

# **Backchannel Communication in Ola Rotimi's Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again**

MOJI A. OLATEJU & YISA KEHINDE YUSUF

*Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria*

## **ABSTRACT**

Written plays are examples of interactive discourse in print and dialogue among characters is a key feature of this discourse. Related features include grumbled fragments such as 'eem', 'ugh', 'ooh' and so on which are backchannels and can contribute to the success of any piece of dramatic work. This paper therefore examines how along with characterisation and cleverly woven language these backchannel items heighten the hilarious and comical effect of Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has gone Mad Again* which is meant to ridicule the selfishness and naivety of neo-colonial African politicians.

*Keywords: backchannel, communication, discourse, human interaction*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

For as long as human societies exist, there would be need for the analysis of human interactions which takes various forms. Daniels (1994: 23) in his write up on 'Nine ideas about language' says all human beings belong to a speech community and learning the sociolinguistic rules which tells us which speech is appropriate in different social situations is as much of language acquisition as learning to produce initial speech sounds. The ability to adjust our language forms to the social context is something which we acquire at a youthful age along with sounds, words and syntax. In the Yoruba (a large socio-ethnic group in the south-western part of Nigeria) socio-cultural context, anyone who lacks this skill is seen as not well-bred.

Daniels (1994: 24) gives a record of Martin Joos work on the five basic styles or registers of language which everybody learns. He notes that there are intimate, casual, consultative, formal and frozen registers of language. Joos categorisation is just one out of many categorisations but it highlights ways in which day to day language varies. To Joos, the intimate style is personal, fragmentary and implicit while the casual style is characterised by ellipsis and slang and this is reserved for friends and outsiders or those we choose to draw closer to. The consultative style helps the speaker to provide more explicit information and it is used by strangers or near strangers in routine transactions. In this style, the listener participates and uses frequent interjections such as 'yeah'-'uh',-'huh' or 'oh' etc.

In the formal style which is common in speeches, lectures, sermons, television newscasts, listener participation is not common. The frozen style is found in print especially literature. In real life situations, speakers need to shift between intimate, casual and consultative styles because each requires certain contexts. Apart from having a range of speech styles, speakers also need a number of jargons based on their relationship with certain groups. The most common of the jargons are however occupational and job related.

Literature falls under the frozen style and this makes interactive discourse possible in dramas and plays. Discourse can be seen as the interaction between the speaker and the hearer and the dynamics of the context in which conversation occurs. Whereas the frozen style creates a picture of the reader versus the written texts, in written plays, the supposed frozen style comes alive as the reader reads about characters and their actions in print. In print, a range of speech styles and casual jargons are introduced to drive home the message. It is one of such speech styles referred to as backchannel communication that this paper wishes to examine.

Discourse analysis has to do usually with utterances above the sentence in which discourse units such as paragraphs may have different features of speech. Scholars have worked on the structures of monologues, lectures, sermons, interviews etc. In some situations, analysts have recognised and noted the fact that speech exchange systems are involved where there are more than one participant or where only one participant speaks. In any case, different speech exchange systems are involved in the different types of conversation and this also involves different turn-taking practices in backchannel communication.

## 2. BACKCHANNEL COMMUNICATION

Emanuel Schegloff (1982: 77) in his article on 'Discourse as an Interactional Achievement notes that modern literature in which bits of talk are subjected to treatment started with Fries (1952: 49). Fries puts together items of talk such as 'yes', 'uh', 'huh', 'yeah', 'I see', 'good', 'oh' etc and others of lesser frequency. Schegloff (1982: 77) also notes that the most common term now used for such items is back-channel communication which was introduced by Yngve (1970). Duncan and Fiske (1977: 201–202) adopted the term backchannel communications for utterances such as 'uh', 'huh', 'yeah', etc, but they included completions by a recipient of sentences begun by another, requests for clarification, brief restatement of something just said by another and head nods and shakes. These bits of talk are evidence of attention, interest and understanding on the listener's part and they also keep conversations going smoothly.

