Received: 23 April 2020 | Revised: 17 August 2020 | Accepted: 26 August 2020

DOI: 10.1111/weng.12522

PAPER

WORLD ENGLISHES WILEY

Backchannels and the pragmatics of South Asian Englishes

Michelle Kraaz | **Tobias Bernaisch**

Department of English, Justus Liebig University Giessen

Correspondence
Tobias Bernaisch, Department of English, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Otto-Behaghel-Strasse 10B, 35394 Giessen, Germany.
Email: Tobias.J.Bernaisch@anglistik.uni-giessen.de

Funding information
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Grant/Award Number: BE 5812/2-1

Abstract

The pragmatics of postcolonial Englishes including backchannels have so far remained in the periphery of academic inquiry. As pragmatic principles may be regarded as culture-sensitive and various cultural differences have been attested between Great Britain and South Asia, the present paper studies backchannels in British, Indian and Sri Lankan English. Drawn from the respective spoken parts of the International Corpus of English, 3,212 backchannels are multifactorially modelled via a conditional inference tree and random forests including recent methodological improvements. Indications of pragmatic nativisation with backchannels are evident in Indian and Sri Lankan English with their distributions and forms in the light of various sociobiographic factors such as age and gender, but also type-token ratio and conversational topic resonate with cultural differences across the speech communities. Lexical echo backchannels only attestable in the South Asian varieties instantiate a creative pragmatic innovation adding to the existing repertoire of backchannels in world Englishes.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although backchannels like *mhm*, *aha* or *okay* are short instances of feedback generally void of lexical meaning and used to simply signal the speaker holding the floor that she or he is still being listened to, they are vital in 'growing

a mutual understanding, empathizing, bonding and entertaining between humans' (Ruede, Müller, Stüker, & Waibel, 2019, p. 248). Yet, in the light of the pluricentricity of English and the diversification of its language system, it cannot be assumed that frequencies, forms and usage patterns of backchannels are universal and that the ways in which backchannels are employed in one variety of English trigger the same interpersonal bonding effects in other varieties. Consequently, it is certainly necessary to ask to what extent cross-varietal differences in backchannel profiles of English exist – particularly against the background of cultural differences between the respective speech communities using them. Backchannels are investigated in British English – the historical input variety of virtually all world Englishes, which is used in a society largely constructed around individualism – as well as in Indian and Sri Lankan English, two postcolonial Englishes of South Asia employed in social contexts with notably stronger tendencies towards collectivism and in direct lineage of British English. Section 2.1 describes the evolution of these two South Asian Englishes and highlights their connections with British English and section 2.2 reports earlier (mainly empirical) research into backchannels to derive relevant research questions. In section 3, the corpus data and the methodology are described before the results of multifactorial analyses of forms and frequencies of backchannels are provided in section 4. Section 5 discusses these findings and offers some avenues for future research into backchannels in Asian and world Englishes.

2 | THEORY

2.1 | The evolution of South Asian Englishes

In wide-ranging studies of their sociolinguistic profiles, Indian and Sri Lankan English (Balasubramanian, 2009; Kachru, 1981, 1986; Lange, 2012; Mathai, 1951; Mehrotra, 1982, 1998; Schilk, 2011 or Sedlatschek, 2009 for Indian English and Bernaisch, 2015 or Gunesekera, 2005 for Sri Lankan English) have been portrayed as South Asian varieties of English in their own right. Still, the histories of these two neighbouring postcolonial Englishes in the South Asian *Sprachbund* display – disregarding the occasional time lag or difference in the sequencing of decisive events – far-reaching similarities in how English took root and developed in these two countries.

Although the evolution of Indian English is occasionally traced back to the end of the 16th century when British missionaries embarked on their voyages to the Indian subcontinent to convert particularly the higher echelons of Indian society to Christianity,[1] it was only after the Charter Act of 1813 that English missionary activity was no longer actively discouraged and English became more prominent as its medium (Vennila, 2018). Since then, missionary activities have complemented less ecclesiastically motivated connections between the British East India Company and local merchants to foster international commerce (Mukherjee, 2007, p. 164). In Sri Lanka, English was introduced to the island via trade – particularly with cinnamon – between the British East India Company and Sri Lankan residents at the end of the 18th century, that is roughly 200 years after English left its first marks on the linguistic scenery in India. At the beginning of the 19th century, British missionary activities were visible throughout South Asia including Sri Lanka, where a notable number of British missionary schools – along with a few American ones, which have been claimed to be responsible for present-day intra-varietal phonetic variation in Sri Lankan English (Gunesekera, 2005, pp. 38–39) – established a basic organisation of teaching facilities (de Silva, 1981, p. 252).

In addition to these similarities in terms of local driving forces behind the spread of English in India and Sri Lanka, sociolinguistic parallels in their evolutions can also be outlined in the eras beyond their foundation. The existence of these evolutionary similarities is probably not surprising since both countries were under century-long colonial rule by the same administration, namely the British Empire, which continuously fought to uphold its dominant position in the respective territories via common strategies. Accordingly, in order to establish efficient channels of communication between the British colonial rulers and the locals, who, in the first half of the 19th century, were not well versed in English for the most part, more rigorous language policies were implemented in India and Sri Lanka to replace the hitherto *laissez-faire* approach in language education. These policies – in India Macaulay's minute in 1835 and in Sri Lanka the recommendations of the Colebrooke-Cameron commission in 1831/1832 – sought to linguistically nurture a small

elite of locals via westernised teaching facilities with the goal of making them proficient in English to effectively mediate between the colonial administrators and the local population. A small number of Indians and Sri Lankans were thus promoted to high-ranking officials in the civil service resulting in the association of (British) English with upward social mobility and – more generally – positive attitudes; two associations still visible today in both countries (Bernaisch, 2012; Bernaisch & Koch, 2016). Although it is understood that the evolutions of Indian and Sri Lankan English are not identical, sociolinguistic similarities between India and Sri Lanka further abound with regard to (the roles of) local languages, independence movements, the roles of English after independence, codification processes of the local forms of English and others. The relevant question to ask is whether these similarities in their sociolinguistic profiles are also reflected in structural similarities between Indian and Sri Lankan English.

