpt of conversation between "D" and "N". D is a male, native-English speaker and N is a female, native-English speaker. This excerpt exemplifies both In-Between and Overlap BC. D holds the floor and N overlaps with his speech. N utters the In-Between BC, in parentheses, when she says "Wow!" after D has finished his utterance. The Overlapped speech appears in bold. N's "Mmm" overlaps with D's "Japan". Also, N's "Oh, the" overlaps with D's "could".

D: I'm just... I don't know. I'm not so happy with the financial situation 'cause I want to go to **Japan** first because that's what I study but (yeah) it's like
N: **Mmm**

D: one of the most expensive places I **could**

N: **Oh, the** ticket to get there must be...

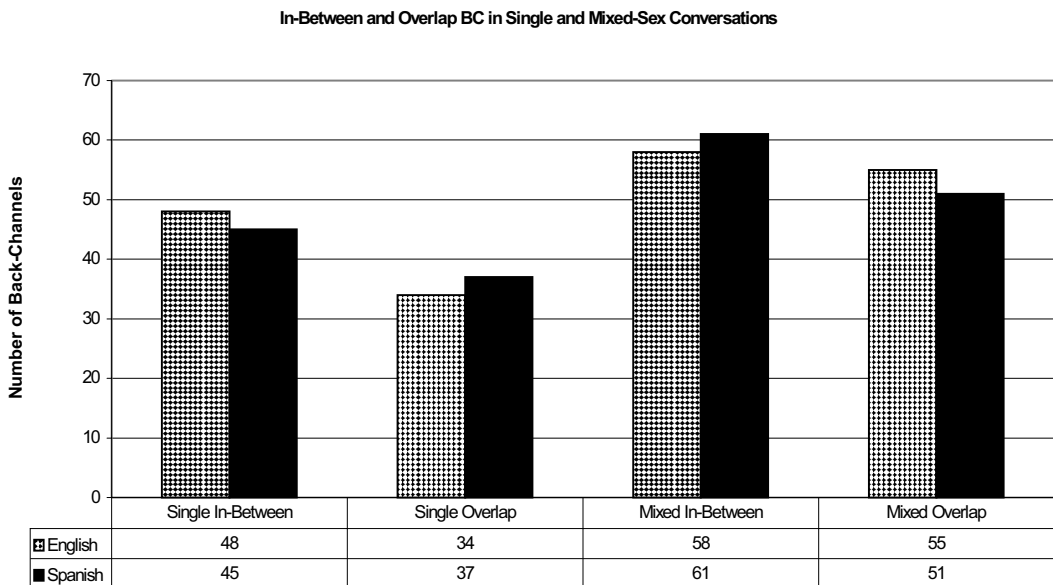D: Yeah, the average ticket must be like $1,500. (Wow!)

5. Findings

As mentioned above, many linguistic researchers have examined the affects of both gender and culture on the production of back-channel responses. In the present study, I examine the influences of both sex and native-language on back-channel responses. I propose that the native-English-speaking participants of my study share a common culture, as do the native-Spanish-speaking participants of my study. Firstly, I will present my findings, comparing native-English speakers to native-Spanish speakers. Secondly, I will present my findings comparing the back-channel behavior of males and females. Finally, I will present my findings comparing both variables, native-language and sex.