Jefferson (1984: 199) sees items such as 'yeah' or 'yes', 'uh', 'huh' as acknowledgement tokens. He believes that when there is overlapping in talk or shift in topic, the overlapping talk is acknowledged. To him 'yeah' or 'yes' are

massively associated with topical shift. 'Yeah' according to Jefferson can exhibit a preparedness to shift from resiliency to speakership while 'mm' and 'hm' exhibit what he calls passive reciprocity. Passive reciprocity means that its user is proposing that his co-participant is still in the midst of some course of talk and shall go on talking.

Schegloff (1982: 81) sees items such as 'uh' 'huh' etc as continuers. To him, the production of talk in a possible turn position with the use of 'uh' or 'huh' etc claims an understanding of the state of the talk and that an extended talk by another is going on by declining to produce a fuller turn in that position. It could also be a demonstration of an action with an underlying motive. Schegloff (1982: 73) also notes that important analytic leverage can be gained if the examination of any discourse is conducted in a manner guided by the fact that the discourse be seen as an achievement that is interactional. The character of this interactional achievement should also be shaped in part by the socio sequential organisation of participation in conversation and that the mechanisms of the achievement and its efforts are displayed in terms of analysis which is what we have tried to do in this paper.

Daniels (1994: 23) refers to items of talk such as 'uh' 'uhhh' 'yeah' as grumbled fragments of a private code. To him, human beings constantly range between formal and informal styles of speech and this is common to speakers of all languages. The sociolinguistic rules guiding the different social situations is part of what speakers of different languages should take note of. To Daniel, 'uh' etc could signify momentary confusion or embarrassment while 'oohh', 'that reminds' or 'oohh', 'I meant to tell you...' could signal a change of topic. Chaika (1994: 485) in his work on discourse routines notes that the 'oohh' uttered rapidly on a high pitch with a tense throat is a warning that there is an announcement about topic change.

Schiffrin (1999: 275) writing on 'oh' as a marker of information management notes that a distinction should be made between the contribution a discourse marker makes and the contributions made by characteristics of the discourse slot in which the marker occurs. This means that one should be able to find out the semantic meaning or grammatical status of any discourse marker and how the meaning influences the interpretation of the data.

As regards the importance of backchannel items in discourse, Gardner Rod (2000: 281) see backchannel items as little conversational objects which do not have meanings in a conventional dictionary sense but are loaded with complex and subtle information about the attitude of listeners to what they hear, the placement of the conversational objects and the timing within the flow of talk.

Andersen and Fretheim (2000: 273) also see backchannel items as attitudinal markers in different languages. To them, interlocutors express different attitudes to interactive discourse and propositions. A speaker can express an attitude of desire, hope, believe grief, doubt, fear, regret, pretence, satisfaction etc in any given proposition using attitudinal markers. So these seemingly insignificant discourse items are very important in speech and they help in both semantics and linguistic interpretation of utterances.

Codgill et al. (2001) note that the term backchannel is defined a number of ways depending on the discipline in which one is working. They noted the following in network and systems architecture that backchannel refers to the physical or logical pathway back from the source of most of the data. The web dictionary of cybernetics and systems defines backchannel as communication which travels through informal rather than formal channels. Governments and people with political power use backchannel or informal communication occasionally to test the reactions of people to unpopular government policies or decisions.

To Codgill et al, backchannel in digital conversations permits private communication visible only to the sender and receiver. Backchannel can be spelt in three different ways: backchannel, back-channel, or back channel.

From this short review on backchannel communication, it is clear that linguists agree that items such as 'uh' 'ohoo' etc generally referred to as backchannels contribute to the development and success of interactional discourse.

These bits of discourse units, though insignificant to the uncaring eye are instances of vocalizations referred to as backchannel communications which this paper focuses on in the book '*Our Husband has gone Mad Again*' by Ola Rotimi.

Drama is basically interactive and involves a lot of turn-taking sequences. More often than not, action accompanies or replaces words or conversations. To the discourse analyst, all the words and actions in an interaction have one discourse relevance or the other. This paper therefore attempts to,

1. highlight the various forms of backchannel communications such as 'ooh' 'yeah' etc in the text '*Our Husband has gone Mad Again*' by Ola Rotimi.
2. determine and categorise the discourse functions of each of the groups of these bits of talk and how they contribute to the overall understanding of the text.