The distributions of three lexicogrammatical phenomena – particle verbs, intrusive *as* and presentational *itself* – encapsulate the structural relation so far largely observed to hold between Indian and Sri Lankan English. As particle verbs such as GIVE *up*, TAKE *off* and GO *out* combine a lexical verb with a particle sometimes resulting in semantically non-transparent meanings, it is not surprising that these verb-particle constructions have been the subject of innovative and creative (re-)combinations of their constituents. In second-language varieties of English, speakers derive novel structural forms by means of semantico-structural analogy, meaning a creative process where formal and semantic templates available in English are productively shuffled to introduce new forms and/or meanings into the variety concerned (Mukherjee, 2007, pp. 175–176). For Sri Lankan English, several innovative re-combinations of verbs and particles such as GET *down foreign workers* meaning ATTRACT *foreign workers* (Kumara & Mendis, 2010) or MAKE *out* in the sense of PRETEND (Mendis, 2010) can be attested, but the occurrence of these innovative particle verbs has so far not been examined outside Sri Lanka. Yet, one verb-particle combination with an extensive research record across various South Asian Englishes is COPE *up with*, a construction featuring an additional *up* compared to the British English COPE *with*. Corpus-based comparisons of British, Indian and Sri Lankan English provide evidence that COPE *up with* is a structural alternative to COPE *with* in Indian and Sri Lankan, but not in British English, instantiating a categorical difference between British English and the two South Asian English, where, in turn, COPE *up with* is a minority variant with slightly higher frequencies in Indian than in Sri Lankan English (Bernaisch, 2015, pp. 153–154; Mukherjee, 2012, pp. 204–205; Zipp & Bernaisch, 2012, p. 188). This constellation – structural innovation with quantitative differences across Indian and Sri Lankan English, but absence from British English – also surfaces with other lexicogrammatical innovations as illustrated in (1) and (2):

(1) The participants termed the bidding process as fair and transparent. (SAVE-PAKDA_2006–07–21.txt; Lange, 2016, p. 140)
(2) According to a real-estate dealer, in the last couple of months itself, three huge bungalows on CG road have been or are in the process of being sold. (IN_TI_38094; Bernaisch & Lange, 2012, p. 12)

What Lange (2016) coins the intrusive-*as* construction is shown in (1), where a complex-transitive pattern governed by TERM features the object complement *fair and transparent* preceded by *as*. While this syntactic construction with TERM and an object complement introduced by *as* is not licensed in British English, it is the default variant in Indian (72.26%) and Sri Lankan English (52.27%), although TERM *as* appears more firmly rooted in Indian than in Sri Lankan English (Lange, 2016, p. 142). Similarly, presentational *itself* as in (2) putting pragmatic focus on the structural entity preceding it – in (2) the prepositional phrase *in the last couple of months* – does not exist in British English, but is in use in Indian (19.53 instances per million words (pmw)) and Sri Lankan English (10.76 instances pmw; Bernaisch & Lange, 2012, p. 9). The combination of grammatically singular *itself* with the – at least notionally – plural *in the last couple of months* in (2) may even be considered an indication that *itself* develops into an invariant focus particle in South Asia. While it follows that invariant *itself* is absent from British English, Indian and Sri Lankan English are the only South Asian Englishes employing invariant *itself* with – again – Indian English displaying more examples of the innovation than Sri Lankan English (Bernaisch & Lange, 2012, p. 12).

Due to the relevance of syntactic changes in the evolution of postcolonial Englishes (Schneider, 2007), particularly recent research into South Asian Englishes – without ignoring the long research traditions into the phonology, lexis

and discourse pragmatics of Indian English – has displayed a keen interest in lexicogrammatical phenomena. In contrast, the pragmatics of postcolonial Englishes – although they can be expected to be highly culture-sensitive and thus promising areas of research given the differently structured societies around the globe in comparison to that of Great Britain – have so far not been in the limelight (with notable exceptions such as Kachru, 1981 and – more empirically oriented – Revis and Bernaisch (2020)). It is against this background that the current paper zooms in on a pragmatic feature of discourse organisation, namely backchannels. As noteworthy differences between Britain, India and Sri Lanka with regard to their degrees of individualism according to Hofstede's (1991) multidimensional evaluations, which – in their first conceptualisation – complement the individualism-vs.-collectivism scale just mentioned with perspectives on power distance, uncertainty avoidance and a masculinity-vs.-femininity scale, exist, it needs to be examined to what extent these cultural dissimilarities might find reflection in the use of backchannels. Backchannels re-assure the turn holder that the interlocutor is still listening and their use can thus be regarded as strengthening the phatic communion, while their absence achieves the opposite. As Hofstede (1991) – admittedly glossing over regional cultural differences in favour of blanket evaluations of a given nation – profiles British people as more individualistic compared to a more collectivist mindset attested for Indians and Sri Lankans, these sociocultural differences could have linguistic repercussions. A collectivist society is characterised by strong and long-lasting ingroup relations providing a sense of social security and belonging and requiring a high degree of loyalty (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). If one accepts that backchannels are linguistic means of building and maintaining interpersonal relations (Ruede et al., 2019, p. 248), it seems likely that more backchannels occur in collectivist societies, that is in India and Sri Lanka in the framework of the present study, than in Great Britain.

