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“Speech to which no one says *mhmm* is an orphan”: Backchannels in Kambaata conversations

VIELFALTSLINGUISTIK GRAZ, 14-15 JUNE 2024

Overview

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 - Some characteristic features of language in interaction
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 - The understanding backchannel
 - The narrative backchannel
 - The religious backchannel
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Work in progress!

1. Preliminaries

KAMBAATA AREA AND LANGUAGE, COLLABORATIVE KADILA-PROJECT, WORK FLOW ETC.



The Kambaata zone (capital: Duuraame) is located in the Central Ethiopian Region in southwestern Ethiopia

The Kambaata area

- The Kambaata essentially settle on and around the Hambarrichcho massif (peak: 3038m), most parts of Kambaata are above 2000m in altitude
- The Kambaata zone is densely populated
- > 600,000 speakers (Last census: 2007)
- More and more children do not learn Kambaata any more



The Kambaata language

- Kambaata (*Kambaatissata*) < Highland East < ... < Cushitic < Afro-Asiatic
- Neighbours: Hadiyya and Alaaba (Cushitic) and Wolaitta (Omotic)
- Since the early 2000s, the grammar of Kambaata (cf. works by Treis and Treis & collaborators) and its lexicon (Alemu Banta 2016) have been studied in detail.
- In 2023, the plan arose to create a **Kambaata Digital Language Archive (KaDiLA)** with audio-recorded, transcribed, annotated and translated tales, myths, **conversations**, poems, eulogies, readings etc. > searchable, citeable, freely consultable by the linguistic community and the speaker community



Collaborators of the corpus project



- Linguist: **Yvonne Treis**
- Regular transcribers and translators (and co-authors of this paper)
 - **Yoseph Yonas Zecharias** (PhD in Environmental Studies, native speaker, beekeeper, hobby photographer)
 - **Teshome Dagne Madebo** (Employee in the zonal office of urban planning, native speaker)
- Additional help
 - **Deginet Wotango Doyiso** (PhD in Law, U Cologne, native speaker): Former language assistant and co-author of other papers on Kambaata, at present: consultant for tricky translation questions
 - **Lidiya Tadesse Getiso** (M.Sc. in Computer Sciences, U Wachemo): Recently joined the corpus team as transcriber and translator
- Numerous native speakers recorded

Types of data collected

- Goal of 2023 fieldtrip: Record **conversational** data (hardly included in the recordings up to that point)
- Ideal context would be “coffee conversations”, but impossible to record (too many overlapping voices, ethical questions ...)
- Compromise: Conversational interviews
 - Selected main topic 1: Beekeeping (~ 6h)
 - Selected main topic 2: Blessings and curses (~ 7h)
 - Interviews were conducted by Yoseph (2nd author) and Teshome (3rd author) and recorded at the interviewee’s or the interviewer’s home



Archiving and online publication

- Archived on **CoCoON** (<https://cocoon.huma-num.fr>)
 - Currently 318 “resources” (= recordings and parts of recordings)
 - Sound files + metadata
 - Transcriptions and translations (i.e. ELAN files) are to be added continuously
- Planned: Online publication on **CorpOrAn** (<https://corporan.huma-num.fr/Archives/corpus=ktb>)
 - Requires **glossed** ELAN-files
 - So far no natural Kambaata recordings available yet in CorpOrAn
 - Available: fully glossed recordings of the Kambaata *Qakkichchu Laaha* (Little Prince) (2h09min)

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Pour voir une ressource, cliquez sur son identifiant (audio, vidéo, sketch grammatical, dictionnaire)

Pour citer un corpus : nom_de_l'auteur, Corpus oral recueilli et annoté par nom_de_l'auteur, CorpOrAn : Corpus Oraux Annotés, https://corporan.huma-num.fr/Archives/corpus.php?codeLangue=code_iso_de_la_langue,date_d'accès

Register to access protected corpora

Language	Title	Author	Identifier	Size	Duration	Links
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), title	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH00.EAF	11 words	00:00:16	i
<input type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), preface	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH00-RE	110 words	00:01:02	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.1	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH01.EAF	472 words	00:04:30	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.2	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH02.EAF	666 words	00:06:49	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.3	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH03.EAF	378 words	00:03:38	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.4	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH04.EAF	749 words	00:07:07	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.5	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH05.EAF	664 words	00:05:56	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.6	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH06.EAF	218 words	00:02:08	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.7	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH07.EAF	675 words	00:05:53	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.8	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH08.EAF	628 words	00:05:40	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.9	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH09.EAF	344 words	00:03:17	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.10 p1	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH10-P1	525 words	00:04:51	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.10 p2	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH10-P2	567 words	00:04:57	i
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Qakkichchu Laaha (The Little Prince), chap.11	Yvonne Treis	KTB_YT_LECT_2017_QL-CH11.EAF	281 words	00:02:20	i