### 3. THE DATA

In this paper, Ola Rotimi's book titled '*Our Husband has gone Mad Again*' has been chosen because of the high prevalence of backchannel items and their discursive relevance to the theme, plot, characterisation and current political structure of the African nations. The book is a comedy and the play depicts the naivety and ignorance of a former military major-Rahman Taslim Lekoja-brown in his bid to go into politics. His motives and actions were misplaced and his unpatriotic motives makes it difficult for him to succeed as a politician or even win any party primaries and his attempt to adapt to a situation he hardly comprehends produces high comic effects and results. He attempts to use military tactics in place of political strategies. This inexperience coupled with

his domestic problems and misdirected political ambition ruined him as a politician and almost wrecked his matrimonial home as well. All these were achievable through the use of language which the artist cleverly weaved together to produce high comic results.

Ola Rotimi can be seen as a very visionary writer who perceived what the political scene in Nigeria and other African nations would be in the nearest future and has therefore decided to take a comic swipe at ideological misfits and opportunists who flood the ever accommodating political landscape of contemporary Africa. The issue of women in politics is also highlighted in the play. With little information and instruction from Lekoja Brown's American trained wife, Sikira (a political and illiterate wife) of Lekoja Brown abandons her husband and takes to politics which she feels will lose her from the grips of oppression and get her the dividends of democracy and popularity. Surprisingly enough, towards the end of the play she is seen as the party's gubernatorial candidate campaigning and canvassing for votes- that men and women are created equal. In contemporary Africa, women are gradually finding their feet more and more in politics and this is a welcome development in world politics.

In other to realise his objective of ridiculing the opportunistic attitude and ignorance of the avant-garde African politicians, Ola Rotimi creates characters that are versed in the use of backchannels to an appreciable extent. The use of backchannel items could be said to be a demonstration of the exhibition of the interest, attention, understanding or agreement of the interlocutors involved in a discourse. It is also to be noted that the backchannel items occur at specific points in a discourse and these are meant to highlight or draw attention to a speaker's response verbally or non-verbally. Schegloff (1982: 80) notes that the appropriate sets of analysed single cases of 'uh', 'huh' etc may be used to display recurrent practices, themes, structures of a piece of work. 'Uh', 'huh' etc also present an understanding and opportunity to produce a full turn at talk. The different backchannel items in the book *Our Husband has gone Mad Again* have been categorised according to their functions in the book.

Below are two tables showing the bits of language fragments referred to as backchannels and their distribution among the major characters. From the two tables, 20 different backchannel items were identified. The main character- Rahman Lejoka-Brown, a former military officer and a gubernatorial aspirant used 13 (65%) different types of the total number of discourse items used. He used the discourse items frequently giving him the talkative and desperate nature of seasoned politicians. He constantly and deliberately asks for a positive confirmation of his ideas and propositions from his listeners especially with the use of *huuh?* and *abi?* (Yoruba word for 'Is it not so?').

**Table 1.** Backchannel items 1–10 and their distribution.

	Questioning Ehen	Surprise E-he- en!	Confirmatory H-e-en Ahennn	It is new to me Ohoo, ooh	Gap filler Ooh	Allowance for fast thinking Mhm, mmm	Disgust Chuu	Gap filler Oh	Excitement Hey Heyyy	Hearing check Huuh? Abi?
Lejoka- BrwonA Retired military officer	2		1	4	3	2	4	2	2	10
Okonkwo Friend of Lejoka Brown, also a retired military officer	1				2			1		6
Liza, a foreign trained medical doctor. Wife to Lejoka Brown					1			1		
Sikira, wife to Lejoka, Brown daughter of madam Ajanaku, leader of market women.	1	1	1	2	2	1			1	
Mama Rashida, wife to Lejoka Brown, sells chickens		2	1	1				1	2	2
Madam Ajanaku, leader of women's group										
Polycarp, houseboy									1	
Total	4	3	3	7	8	3	4	5	6	18