2.2 | Backchannels

Rühlemann (2007, p. 94) states that 'there is little agreement in the literature as to what qualifies as a backchannel'. Also labelled 'active listenership', 'reactive tokens' (Castello & Gesuato, 2019, pp. 231, 235), 'listener responses' (White, 1989, p. 59) and many other terms referring to the same phenomenon (for a list, see Purwanti, 2018, p. 40), the term *backchannel* was first coined by Yngve (1970) according to whom it 'is observed when "the person who has the turn receives short messages such as 'yes' and 'uh-huh' without relinquishing the turn"' (Maynard, 1986, p. 1079). According to Yngve (1970), the backchannel is distinct from the main channel, which the speaker holding the floor uses to send messages. Instead, it is the channel 'over which the listener (the addressed recipient of talk) gives useful information without claiming the floor' (White, 1989, p. 59). From a broad functional perspective, backchannels can thus be considered to communicate the listener's attentiveness and understanding while acknowledging and 'notifying the speaker that s/he still holds the floor' (Hasegawa, 2014, p. 320; also Benus, Gravano, & Hirschberg, 2007, p. 1065; Castello & Gesuato, 2019, pp. 231–232). Furthermore, backchannels 'may signal agreement, approval, surprise, etc.' (Kachru & Smith, 2008, p. 122). In terms of their formal realisations, backchannels are often exemplified with 'a range of […] forms from *mm*, *uh huh* and *mhm*, to *right*, *really* and *I see*' (Wong & Peters, 2007, p. 480, original emphasis), but the compilation of a finite list of English backchannels is almost impossible as backchannelling is a discourse phenomenon with many different potential realisations and – when it comes to their empirical analysis in corpus data – in turn a number of different transcriptions for similar or the same realisation (Rühlemann in Kjellmer, 2009, p. 83). In this light, backchannels have a high degree of lexical variability with most lexical items used as backchannels being 'highly ambiguous' (Benus et al., 2007, p. 1065) themselves. Furthermore, backchannels do not only include said more or less rigidly defined linguistic items but also 'vocal noises' (Wong & Peters, 2007, p. 479) as well as 'visual displays, such as facial expressions, nods, and gestures' (Tolins & Fox Tree, 2014, p. 152) or 'responsive laughter and head movement' (Hasegawa, 2014, p. 320).

There are several ways of establishing various subcategories of backchannels. Regarding the structural complexity and constituting elements of backchannels, Wong and Peters (2007, p. 483) suggest a differentiation between minimal, lexical and grammatical constructions. Minimal backchannels are described as 'non-lexical items that are semantically empty, apart from polarity' and include forms such as *uhuh* and *mm* as well as interjections like *yes* and

no (Wong & Peters, 2007, p. 483). Lexical backchannels, in contrast, are defined as 'all single word backchannels that are codified in dictionaries and show a corresponding increase in semantic weight, such as *really*, *right*, and *good*' (Wong & Peters, 2007, p. 483). Lastly, grammatical backchannels involve 'predications and syntactic structure. These include short fixed phrases, such as *I see* and *that's true*, as well as brief questions, repetitions, sentence completions and running commentaries' (Wong & Peters, 2007, p. 483). Tottie (1991, p. 263) also establishes three structurally motivated categories of backchannels, but groups them into simple, double and complex forms. While simple backchannels are described as one single utterance such as *yes* or *mhm*, double backchannels are the repetition of a simple one (*yeah yeah*) and complex backchannels stand for a combination of several different simple backchannels or lexemes (*mhm gee*, *that's right yeah yeah*). A fine-grained pragmatic categorisation is suggested by Kjellmer (2009, p. 84), who differentiates backchannels according to their function, which can be regulative (*OK so far*, *carry on*), supportive (*I appreciate/understand/agree with what you are saying*), confirmatory (*I confirm what you are saying*), attention-showing (*I'm listening*) or empathetic (*I'm on your side*, *I sympathise with you*). Another perspective on the functions of backchannels has been proposed by Tolins and Fox Tree (2014, p. 152) with a focus on their contextual adequacy: context-generic backchannels such as *mhm* and *uhuh* versus context-specific backchannels like *oh* and *wow*. While the former lead to a continuation of the conversation, the latter evoke an elaboration of what has been said, illustrating that '[a]ddressees collaborate directly in the moment-by-moment creation of talk' (Tolins & Fox Tree, 2014, p. 163).

There has been a lot of research into backchannelling behaviour of non-native speakers of English with a particular focus on learners of English around the world, while research on second-language speakers of English has so far remained relatively peripheral. In the literature on backchannels, the degree of accommodation between conversational partners for whom English is a native or second language and potential culturally motivated transfer effects from one language to another with multilingual speakers have been recurrent foci. Purwanti (2018, pp. 39, 48) finds a high degree of accommodation in her analyses of Indonesian non-native speakers and Australian L1 speakers. While '[b]ackchannel responses existed in different linguistic environments that may be culturally specific', such as following a clause-final *you know*, which is specific to the English language and is not used in Indonesian interactions, the study also shows that the 'non-native' Indonesian speakers 'converge[d] their linguistic devices to that of their [Australian] supervisors' in order to 'express politeness to satisfy the supervisors' (Purwanti, 2018, pp. 39, 48). Conversely, White (1989, p. 59) concludes that Japanese L2 speakers' 'listening style remains unchanged in cross-cultural conversations'. This is contrasted by their American interlocutors who adapted their style in the direction of the Japanese speakers 'because they clearly have the linguistic ability to do so' (White, 1989, p. 74). Consequently, there is no unanimous agreement as to whether and to what degree L2 speakers accommodate to L1 speakers in terms of their backchannel use. Interestingly, it has also been investigated complementarily whether and how usage patterns of backchannels in an L2 may influence the use of backchannels in the mother tongues of speakers. By comparing previous studies, Pavlenko (2000, pp. 194–195) concludes that the 'L2 influence on L1 […] may also compromise […] listener responses, or backchannels', which results in convergence, borrowing, shift and loss. Heinz (2003) examines backchannels as used by American and German speakers of English and pays particular attention to the degree to which backchannel behaviour differs in conversations between monolingual and bilingual Germans. The study concludes that Germans with high levels of proficiency in American English exhibit backchannelling behaviour normally seen in American English even when speaking German with other 'native speakers' of German (Heinz, 2003, p. 1113). With non-native speakers of English, culturally motivated transfer effects from their respective L1s have also been documented repeatedly. Castello and Gesuato (2019, p. 240) find that backchannelling behaviour is culturally specific; in their analysis of corpus data of Chinese, Indian and Italian 'non-native language users' 'speakers from China and India produced the highest and the lowest number, respectively, of lexical backchannels'. Still, also a qualitative difference in backchannelling with the Italian and Chinese speakers can be observed since they often use backchannels to convey uncertainty whereas the Indian speakers convey certainty. Furthermore, the Chinese speakers tend to express surprise, requests and confirmation in their backchannels the most out of the three groups (Castello & Gesuato, 2019, p. 231). A number of studies have been conducted examining the backchannels produced by Japanese L2 speakers. In these studies, a recurrent pattern becomes obvious in that Japanese speakers of English compared to those of other varieties of English – specifically American English, but also British and Australian English – use significantly more backchannels in conversations (Cutrone, 2014,