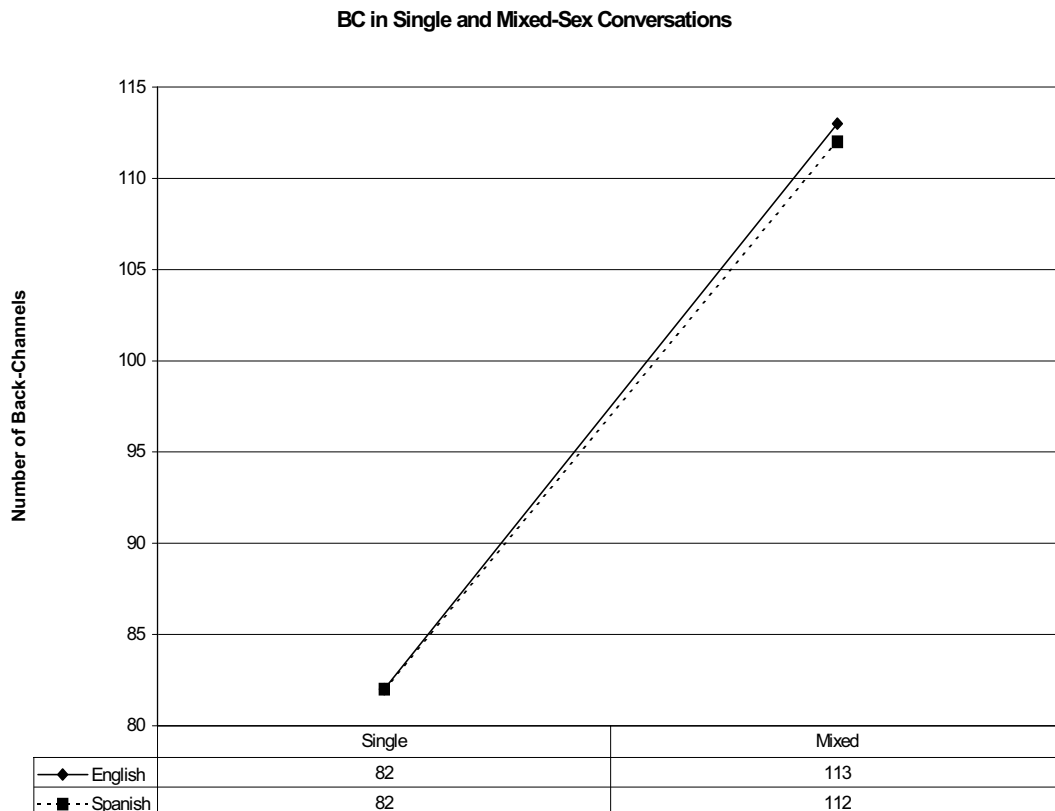### 5.1 Comparing Native-English and Native-Spanish Speakers

In Graph 1 below, I present findings comparing the performance of native-English and native-Spanish speakers in both Single-Sex (Single) and Mixed-Sex (Mixed) conversations. More specifically, here, I counted the speakers' instances of using the In-Between and Overlap back-channel responses. The native-English speakers are represented in the column graph below by a pattern, while a solid black column represents the native-Spanish speakers. It is obvious, from the graph and the data contained in the table below the graph, that both native-English and native-Spanish speakers behaved similarly in each of the four measures: use of In-Between BC in Single conversation, use of Overlap BC in Single conversation, use of In-Between BC in Mixed conversation, and use of Overlap BC in Mixed conversation. Therefore, in these measures, native-language was not an influential factor. However, it is obvious that both language groups used more In-Between and Overlap BC in the Mixed-Sex conversations that in the Single-Sex conversations.

Graph 1

In-Between and Overlap BC in Single and Mixed-Sex Conversations

	Single In-Between	Single Overlap	Mixed In-Between	Mixed Overlap
⊞ English	48	34	58	55
■ Spanish	45	37	61	51

In Graph 2 below, I again compare the performance of native-English speakers, represented here by the solid black line, and native-Spanish speakers, represented by the dotted line. Here, I show the results for total back-channels, the In-Between BC plus the Overlap BC. In this line graph, it is obvious that both native-English and native-Spanish speakers use more total BC in Mixed conversations than they do in Single conversations.