**Table 2.** Backchannel items 11–20 and their distribution.

	Aaahh Ah! Aha!	Emphatic negative Ooooh no!	Contrast Ha! Ha	Sshh	Mmn	Surprise Toh!	Exclamation Hoo!	Abah! Auru!	Ugh!	Pain oooohhh
Lejoka	6	1	2	2						
Okonkwo	2									
Liza	1	1	1	1					2	1
Sikira	2		4				1	1	1	
Mama Rashida	2	3		1		1		1		
Madam Ajanaku										
Mustapha- an old friend of Lejoka					3	1				
Total	13	5	7	4	3	2	1	2	3	1

Okonkwo who is also a retired military officer, is a friend of Lejoka-Brown. He identifies with the political ambition of Lejoka-Brown. He is of Igbo origin (people from the south-eastern part of Nigeria) and he is not quite familiar with the political strategies of ambitious political aspirants such as Lejoka-Brown, the native laws and customs of the Yoruba people and the Islamic faith which Lejoka-Brown seems to represent. His questioning remarks through the use of the hearing check- ‘hunh?’ sounds genuine in that he wants to be informed about the things he does not know about political campaigns and strategies. Okonkwo used a total of 5 (25%) different types of the total number of backchannel items used in the book. The total number of hearing checks used is 20 out of which Okonkwo used 6 (33.3%) which is about one third of the total. The difference between his use of the hearing checks and that of Lejoka-Brown is that, he genuinely wants a response to his initiations. For example:

Lejoka-Brown: (with a broad sweep of the arm that takes in both  
Sikira and mama Rashida). Wives...

Okonkwo: (confused). Hunh?

Lejoka-Brown: (indicating both women again) Wives...

Liza is the American trained medical doctor who happens to be the legally wedded wife of Lejoka-Brown who eventually had to adjust to the dictates of Lejoka-Brown’s polygamous family even though she found that out too late and too suddenly. Liza used 8 (40%) of the total number of backchannel items. From tables 1&2, it is evident that she only used discourse fragments that are common to native speakers of English such as: ‘ugh’, ‘oh’, ‘mhm’, ‘hey’ etc.

Her appearance in Lejoka’s house at election time brought a new orientation to the political carrier and matrimonial out look of Lejoka-Brown. The backchannel items she used such as: ‘ah-ah-ah-ah’, ‘ugh!’, ‘ooh no!’, demonstrated her anger, surprise, disgust and disagreement at the situation she found herself.

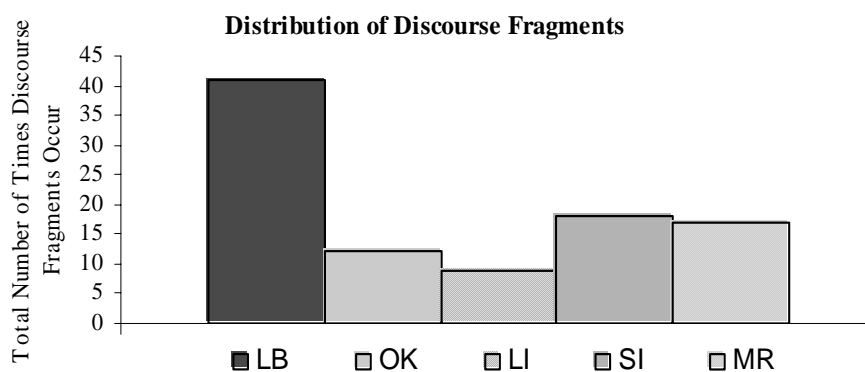
Once, she exclaimed in pain- 'Oooohhhh' during the quarrel between her and Lejoka-Brown. Some of her other interactions were in form of real questions such as: don't you know what I mean? things? what things? etc

About 7 (35%) of the total number of the different items are close adaptations from the Yoruba language. These are: 'ehen', 'ehe-en', 'ahen', 'chuu', 'huuh/abi?', 'abah/auru', 'toh'. From the two tables, it is evident that Liza did not use any of the discourse items that are close adaptations from the Yoruba language. One of the reasons why Liza probably did not use some of these discourse items is that she is a Kenyan lady trained in America and she does not understand Yoruba language.