pp. 87–88; Maynard, 1986, p. 1091; White, 1989, p. 73). However, the Japanese speakers also showed less variation in their backchannels than 'native speakers' (Cutrone, 2014, p. 88). In conclusion, it is safe to assume that backchannelling behaviour is specific to the regional speech community in which it is employed. From a sociolinguistic viewpoint and in addition to regionally induced variation, the gender of the speaker seems to influence the usage patterns of backchannels. Using the spoken component of the COBUILD Corpus, Kjellmer (2009, p. 81) attests 'that women use backchannels more than men and that, unlike men, they prefer unemphatic backchannels'.

Besides sociolinguistic factors exhibiting influences on backchannels, their prosodic features have also been studied. As Benus et al. (2007, p. 1067) show, backchannels in American English are characterised by a very specific prosody: 'they have higher pitch, intensity and pitch slope than both agreements […] and other functions'. With regard to clausal position, they find that '73% of backchannels follow a rising intermediate or intonational boundary'. This conclusion is complemented by a study by Heldner, Edlund, and Hirschberg (2010, p. 4) who show 'that the pitch at the beginning of a backchannel is similar to the pitch at the end of the utterance that precedes it'. They conclude that this is unique to backchannels and a possible reason for their unobtrusiveness in the flow of conversation (Heldner et al., 2010, pp. 1, 4) Therefore, the pitch of backchannels supports their main function of signalling that the speaker still holds the floor.

This overview of the body of research concerned with backchannelling highlights that regional variation in backchannel use – particularly in the light of accommodation and transfer effects as well as sociolinguistic and prosodic aspects – exists. Still, in terms of Kachruvian Circles, their analytical focus has rather been on Inner and Expanding Circle varieties with second-language varieties in the Outer Circle – to the exception of Castello and Gesuato (2019), who include Indian English in their study on backchannels – being almost categorically neglected. As backchannelling behaviour has been profiled as a culture-sensitive pragmatic practice (Purwanti, 2018, p. 39), the South Asian language area encapsulating Indian English, that is the second-language variety with the largest speech community around the world, which is regularly in use in a locale culturally clearly distinct from its historical origins in Britain (Hofstede, 1991), represents a particularly relevant context to understand whether and how patterns of backchannel use are unique in the Kachruvian Outer Circle and sensitive to underlying cultural differences in the societies concerned – also by drawing comparisons between the direct neighbours Indian and Sri Lankan English. Informed by the research on backchannels just mentioned and additional potentially relevant predictors, factors relating to (a) regional and genderlectal variation, (b) accommodation between interlocutors and (c) speaker-related characteristics such as age and lexical flexibility are integrated into the study at hand as shown in the following section.

3 | METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was sampled from the spoken parts of three components of the International Corpus of English (ICE): ICE-Great Britain (ICE-GB), ICE-India (ICE-IND) and ICE-Sri Lanka (ICE-SL). Of the 300 spoken texts presented in each component, the 180 dialogues (S1A-001–S1B-080) covering various genres including relatively informal face-to-face conversations constituting the majority of texts with 100 out of these 180 texts, but also broadcast material as well as recordings made in business and legal settings – among others – were examined. The uniform design of the ICE components ensures that the data studied are maximally comparable. Given that the analytical focus is on the degree to which Indian and Sri Lankan English have emancipated themselves linguistically from British English as well as from each other, it was central to ensure that the backchannel data could reflect these possible variety specificities. Consequently, we decided not to work with a pre-defined list of backchannels culled from earlier research because (a) this list would probably not feature (potentially localised) backchannels specific to Indian and Sri Lankan English and (b) the various ways in which backchannels are transcribed in the ICE components studied is unpredictable even when certain types of backchannels are documented in the relevant literature.

In order to thus allow for formerly unseen backchannels to be extracted from the corpus data, but still keep the precision of the searches at a tenable level, we decided to restrict this study to simple backchannels as defined

by Tottie (1991, p. 263), meaning single-word backchannels. Also in the light of Peters and Wong's (2017, p. 506) finding that single-word backchannels are the most common type among the three groups of backchannels Tottie (1991) establishes, this appears a relevant and viable focus. Accordingly, the search expression based on regular expressions in AntConc (Anthony, 2018) matched all single-word text units by a particular speaker in the three ICE components in case they were preceded by a turn consisting of more than one word by another speaker and followed by a turn of more than one word by the speaker who also preceded the backchannel. The 6,731 resulting backchannel candidates were manually checked and discarded when they (a) could be interpreted as answers to a preceding question, (b) were marked as cases of unclear transcription, (c) succeeded a text unit featuring unclear mark-up to the extent that the content of the text unit could not be reliably recovered or (d) completed the preceding text unit. Accordingly, instances such as example (3) were extracted from the corpus data. Example (3) instantiates a prototypical single-word backchannel use since speaker B has the floor and speaker A interjects *mhm* signalling that the she or he is still listening to what speaker B is saying. Still, examples as in (4) were also extracted from the data since one speaker has the floor and another speaker interjects one word, but they – in the light of the selection criteria just mentioned – had to be discarded since, in the case of example (4), speaker B's single-word text unit is not a backchannel, but an answer to speaker A's question.