Graph 2

BC in Single and Mixed-Sex Conversations

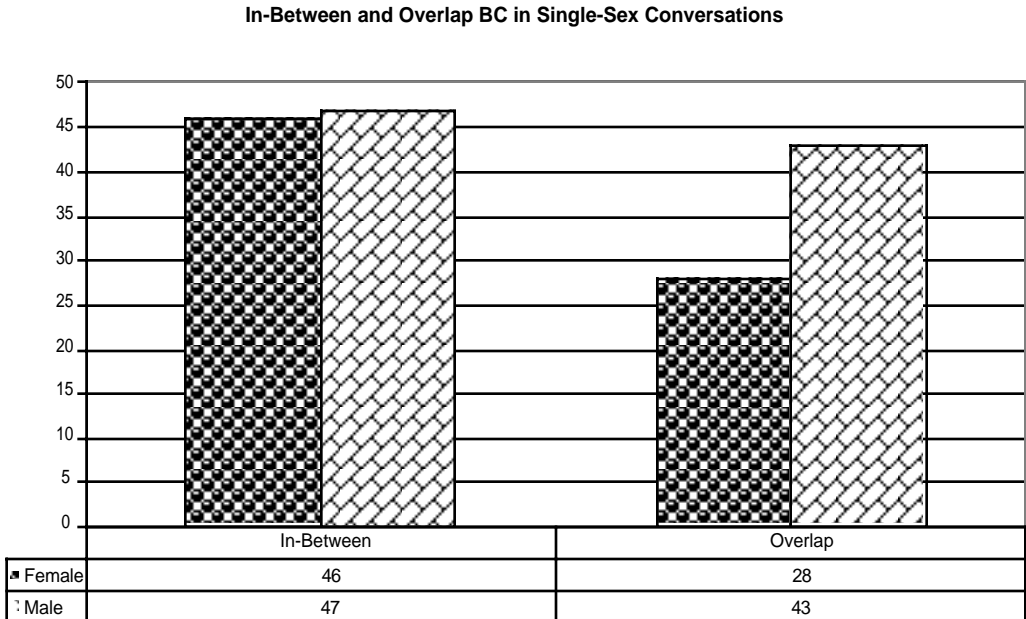|	Single	Mixed
—◆— English	82	113
‑ ‑■‑ ‑ Spanish	82	112

5.2 Comparing Male and Female Speakers

In Graph 3 and Graph 4 below, I present findings comparing sex rather than native-language. In Graph 3, I present the performance of Males versus that of Females in Single-Sex conversations. In Graph 4, I present the performance of Males versus that of Females in Mixed-Sex conversations. In both graphs, the performance of Females is represented by a pattern of black bubbles, while the performance of Males is represented by a pattern of diagonal bricks.
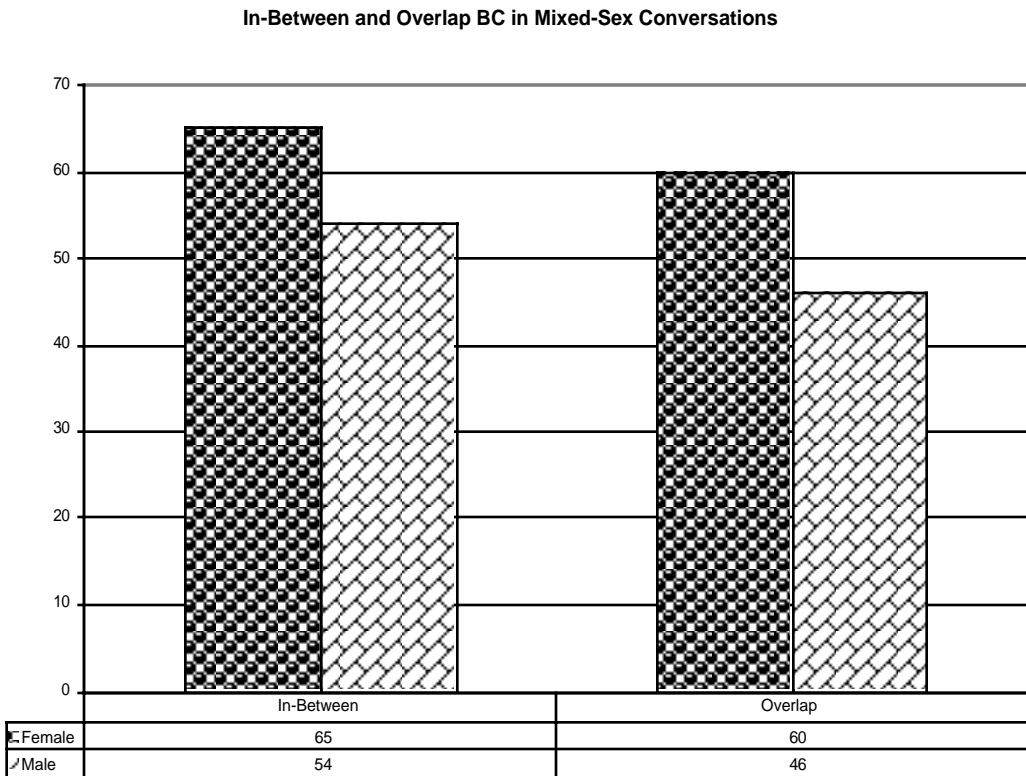
In Graph 3, Males and Females perform almost exactly the same in Single conversations when it comes to the production of In-Between BC. The Males produce just one more occurrence of In-Between BC than the Females. However, in Single conversations, Males produce more Overlap BC than do Females.