2. Language in interaction

SOME CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

2. Language in interaction

- Speaker overlaps
- False starts, errors (in pronunciation, word choice, grammatical marking)
- Filled pauses (to search for a word, to hold the floor)
- Disfluency
- Afterthoughts and other deviations from the “standard” constituent order (see examples)
- Emphatic lengthening (see examples)
- Placeholders
- Interjections of surprise, disbelief, outrage, etc.
- Laughter
- Gestures
- ...

Deviation from the “standard” constituent order

- Kambaata is (in principle) strictly head-final
 - Verb-final clauses
 - Modifiers precede the noun in the noun phrase, e.g. Adj N, Dem N, Gen N, Rel N
 - Subordinate precede superordinate clause
 - Only two known contexts where native speakers accept a constituent after the main verb in “edited” speech
 - Postposed subjects in curses
 - Postposed constituents in reporting clauses

Deviation from the “standard” constituent order

- Kambaata is in principle strictly head-final – Exceptions:
 - Postposed subjects in curses

(2) *ées hiliqisseent? áagg fúlt hiliqi át!* (TD2023-10-23_004_p2_74 to _75)

ées	hiliq-ís-seent		
1SG.ACC	be_shocked-CAUS1-2SG.PRF		
áag-g	fúl-t	hiliq-i	át
enter-2SG.PFV.CVB	go_out-2SG.PFV.CVB	be_shocked-2SG.IMP	2SG.NOM

‘You have shocked me(, haven’t you)? (So) whenever you go in and out, be shocked, you!’

- Postposed subjects and objects in reporting clauses

(3) *“Xummá hé’i!” yéese fiitichchús.* (Saint-Exupéry 2018/ DWD_QL2017_ch9_28)

xumm-á	hé’-i	y-ée-se	fiit-ichch-ú-s
peace-M.ACC	live-2SG.IMP	say-3M.PFV-3F.OBJ	flowers-SGV-M.ACC-3M.POSS

‘“Good-bye (lit. Live/stay in peace)!” he said to his flower.’



NB: Kambaata data is written in the official orthography.

Deviation from the “standard” constituent order

- Conversational corpus shows no obvious violations of head-finality in the NP
- **But:** many deviations on the clausal and sentential level, e.g.
 - Postposed subjects: |V| |S|
 - Postposed adverbial NPs: |V| |Adv|
 - Postposed converb clauses and other subordinate clauses:
|Main clause| |Subordinate clause|
 - Sometimes even two postposed constituents: |V| |O| |S|
- Native speakers want to “edit out” all these changes in the constituent order.



Violation of “standard” constituent order: Examples

- Subordinate purposive clause and direct object postposed to the **main verb**

(4) ... *aazís abbaaséen kaméen, kakkittú wiliilita akkiséenno, anjunta. hitt a'éen aguréen ké' abbaaseenán kaméenno aazís.* (TSG2023-09-21_001_p3_136 to 138)

aaz-í-s interior-M.ACC-DEF	abbaas-éen sweep-3HON.PFV.CVB	kam-éen do_completely-3HON.PFV.CVB	
kakkitt-ú tiny-M.ACC	wiliil-íta smoke-F.ACC	akkis-éenno smoke-3HON.IPFV	ánj-unta smell_good-3M.PURP.DS
hitt=a'éen like_this=do-3HON.PFV.CVB		agur-éen=ké' leave-3HON.PFV.CVB=SEQ	abbaas-eenán sweep-3HON.IPFV.CVB
kam-éenno do_completely-3HON.IPFV		aaz-í-s interior-M.ACC-DEF	

postposed purposive clause

postposed direct object

‘... one cleans (the beehive’s) inside, (one) smoke (it) in small (bits), **to make (it) smell better**. Having done like this, one cleans it, (the beehive’s) **inside**.

NB: 3HON verb form used for honorific and impersonal subjects

NB: Kambaata data is written in the official orthography.