(3) < ICE-GB:S1A-059#108:1:B > I wouldn't say food was becoming boring
< ICE-GB:S1A-059#109:1:A > Mhm
< ICE-GB:S1A-059#110:1:B > I wouldn't say there was too much variety

(4) < ICE-GB:S1A-059#79:1:A > And you do your own cooking
< ICE-GB:S1A-059#80:1:B > Yes
< ICE-GB:S1A-059#81:1:A > Are you a good cook

The manual cleaning of the 6,731 backchannel candidates, in the course of which conservative decisions about unclear cases were made by a group of four coders, led to a remaining total of 3,212 backchannels. Each backchannel example was annotated for the following sociobiographic and structural factors:

- BAGE: the age of the backchannel user; older (26+ years, o) vs. younger (< 26 years, y),
- BCPER1000LOG: the logged normalised frequency of backchannels per 1,000 words by the backchannel user concerned,
- BGENDER: the gender of the backchannel user; female (f) vs. male (m),
- BTTR: the type-token ratio of the backchannel user; low (less than or equal to 33.33%) vs. medium (more than 33.33% and less than 66.66%) vs. high (more than or equal to 66.66%),[2]
- SAGE: the age of the speaker preceding and succeeding the backchannel; older (26+ years, o) vs. younger (< 26 years, y),
- SGENDER: the gender of the speaker preceding and succeeding the backchannel; female (f) vs. male (m),
- STOPIC: the topic the speaker preceding and succeeding the backchannel discusses as established via LDA topic modelling (Grün & Hornik, 2011);[3] court vs. government vs. humanities vs. legal vs. news vs. personal vs. politics vs. research vs. schooling,
- STTR: the type-token ratio of the speaker preceding and succeeding the backchannel; low (less than or equal to 33.33%) vs. medium (more than 33.33% and less than 66.66%) vs. high (more than or equal to 66.66%) and
- VARIETY: the regional origin of the example; Great Britain (GB) vs. India (Ind) vs. Sri Lanka (SL).

In order to connect with, but also go beyond earlier work on backchannels, the following research questions represent the foci of this study:

- Are there differences in the forms and frequencies of backchannels across the varieties studied and can such potential differences be reconciled with cultural particularities of the countries concerned?
- Which factors influence speakers' choices with regard to forms and frequencies of backchannels?
- Are there variety-specific tendencies with forms and frequencies of backchannels – particularly when British and South Asian speakers of English are compared?

With the intention of complementing their results, multifactorial statistical models are created in R (R Core Team, 2018) in the form of random forests and a conditional inference tree, the former of which incorporate a recently suggested methodological improvement accounting for interactions between independent variables (Gries, forthcoming). A random forest (Breiman, 2001, p. 5) is constituted by a large number of decision trees – the default number of trees in a forest is 500 – and each of these trees is modelled on the basis of a subset of factors relevant to the object of investigation and a selection of examples drawn from the respective corpora. This method of repeatedly selecting only samples of all available examples and factors is also referred to as bootstrapping and allows arguing that random forests avoid statistical issues like overfitting or multicollinearity (James, Witten, Hastie, & Tibshirani, 2015, p. 320; Kuhn & Johnson, 2016). Yet, tree-based modelling has been shown to potentially fail to recognise important interactions between factors (Bernaisch, Gries, & Mukherjee, 2014), which is why Gries (forthcoming) has recently suggested that interaction predictors which researchers consider particularly relevant for their objects of investigation be explicitly coded and included in the random forest model to force the individual trees in the forest to consider their relevance. In our case, this means that we created additional factors combining VARIETY with each of the independent variables listed in section 3 to the exception of VARIETY itself and used the independent variables as well as the newly created interaction predictors with VARIETY to predict the frequencies and forms of backchannels. With the danger of gross oversimplification, a conditional inference tree is an improved version of the kinds of decision trees that populate random forests, but they do not bootstrap like random forests, which is why they cannot be regarded as superior to random forests (see also Gries, forthcoming or Bernaisch, forthcoming for more details). Conditional inference trees iteratively split the data with the help of the available predictors with the goal of creating maximally homogenous groups with regard to the dependent variable and stop this process when the implementation of an additional split does not significantly improve the overall model any more. With the help of these statistical approaches, it will be examined whether and how the independent variables affect (a) the frequencies of backchannels and (b) the forms of backchannels a speaker chooses in a given communicative setting. These large-scale quantitative perspectives will be complemented with a detailed qualitative perspective on backchannel forms that appear exclusive to the South Asian Englishes examined.

4 | ANALYSIS

The analyses in 4.1 focus on the overall frequencies of backchannels and how they are affected by speaker-related and contextual factors. In 4.2, the factors guiding the choice of one backchannel over another in a particular conversational context are in the limelight as well as certain variety-specific tendencies in Indian and Sri Lanka English. Methodologically, descriptive statistics, a conditional inference tree and a recently suggested improvement on traditional random forest analyses are used for the identification of important tendencies regarding backchannels in the varieties concerned.