Sikira is another woman in the life of Lejoka-Brown. From her contributions, it is obvious that she does not take the marriage between her and Lejoka-Brown serious because she knows it is a marriage of convenience and a contract for a purpose. Sikira used 12 (60%) of the different types of the total number of discourse fragments in the play. Her use of 'ha!' for contrast clearly betrays her little education, ignorance and readiness to tease her husband popularly known as 'the master'. She sees herself as a bird of passage that could be done away with anytime. But before this however happened, there was a dramatic turn of events which eased her out and she became the gubernatorial candidate to the amazement of her husband who had been craving for this post.

Mama Rashida is an example of a good peace making intermediary. She got into the life of Lejoka-Brown through the African traditional way of parents marrying wives for their eligible sons. Mama Rashida used 11 (55%) different types of the total number of backchannel items used. The highest of the ones she used is the emphatic negative 'Ooooh no!' which came up when she was mediating between Sikira and Liza at their first meeting and when she was narrating her ordeal as a small scale business woman to Liza. Most of the fragments she used are the Yoruba adapted ones such as 'e-hen!' (it is surprising) 'ahennn' (I said so), 'abi'? (Is it not so?) 'toh' (If you must know) etc. which shows her surprise at the wealth of knowledge displayed by Liza. Mama Rashida is a prototype of the struggling African woman in the midst of plenty and oppression. With a little instruction from Liza, she gets the vision of business success which she immediately decides to try out by leaving 'the master' for a village where she could acquire land for business. Knowing fully well that her stay with Lejoka-Brown has not yielded much, she decides to venture on the new vision of success in her trade coupled with the revelation that 'the master' has lost his chance as a gubernatorial candidate which could have changed the social status of the family. Below are three bar-charts of some of the back channel items.





**Figure 1.** Distribution of Discourse Fragments.

- LB = Lejoka-Brown
- OK = Okonkwo
- LI = Liza
- SI = Sikira
- MR = Mama Rashida

Fig 1 shows the total number of times discourse fragments referred to as backchannels are used by the main characters in the book. Lejoka-Brown used discourse markers 41 times (40.2%) of the total number. Liza used discourse items 9 times (8.8%). Okonkwo used them 12 times (11.8%). Sikira used the discourse fragments 18 times (17.6%) of the total number. Mama Rashida used discourse fragments 17 times (16.7%) of the total number of times. Polycarp (houseboy) and Mustapha (an old friend of Lejoka-Brown) used discourse items 5 times (4.9%) of the total number of times discourse fragments were used.

The frequency of times that backchannels are used is important because it has a lot to do with the information structure of a discourse. Lejoka-Brown (a gubernatorial aspirant) used them incessantly and this undermined his seriousness as a political aspirant. The highest of the ones he used were 'ohoo/oh' which means 'it is new to me' or gap filler and 'chuu' which means disgust. Below are examples:

Lejoka-Brown: It is war! Politic is war. Oooh- I am taking no chances this time, brother mine. Mhm. Last time, I took things slow and easy and what happened? Chuu! I lost a by-election to a small crab... a baby monkey (wrinkles paper out of envelope and starts unfolding it) Mhm. This time it is war!

From the examples above, it is evident that Lejoka-Brown is not familiar with political tactics. He is very unlike seasoned politicians who pretend to know everything and anything the populace may expect from them. If political novices are eventually voted into power, their ignorance and naivety could lead to political failure, economic collapse and unpopularity of the parties they represent. Lejoka-Brown should have taken time to participate in party activities

and get well informed before aspiring to become a gubernatorial candidate. So his incessant use of 'oh' and its variants has a lot of implications on the theme and structure of the book.