In Graph 4, in Mixed conversations, Females produce both In-Between and Overlap BC more than do the Males. These graphs show, therefore, that Males and Females exhibit different BC behavior, depending on whether the conversation is with a member of their same sex (Single) or with a member of the opposite sex (Mixed).

Graph 3

In-Between and Overlap BC in Single-Sex Conversations

	In-Between	Overlap
Female	46	28
Male	47	43

Graph 4

In-Between and Overlap BC in Mixed-Sex Conversations

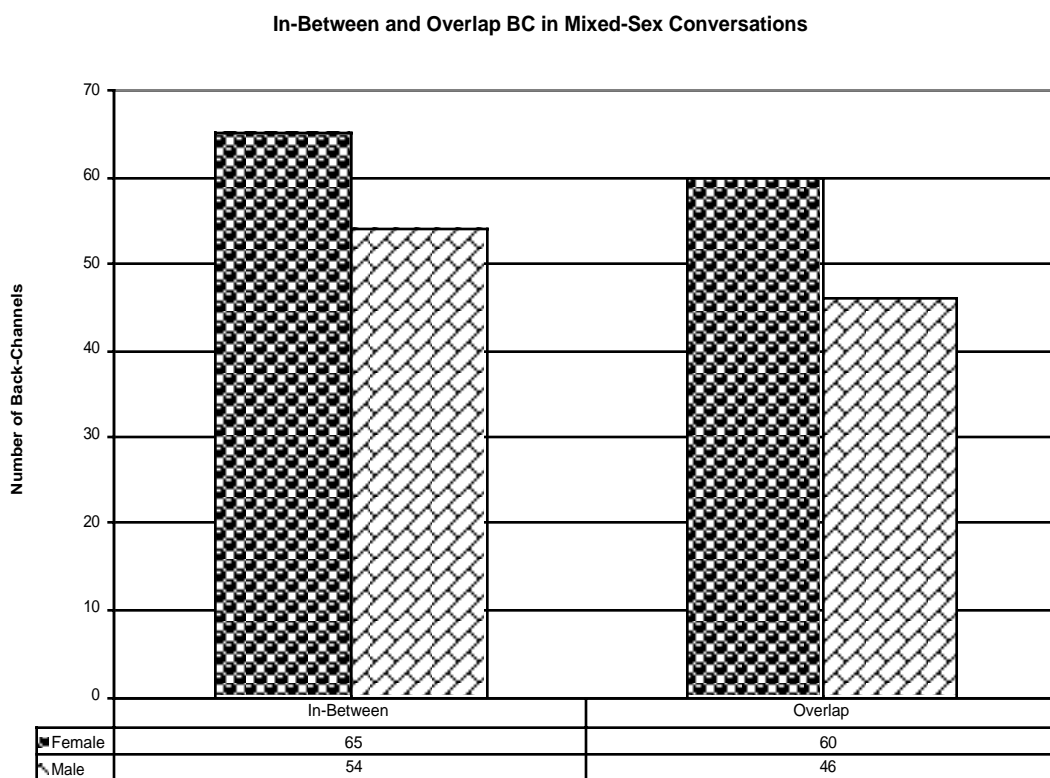|	In-Between	Overlap
Female	65	60
Male	54	46

In Graph 5 below, findings are also presented, comparing the back-channel behavior of Males versus that of Females. Above, Graph 1, Graph 2, and Graph 3 and Graph 4 together, show that both Males and Females use both kinds of BC, in-Between and Overlap, more in Mixed conversations than they do in Single conversations. Graph 5, below, shows the differences In BC behavior for the Males

and Females in Single versus Mixed conversations. The differences between the two are the number of occurrences of both kinds of BC in the Mixed conversations minus the number of occurrences of both kinds in the Single conversations.