4.1 | Frequencies of backchannels

As illustrated in the overview of earlier research in section 2.2, usage patterns of backchannels can be sensitive to sociobiographic factors such as backchanneller gender (Kjellmer, 2009, p. 81). Against this background, Figure 1

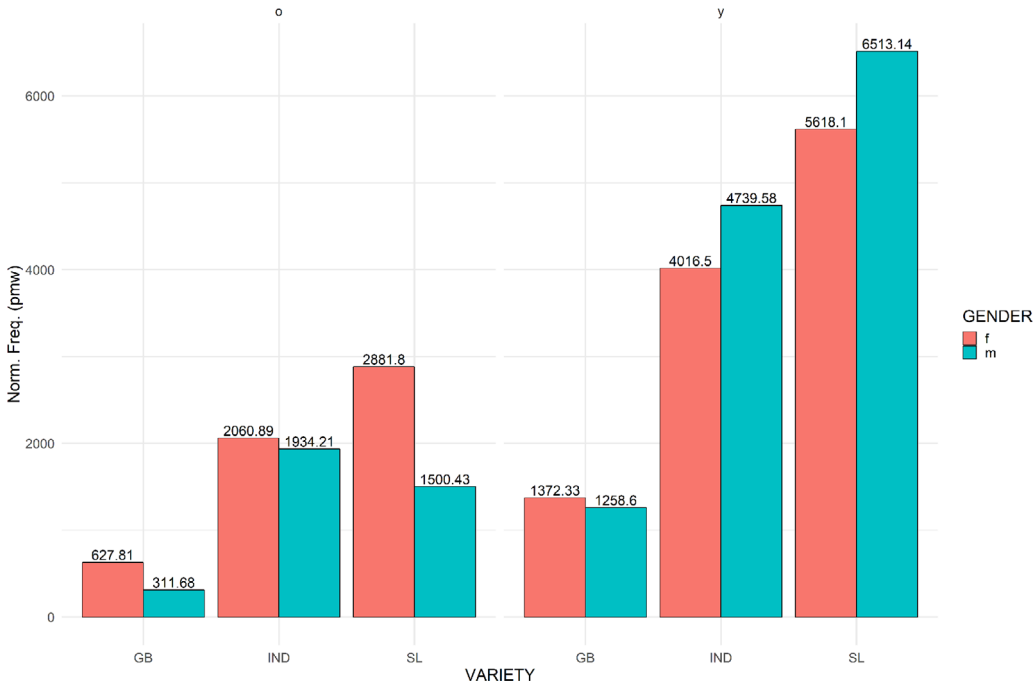

FIGURE 1 Normalised frequencies (pmw) of backchannels according to AGE, GENDER and VARIETY [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

visualises the normalised frequencies of backchannels per million words (pmw) with older speakers (26+ years) to the left and younger speakers (< 26 years) to the right. The individual bars are paired per VARIETY and each pair features a bar coloured in red representing female backchannel frequencies and a blue one for male backchannel frequencies.

With a focus on how AGE affects backchannel frequencies, the distributions in Figure 1 suggest a consistent trend in that younger speakers use more backchannels than older speakers. With older speakers, females use backchannels more often than men and while this observation also holds for younger British speakers, younger Indian and Sri Lankan men employ more backchannels than the respective female groups. Figure 1 further provides a visual impression of varietal frequency differences in that backchannels appear to be most frequent in Sri Lankan English followed by Indian and British English. This visual impression is backed up by the normalised frequencies of backchannels per VARIETY with 507.73 (pmw) for British, 1,892.31 (pmw) for Indian and 2,854.82 (pmw) for Sri Lankan speakers.

To examine how the factors featured in Figure 1 as well as those listed in section 3 influence backchannel frequencies per speaker in a statistically reliable way, a random forest analysis was conducted – the dependent variable to be modelled is the frequency of backchannels per 1,000 words (BCPER1000LOG). For this, the total frequency of backchannels was established per corpus speaker who used at least one backchannel and this total number of backchannels per backchannel user was then normalised to 1,000 words based on the total number of words the speaker contributed to the corpus. Given that the speaker concerned might have used backchannels with different interlocutors, only sociobiographic predictors relating to the backchanneller – and not to the turn holders at whom the backchannels were directed – are used because the sociobiographic information of the backchanneller remains the same across different interlocutors while the metainformation of the interlocutors might change. The following model formula was used to construct the random forest consisting of 500 trees: BCPER1000LOG ~ BAGE + BGENDER + BTTR + VARIETY + VAR_BAGE + VAR_BGENDER + VAR_BTTR.

The mean standard error (mse) of the resulting random forest model is 0.7910, which is statistically highly significantly better ($p < 0.001$) than a baseline model always predicting the mean value of the dependent variable, which