'Oh is traditionally a viewed as an exclamation or interjection but can also be used to indicate emotional states of surprise, fear or pain. Lejoka-Brown was surprised that he could loose a by-election and according to him, it was because he was too slow and took things too easy. But the military tactics that he wanted to use which he got from his experience at war now did him no good as he eventually lost to a woman.

'Ooh' is also used to initiate part of the utterance quoted above. This is followed by a brief pause. Interlocutors can replace one information unit with another especially if an old information unit makes the present one either conversationally or situationally relevant as in the example above. In the book '*Our Husband has gone Mad Again*', 'oh' and its variants play a lot of role in the information management.

'Oooh' meaning 'I meant to tell you' uttered rapidly on a high pitch with a tense throat in the example below gives the signal of topic change as in:

Mama Rashida: All women who sell in the market have a big union  
Liza: How nice  
Mama Rashida: Sometimes I... hunnh? 'nice', you say? Oooh no, sister. You mistake. If I tell you my trouble in the trade now, you will cry blood for me. You want...

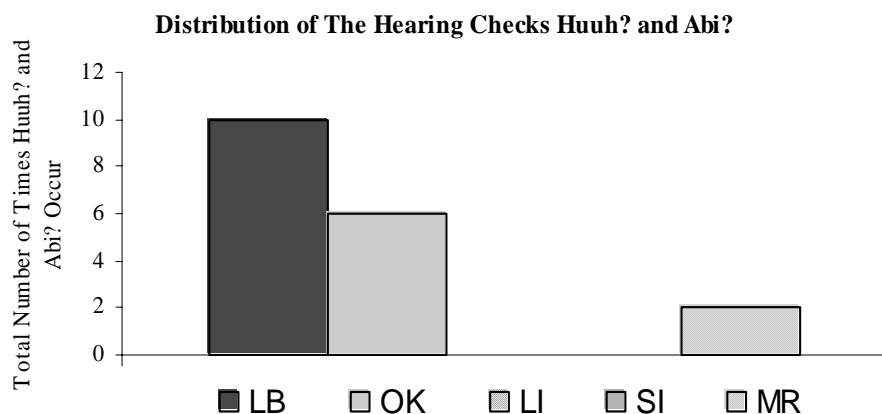
Backchannels could be used as gap fillers where the speaker is short of words. In order not to stop the discourse, backchannels are introduced as in:

Lejoka-Brown: Liza, I've been waiting patiently... Ooh, so patiently for you to c-o-o-l it, so I could say something.

Repair work is also possible with backchannels as in the following:

Liza: Things? What things?  
Lekoja-Brown: hunh? Oh, I mean... eem, things, things... eem... introduction ceremony et cetera.

Apart from 'oh', backchannel items which we refer to as 'hearing checks' were used a lot in the book *Our Husband has gone Mad Again*. Below is the bar chart showing the frequency with which 'hearing checks' were used.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of The Hearing Checks Huuh? and Abi?

LB = Lejoka-Brown  
 OK = Okonkwo  
 LI = Liza  
 SI = Sikira  
 MR = Mama Rashida

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the hearing checks Huuh? and Abi? (Is it not so). A hearing check is usually a fact finding discourse fragment. Abi? is a Yoruba word which means “Is this/ that not so? Yoruba is the language of the Yoruba people in the south-western part of Nigeria. Many Yoruba second language learners of English occasionally use this discourse fragment while speaking English because of language interference. Hearing checks are fact-finding discourse fragments that should be responded to before the introduction of a new information segment.

In figure 2 above, Lejoka-Brown used the hearing checks 10 times (55%) of the total number of times hearing checks are used in the book. He hardly waits for his listeners to respond before presenting the next information unit and this makes the hearing checks perform the secondary function of gap filling. Whether his listeners respond or not, he goes on talking. His frequent use of the hearing checks is also indicative of someone who wants to cleverly force his opinion on others without giving them the opportunity to respond. Below are instances:

- Liza: Things? What things?  
 Lejoka-Brown: Hunh? Oh, I mean... emm... things, things... emm... introduction et cetera.  
 Liza: It's divine.  
 Lejoka-Brown: Hunh? Well, it is a bit old - true but as you say , it is... emm... divination-like  
 Lejoka-Brown: Well isn't that what it comes to? I leave these two women here in Idumagbo: next, I hire room and parlour in Surulere for Liza; then I to, bury my head in a separate room at Abule-jesha. Abi? I wake up

every morning and parade from one house to another visiting these women. Suddenly I am no more a husband; I've become a care taker! Thank you!