Iconic lengthening



- Iconic lengthening to express a large amount/high degree

(5) ... *intáamm yeemmáda **hoo:::lamá** maqóo hasáno.* (YZ2023-10-14_001_p8_021 to 022)

<i>intáamm</i>	<i>y-eemmá=da</i>	
eat<1PL>IPFV	say-3HON.IPFV.REL=COND	
hoolam-á	<i>maq-óo</i>	<i>has-áno</i>
much-M.ACC	strength-M.ACC	want-3M.IPFV

‘... if one wants to eat (lit. says “we will eat”), it requires **a looooot** of effort (lit. strength).’



- Iconic lengthening to express a long distance

(6) *ichcháta daqqée saatá **qee:::rsi** ke'éechch, ku'llantáa láagat yóo '(u) gótu.* (YZ2023-10-14_002_p2_059 to 060)

<i>ichch-áta</i>	<i>daqq-ée</i>	<i>saat-á</i>	qeers-i =ke'éechch	
food-F.ACC	find.MID-3M.PFV.REL	time-M.ACC	become_far.CAUS1-3M.PFV.CVB=SEQ	
<i>ku<'>ll-an-taa</i>		<i>láag-at</i>	<i>yóo'u</i>	<i>gót-u</i>
tell<MID>-PASS-3F.IPFV.REL		sound-F.NOM	COP1.3	hyenas-M.NOM

‘Where they have found food, there is a sound, (to) the hyenas, which they make travel **faaaaar** and with which they communicate (lit. tell) with each other.’