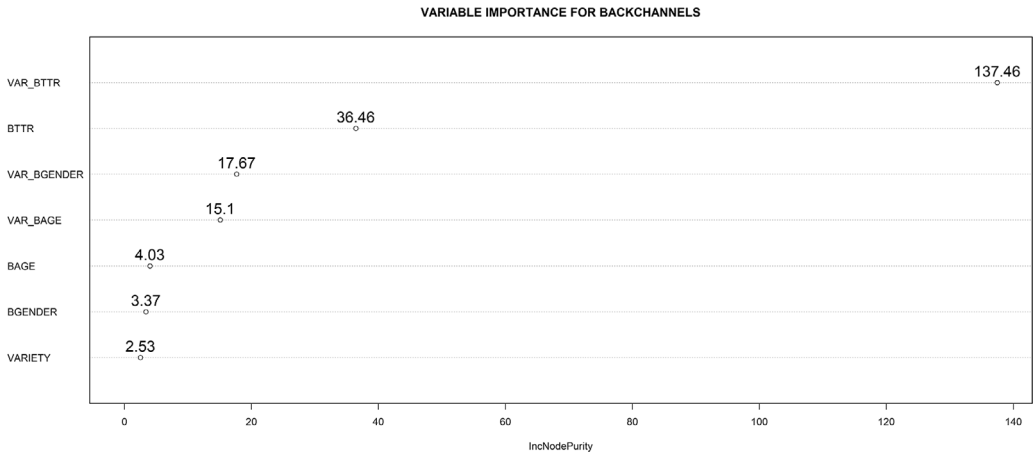

FIGURE 2 Variable importance scores for the frequency of backchannels

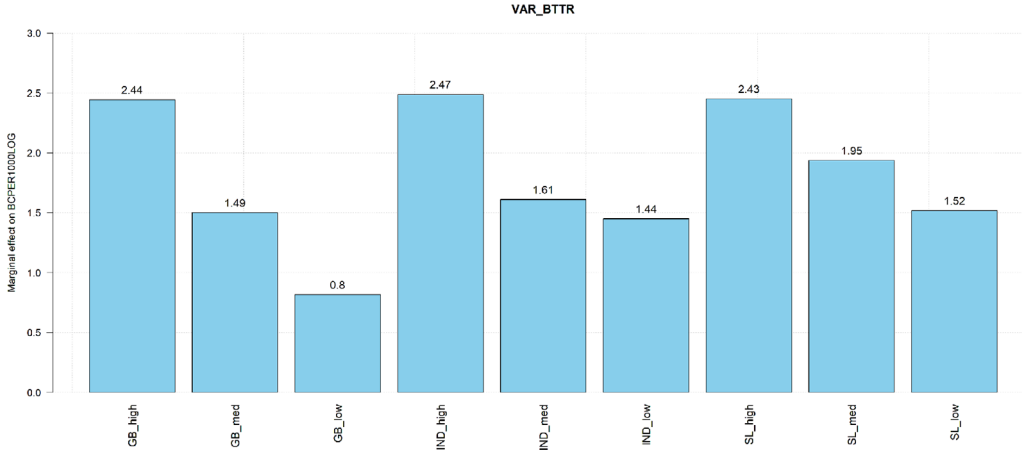

FIGURE 3 Marginal effect of VAR_BTTR on the frequency of backchannels [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

results in a mse of 1.0565. Random forests allow measuring the overall importance of the chosen predictors for the dependent variable gauging the effects of the (levels of the) predictors on the dependent variable. Figure 2 shows the variable importance scores for the predictors of BCPER1000LOG.

By far the most important factor is the interaction predictor combining information on VARIETY and the TTR of the backchanneller.[4] BTTR on its own is the second most important predictor followed by the interaction predictors VAR_BGENDER and VAR_BAGE. BAGE, BGENDER and VARIETY on their own are comparatively of marginal importance for the frequency of backchannels per speaker. As the focus of this paper is on potential cross-varietal differences in patterns of backchannel use anyway, the variable importance scores certainly warrant inspecting the interaction predictors with VARIETY more closely. The partial dependence plot in Figure 3 for VAR_BTTR shows how the levels of this predictor affect the normalised frequencies of backchannels per speaker.

Categorically speaking, a cross-varietally stable trend with regard to how different levels of TTR affect backchannel frequencies can be observed. It is true for British, Indian and Sri Lankan English that speakers with low TTRs use fewest, speakers with medium TTRs more and speakers with high TTRs most backchannels. Still, quantitative compar-

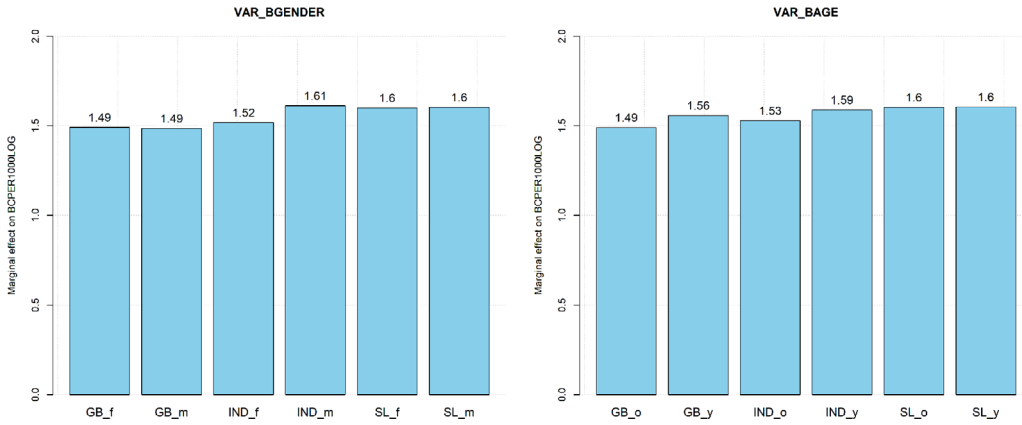

FIGURE 4 Marginal effect of VAR_BGENDER and VAR_BAGE for the frequencies of backchannels [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

isons across the varieties show that (a) differences in backchannel frequencies between British speakers with low and medium TTRs are more pronounced than with the South Asian speakers studied, (b) Sri Lankan English speakers with low TTRs resort more often to backchannels than British speakers with medium (and consequently also low) TTRs and (c) the South Asian speakers in general employ more backchannels than British speakers.

In Figure 4, the partial dependence plots for the remaining interaction predictors with notably lower variable importance scores are provided. It also becomes obvious that the differences between the impacts of the levels of these predictors on backchannel frequency are smaller than for VAR_BTTR.

With regard to VAR_BGENDER, genderrelated differences are absent with British and Sri Lankan speakers, while Indian women display a slightly stronger inclination to use backchannels than Indian men. Zooming in on the role age plays across the three varieties, one can observe that there are no differences between older and younger Sri Lankan speakers, but that it is the younger speaker groups in Britain and India that use marginally more backchannels than the respective older speaker groups.