Okonkwo used the hearing checks 6 times (33.3%). Okonkwo's use of the hearing checks sounds genuine from the fact that he is of Igbo origin and he is not quite familiar with some of the native laws and customs of the Yoruba people coupled with the Islamic faith which Lejoka-Brown represents. Lejoka-Brown's proposed political strategy and his method of solving his family problems is strange to him because he is not used to the Yoruba /Islamic polygamous way of life as most Igbo people ( people from the south-eastern part of Nigeria ) are monogamous. Okonkwo therefore used hearing checks as Lejoka-Brown unravels his problem solving strategies.

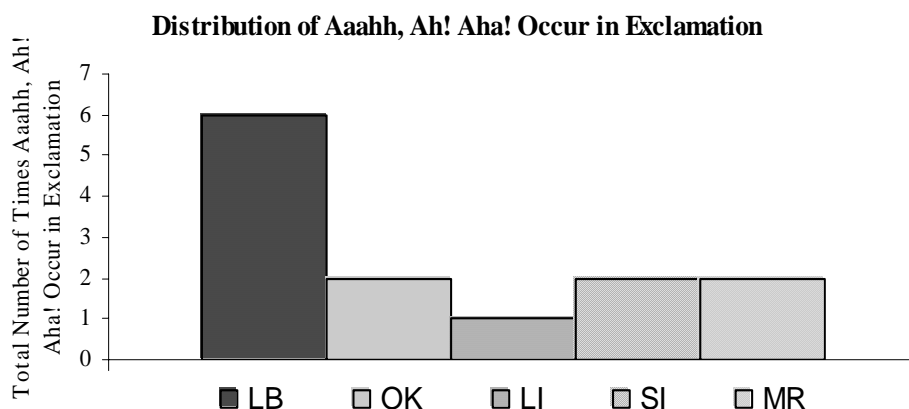
Liza did not use hearing checks at all. She is a Kenyan and American trained doctor who is not familiar with the type of hearing checks used in the book. Of all the discourse fragments used in the book she only used the ones common to native speakers of English.

Sikira who is also a wife of Lejoka-Brown did not use any of the hearing checks. She is the youngest of the wives and culturally, she is expected to take instructions from those older than her. She is also not expected to engage people in conversations to the extent that she starts using the hearing checks for confirmation of whatever ideas she has.

Mama Rashida used the hearing checks 2 times (11.11%). Once, when she did not get the meaning of the word 'atrocious' that Liza used when they met. Surprisingly enough, Liza herself did not know the meaning of 'hunh?' which is the hearing check that mama Rashida used. See the example below:

Liza: Oh... I'm sorry  
.....  
Our plane arrived ahead of schedule...  
.....  
the weather was atrocious  
Mama Rashida: (not getting the meaning of atrocious) Hunh?  
Liza: I beg your pardon?  
Mama Rashida: You say... the weather?  
Liza: oh, atrocious - I mean... Bad. Not good... You know?  
Not clear... weather... dark  
Mama Rashida: Ahennnn

Below is the bar-chart showing the distribution of the backchannel items indicated below:



**Figure 3.** Distribution of Aaahh, Ah! Aha! Occur in Exclamation.

LB = Lejoka-Brown  
 OK = Okonkwo  
 LI = Liza  
 SI = Sikira  
 MR = Mama Rashida

Figure 3 presents the total number of times ‘Aaahh’, ‘Ah!’ ‘Aha!’ Occur in exclamation. Lejoka-Brown used ‘Aaahh’ and its other variants 6 times (46%) of the total number of times this discourse fragment occur. His use of ‘Aaahh!’ with exclamation could best be described as mild surprise. Below is an example.