It is obvious, in the graph below, that Females show a greater difference In BC behavior for both In-Between and Overlap BC than do the Males. Also, it is clear that the Females have a greater difference in their production of Overlap BC than they do in their production of In-Between BC. The Males, on the other hand, show a greater difference in their In-Between BC behavior than in their Overlap BC behavior.

Graph 5

In-Between and Overlap BC in Mixed-Sex Conversations

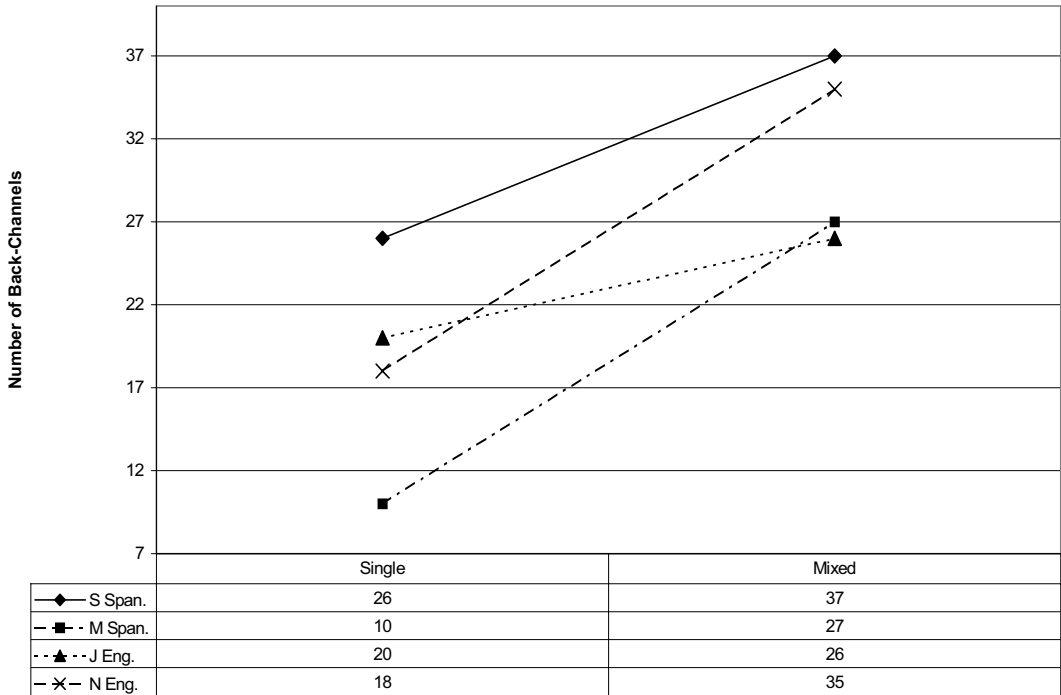|	In-Between	Overlap
Female	65	60
Male	54	46

In Graph 6 and Graph 7 below, I present my individual participants' total BC behavior in Single versus Mixed conversations. In Graph 6, it is obvious that each Female increased in the number of her occurrences of BC from Single to Mixed conversations. However, each Female participant did not increase equally. Some Females increased more than others.

In Graph 7, I present the Males' total BC behavior. Three of the four Male participants followed the general trend, increasing in number of BC from Single to Mixed conversation. However, one Male participant, "A", a native-Spanish speaker, decreased in his total number of BC from Single to Mixed conversation.