3. Backchanneling in Kambaata

DEFAULT / UNDERSTANDING / NARRATIVE / RELIGIOUS / INGRESSIVE
BACKCHANNELS

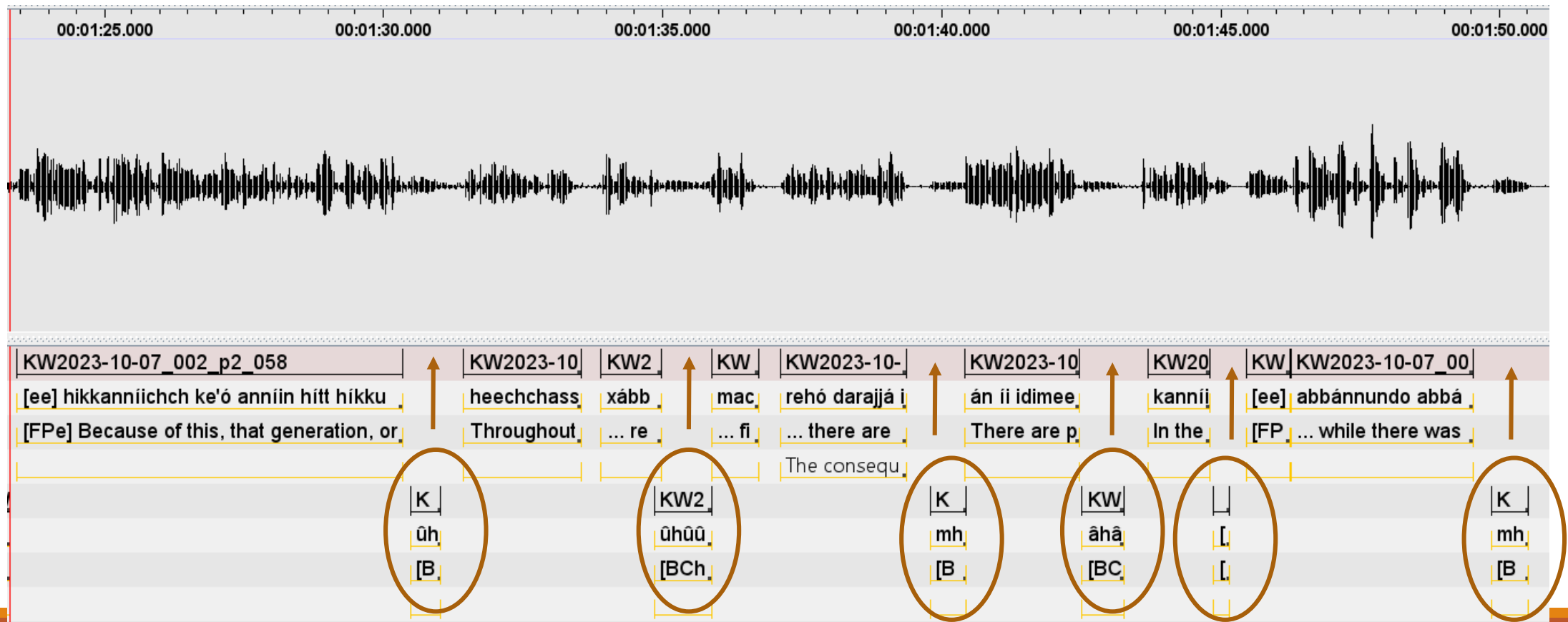
Backchanneling: Some preliminaries

- One very characteristic feature of language in interaction: Backchanneling interjections which “establish and maintain communicative contact” (Ameka 1992: 114)
- Technical term: Backchannels ~ continuers ~ feedback ~ response tokens (cf. Liesenfeld & Dingemanse 2022, Dingemanse et al. 2022)
- ~1573 backchannels have been annotated in our corpus up to today (13.06.2024: 60 audio files of ~4.5h)
- Preliminary classification > at a later point, when the transcription of the conversational corpus progresses: quantification possible
- Questions:
 - Which backchannels are attested in the corpus?
 - Can (first) hypotheses be formulated how their choice is determined?



Backchanneling: Some preliminaries

- Backchannels are usually perfectly timed to fall into the pauses between utterances





3.1. The default backchannel

- The most common backchannel is a nasal or nasalized vowel
- Bisyllabic (*mhmm*, *ũhũũ* ...) or monosyllabic (*mm*, *ũũ* ...)
- The vowel quality is central to back and varies in height between more *ũ* and more *ẽ*-like (> phonetic study would be required)
- Default choice

(7) KW2023-10-07_002_p2_037 to 39

SP1		maassa'-áamba'a íi beet-ú bless-1SG.IPFV-NEG 1SG.GEN son-M.ACC 'I will not bless my son.'	
SP2	mhmm BCH[m] 'Mhmm.'		mhmm BCH[m] 'Mhmm.'

3.2. The understanding backchannel

- The second most common backchannel is a nasalized *ãã* or *ãhãã*.
- In its monosyllabic realization it is not distinguishable from *ãã* ‘yes’ (ex. 8).
- Practical decision w/r/t corpus annotation: The position (after a question or not) is used to distinguish between the backchannel and ‘yes’.

3.2. The understanding backchannel

(8) KW2023-10-07_002_p2_112 to 113

SP1	ros-ámm-ee-si-i get_accustomed-PASS-3M.PRF-DEF-NMZ1.M.NOM 'The usual (things)?'	Question	
SP2			áã yes 'Yes.'



(9) KW2023-10-07_002_p2_014 to 015

SP1	[ee] án kabbóosh woldesambátt-e y-am-am-áamm [FP] 1SG.NOM PN PN-F.VOC say-PASS-PASS-1SG.IPFV 'I am called Kabbabush Woldesambatte.'	Statement	
SP2			áã BCH[A] 'Mhmm.'





3.2. The understanding backchannel

- The bisyllabic realization *ãháã* seems fairly frequent in contexts in which the speaker signals understanding (cf. its label).
- Typical exchange: Question – Explanation – Backchannel/Understanding

(10) YZ2023-10-14_001_p8_002 to 005

SP1	yaar-áno cry-3M.IPFV 'It cries.'					
SP2		annánn-at distinct-F.NOM	láag-at sound-F.NOM	[yóo'] [COP1.3]	Question	
SP1	yáarr cry.3M.PFV.CVB	hir-ch-ú lifesaver.SGV-M.ACC	hir-ch-ú lifesaver.SGV-M.ACC	iill-icc-áno reach-CAUS1.MID-3M.IPFV		
SP2	Explanation	'It cries (to) make a life saver, a life saver come.'				
				<i>ãháã</i> BCH[a] 'I see.'	Understanding.	



3.3. The narrative backchannel

- Backchannel *ee* especially found in narrative contexts
- *ee* ‘that’s interesting! now I am curious, continue’
- Very pronounced in the speech of one participant in narrative events (see ex.)
- But also attested in conversations of other speakers

(11) TC2016-02-12_001_p1

SP1	bun-á coffee-M.ACC	gaf-anó-o boil-3M.IPFV.REL-NMZ1.M.NOM	íso-ot 3M.NOM-COP1	
	‘It was him who boiled the coffee.’			
SP2				ee BCH[e] ‘Ee.’
SP1	waas-á enset_food-M.ACC	shol-anó-o bake-3M.IPFV.REL-NMZ1.M.NOM	íso-ot 3M.NOM-COP1	
	‘It was him who baked the <i>waasa</i> -bread.’			
SP2				ee BCH[e] ‘Ee.’
SP1	wo’-á water-M.ACC	eeb-anó-o bring-3M.IPFV.REL-NMZ1.M.NOM	íso-ot 3M.NOM-COP1	
	‘It was him who fetched water.’			
SP2				ee BCH[e] ‘Ee.’