Lejoka-Brown: Thanks for your concern!  
 (Sikira lingers on, which irks Lejoka-Brown)  
 I said thanks for your concern. A-ah! Polycarp brought a cablegram, yes. Is your name R Rahman Lejoka-Brown?  
 Sikira: (teasingly polite) sorry sah.

Okonkwo used the ‘Aha!’ discourse fragment 2 times (15.4%) of the total number of times this discourse fragment occurred. Liza used it once (7.7%) and the version she used is the exaggerated one as in the following:

Lejoka-Brown: As a muslim, I’m entitled to four, complete live, breathing wives- no less  
 Liza: Ah-ah-ah-ah... that wasn’t stipulated in our wedding agreement brother Rahman, was it?

Liza’s use of ‘Ah-ah’... is another word for emphatic ‘no’. She went this far at her revelation of the fact that, unknown to her, Lejoka- Brown had two other wives. So she could just have said no-no -no -no to express her disagreement with Lejoka-Brown on the latter’s justification of his right to multiple women.

Sikira used it 2 times (15.4%) One of those times is in a non-chalant attitude and in defiance to the instruction given by mama Rashida as in the following:

Mama Rashida: (sternly), Sikira!  
Sikira: What is it?  
Mama Rashida: The chairs, Woman, they need dusting...  
The window- blinds, the chair covers must be...  
Sikira: (nonchalantly). Aaahh  
(she turns away to resume her gaze through the window)

Mama Rashida used the hearing checks in figure 3, 2 times (15.4%). One of the instances is on page 59 where she exclaimed when she saw Sikira packing away to her parent's house shouting 'Our husband has gone mad again'.

Mama Rashida: A-ah! What's happening? Sikira!  
Sikira: I'm going home to my mother!  
Mama Rashida: trotting after her, chickens squawking) Wait! Answer me... what's the matter?  
Sikira: (leaving) **Our husband has gone mad again!**

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have tried to identify the items referred to as backchannels and their relative functions in the development of the theme of the play- "*Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*" by Ola Rotimi. From the text, it was observed that there is a preponderance of backchannel items which is one of the features of spoken or interactive discourse. About twenty different ones were identified some of which are not the conventional ones. These bits of language items were identified in relation to the characters involved. The tables and the histograms showing the distribution of the various items were drawn. The tables and histograms revealed that different characters used different fragments depending on their social and educational exposure.

Fragments such as 'ehen', (surprise) 'e-he-en', (I said so) 'aahen' (It is so) are close adaptations from the Yoruba language. From the table, it is evident that Liza did not use any of them. She used fragments common with native speakers of English which partly suggest that people's exposure socially and educationally affect their use of language. Liza is an American trained medical doctor and she used language fragments such as 'ooh no!' 'ooh!' 'Ugh', etc. The preponderance of the discourse fragments identified in the play reveals the ignorance, naivety and mediocrity of neo-colonialist politicians. Not all the discourse fragments have content meanings. Some are just gap fillers.

It is also important to note that ‘ooh’, ‘uh’, can also be attention seeking in conversations. Their preponderance in the book *‘Our Husband has gone mad again* makes the book highly hilarious as it exposes and mocks the unhealthy ambition of post colonial African politicians and rulers, some of who eventually experience failure politically, socially and matrimonially.

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**About the authors:** *Dr. Moji A. Olateju* is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. Her research interests are in Discourse analysis, Pragmatics and Applied Linguistics. She has published a book entitled *Discourse Analysis: Analysing Discourse in the ESL Classroom* and co-edited two books titled *Readings in Language and Literature* and *Perspectives on Language and Literature*. She has also published articles in the area of Discourse analysis in *Systemic Functional Linguistics Forum*, *Ife Studies in English Language* and on-line journals.

*Prof. Yisa Kehinde Yusuf* lectures in the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. His areas of research interest include semantics, pragmatics and feminist linguistics. He has published in the following, among other journals: *Women and Language*; *Working Papers on Language, Gender and Sexism*; *Linguistik online*; *TESL-EJ: Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language - Electronic Journal*; and *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*.