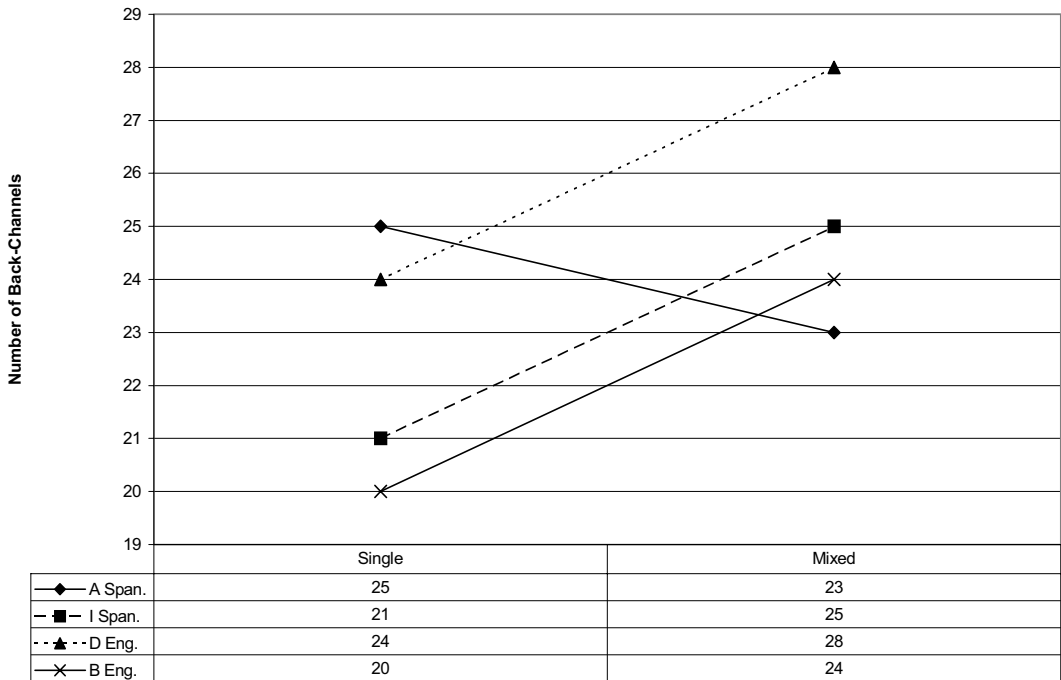In total, seven out of eight participants followed the same trend.

Graph 6

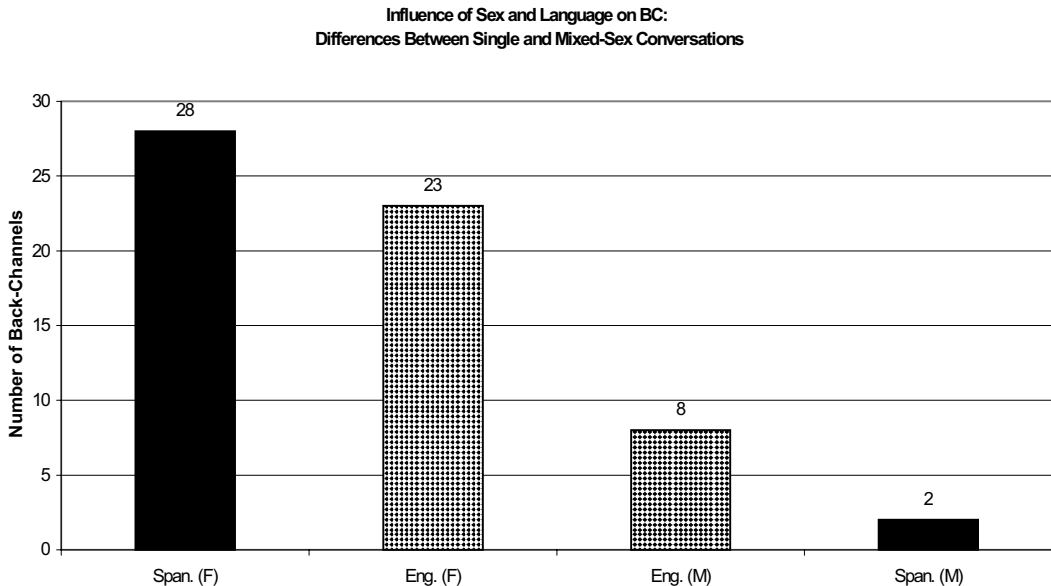**Female Individuals' BC in Single and Mixed-Sex Conversations**