3.4. The religious backchannel

- Backchannel *aamii'nniyyé* ‘amen’ after blessings
- Function may not primarily be to “establish and maintain communicative contact” (cf. above) but rather used to express acknowledgment, agreement, confirmation ...

(12) YZ2023-10-14_002_p3_003 to 005

SP1	mereer-óon-ka-nne middle-M.LOC-LNK-1PL.POSS	birat-í iron-M.GEN	utub-ú center_pole-M.ACC	
	ik-kéen become-2SG.PFV.CVB	he'-iyyé live-2PL.IMP		
	fayyim-áta health-F.ACC	xumm-á peace-M.ACC	iitt-áta love-F.ACC	áass-u-kki'nne give-3M.BDV-2PL.OBJ
	abbíns exceed.1PL.PFV.CVB	galaxx-ináan-ki'nne thank-1PL.IPFV-2PL.OBJ		
	‘May you become an iron center pole and live (long) among us! May he (i.e. God) give you health, peace, love. We thank you very much.’			
SP2	aamii'nniyyé amen	aamii'nniyyé amen		
	‘Amen. Amen.’			

3.5. The ingressive backchannel

- Backchannel expressed as audible inhale (without or with other vocalizations)
- Transcribed as ↓ in the corpus
- 82 attestations (several speakers) in the conversational corpus so far, plus many instances overheard
- (So far) especially common with one recorded female speaker and one overheard female collaborator
- Descriptive label attributed because functional difference to default backchannel unclear (§3.1)



3.5. The ingressive backchannel

(13) KW2023-10-07_002_p1_039 to 041

SP2	á'nnu 2HON.NOM	kambaat-í Kambaata-M.GEN	roshsh-á=g-íin teachings-F.GEN=SIM-M.ICP
	maass-á=tannée blessing-F.GEN=NMZ2.F.DAT	ros-is-séenunta-nne-et learn-CAUS-2PL.PURP.DS-1SG.OBJ-COP1	

‘It is so that you (HON) teach us about blessings, according to the teachings of Kambaata.’

SP1 ↓
BCH[ingressive]

‘Mhmm.’

SP2	máass-at blessing-F.NOM	kambaat-í Kambaata-M.GEN	roshsh-á=g-íin ... teachings-F.GEN=SIM-M.ICP
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‘Blessings, according to the teachings of Kambaata ...’

3.5. The ingressive backchannel

(14) KW2023-10-07_002_p1_103 to 105

SP1 hittig-ú<n>ta ...
like_this-F.ACC<EMP>
'So ...'

SP2 ↓
BCH[ingressive]
'Mhmm.'

SP2 [e] hikku ...
[FP] A_DEM2.M.NOM
'Ee, that ...'



3.5. The ingressive backchannel

- Ingressive responses are so far especially reported for Scandinavian languages (e.g. Peters 1981, Pitschmann 1987, Steensig et al. 2022)
- Anecdotal evidence for the distribution of ingressive backchannels:
 - Considered typical “Ethiopian” by a Sudanese colleague Mohamid-Tahir Hamid Ahmed (p.c.)
 - Considered a possible backchannel (but not necessarily their backchannel of choice) by linguistic colleagues from Addis Ababa University
 - Amharic (Ethiopian lingua franca) is included in Eklund’s (2015) addenda to his list of languages with pulmonic ingressive speech
- To be investigated: How common are ingressive backchannels in (southwestern) Ethiopia and beyond? Are they an areal feature in East Africa?

4. Outlook

- **Work in progress**
 - Boundaries between backchannels and other interjections is often hard to draw (recall ‘yes’, ‘amen’)
 - When the annotation of the conversational corpus is complete, a quantification of the phenomena presented here will be possible.
 - Frequency of the different backchannels
 - Preference of different backchannels across speakers
 - To be investigated: What are universal vs. regional vs. Kambaata-specific features of backchanneling?

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