	Single	Mixed
◆ S Span.	26	37
■ M Span.	10	27
▲ J Eng.	20	26
✕ N Eng.	18	35

Graph 7

Male Individuals' BC in Single and Mixed-Sex Conversations

	Single	Mixed
◆ A Span.	25	23
■ I Span.	21	25
▲ D Eng.	24	28
✕ B Eng.	20	24

5.3 Comparing Native-English and Native-Spanish, Male and Female Speakers

In Graph 8, below, I present both variables, native-language and sex. Graph 8 shows that each of the four groups examined, native-Spanish-speaking Females, native-English-speaking Females, native-English-speaking Males, and native-Spanish-speaking Males, may be ranked in terms of their differences in total production of BC in Single versus Mixed conversations. The native-Spanish-speaking Females show the greatest difference in BC behavior between Single and Mixed conversations, followed by the native-English-speaking Females, the native-English-speaking Males, and the native-Spanish-speaking Males.

Graph 8

Influence of Sex and Language on BC:
Differences Between Single and Mixed-Sex Conversations

6. Conclusion

In this study, I have attained knowledge regarding the two topics listed above, appearing again here:

1. the comparative usage of back-channel responses between native-English speakers (from the United States and Canada) and native-Spanish speakers (from Chile and Argentina) in conversations conducted by interlocutors with the same native language

2. the comparative effects of gender on the production of back-channel responses among native-English speakers (from the United States and Canada) and native-Spanish speakers (from Chile and Argentina) in conversations conducted by interlocutors with the same native language

In Graph 1 and Graph 2, above, I show that native-English and native-Spanish-speaking participants perform similarly in the measures presented. Both native speakers of English and Spanish use more In-Between and more Overlap BC in Mixed-Sex conversations than they do in Single-Sex conversations.

In Graph 3 and Graph 4, I show that Males and Females perform both kinds of BC differently in Single and Mixed conversations. Males use many more Overlap BC than do Females in Single-Sex conversations, while Females use both more In-Between and more Overlap BC than do the Males in Mixed-Sex conversations.

In Graph 5, I show that Females show a much greater difference in BC behavior from Single to Mixed conversations than do Males. Also, Females have a greater difference in their Overlap BC behavior than they do in their In-Between BC behavior. Males show the opposite trend, with a greater difference in their In-Between BC behavior than in their Overlap BC behavior. As evident in Graph 3, Males use many more Overlap BC than do Females in Single-Sex conversations. As just mentioned, Females increase greatly in their Overlap BC behavior in conversations with Males (Mixed). Perhaps, in Mixed conversation, the Females accommodate to the Overlap BC style, which Males exhibit in conversation with other Males (Single).

Graph 6 and Graph 7 show each individual's total BC performance from Single to Mixed conversations. These graphs show that seven out of eight participants display the same trend.

Finally, Graph 8 shows that each of the four groups examined, native-Spanish-speaking Females, native-English-speaking Females, native-English-speaking Males, and native-Spanish-speaking Males, may be ranked in terms of their differences in total production of BC in Single versus Mixed conversations. The native-Spanish-speaking Females show the greatest difference in BC behavior between Single and Mixed conversations, followed by the native-English-speaking Females, the native-English-speaking Males, and the native-Spanish-speaking Males. Therefore, native-Spanish-speaking Females show the greatest difference in their BC behavior while native-Spanish-speaking Males show the least difference in their BC behavior in Single-Sex and Mixed-Sex conversations.

The results contained in Graph 8 suggest a possible ranking of accommodation to the opposite sex's BC style. As the Males have many more occurrences of Overlap BC in Single-Sex conversation than do the Females, and because the Females differ most in their usage of the Overlap BC from Single to Mixed conversation, it is a reasonable assumption that, in Mixed conversation, Females accommodate to the BC style of the Males. In this case, the native-Spanish-speaking Females exhibit the most accommodation, followed by the native- English-speaking Females, the native-English-speaking Males, and the Spanish-speaking Males.

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