4.2 | Forms of backchannels

Other than establishing which factors are responsible for speakers using more or fewer backchannels, it is also relevant to ask under which circumstances speakers choose a particular backchannel. Although a total of 160 different backchannel forms were used in 3,212 examples in the data studied, three groups of backchannels can be established. The *mhm* group with forms such as *mmh*, *ahh* or *oh* consists of non-lexical items giving the speaker the feedback that the phatic communion is still in existence and makes up 43.29% of all backchannel forms. The *ok* group consists of backchannels like *okay*, *right*, *yeah* or *yes* traditionally used to signal agreement and accounts for 41.58% of the total. The remaining backchannels, which could not be grouped into either of the two preceding groups and are often lexical in nature, were put together in the group *other* constituting 15.13% of all backchannels. This *other* group also includes indigenous backchannels such as *accha* or *haan* in the Indian data.

As a first approach to devising profiles of speakers who prefer one group of backchannels over the other two, a conditional inference tree can be used. In order to understand whether and how the choice of a particular backchannel form is influenced not only by characteristics of the backchannellers, but also by the speakers who have the conversation floor, sociobiographic and linguistic features of the speakers are included in the statistical model.[5] The conditional inference tree in Figure 5 is the result of the following model formula: BCCAT ~ BAGE + BGENDER + BTTR + SAGE + SGENDER + STOPIC + STTR + VARIETY and has a classification accuracy of 50.53%, which is statistically highly

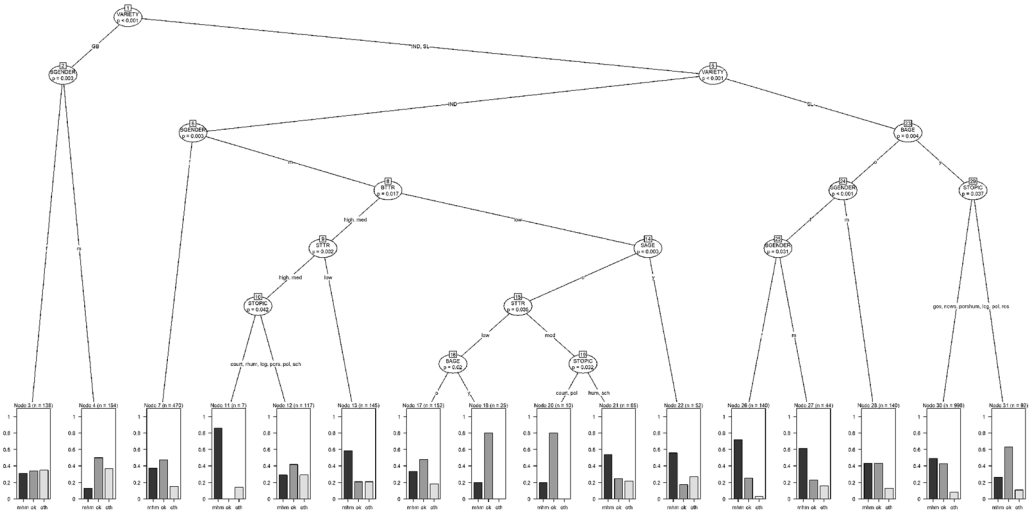

FIGURE 5 Conditional inference tree for the choice of backchannels

significantly ($p < 0.001$) better than a baseline model always predicting the most frequent backchannel group, which is *mhm*, with a frequency of 43.29%.[6]

The conditional inference tree profiles VARIETY as the most important factor for splitting up the data according to the different groups of backchannels. For British speakers (nodes 3 and 4), it can be observed that *ok* and *oth* backchannels figure relatively prominently – particularly with men. For Indian females (node 7), *mhm* and *ok* backchannels are notably more present, while the backchannel choice of Indian men is modelled as relatively complex taking into account BTTR, STTR, STOPIC and SAGE. With a focus on the dominant backchannel groups with Indian men, *mhm* backchannels are used most often by Indian men with a medium or high TTR when conversing with somebody with a similar TTR range about court- or research-related topics (node 11). *Ok* backchannels prevail when Indian men with a low TTR talk to an older interlocutor and (a) the TTR of the interlocutor is low and the Indian backchanneller is younger or (b) the TTR of the interlocutor is medium and the conversation covers court-related or political topics. With Sri Lankan speakers, *mhm* backchannels are most often used by older female speakers in conversations with other females while *ok* backchannels are the preferred choice of younger Sri Lankan speakers with topics covering the humanities, legal or political issues as well as research. The backchannel group *oth* does not represent a default option for any of the speaker groups established in the conditional inference tree documenting the more marginal role of this group of backchannels in comparison to the *mhm* and *ok* backchannels.

To complement these relatively fine-grained perspectives on preferred backchannels by specified speaker groups, a random forest was created to judge the importance of the predictors concerned for backchannel selection more globally and to model how important predictors affect backchannel selection. In contrast to the results of the model selection process for the conditional inference trees, the random forest model consisting of 500 trees with interaction predictors performed better than the one without them, which is why the model formula for the random forest reads as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{BCCAT} \sim\ & \text{VARIETY} + \text{SGENDER} + \text{SAGE} + \text{BGENDER} + \text{BAGE} + \text{STOPIC} + \text{STTR} + \text{BTTR} + \text{VAR\_SGENDER} \\ & + \text{VAR\_SAGE} + \text{VAR\_BGENDER} + \text{VAR\_BAGE} + \text{VAR\_STOPIC} + \text{VAR\_STTR} + \text{VAR\_BTTR}.\end{aligned}$$

The resulting random forest has a classification accuracy of 59.11%, which is highly significantly ($p < 0.001$) better than a baseline model always predicting the most frequent backchannel *mhm* and also notably outperforms the classification accuracy of the conditional inference tree.

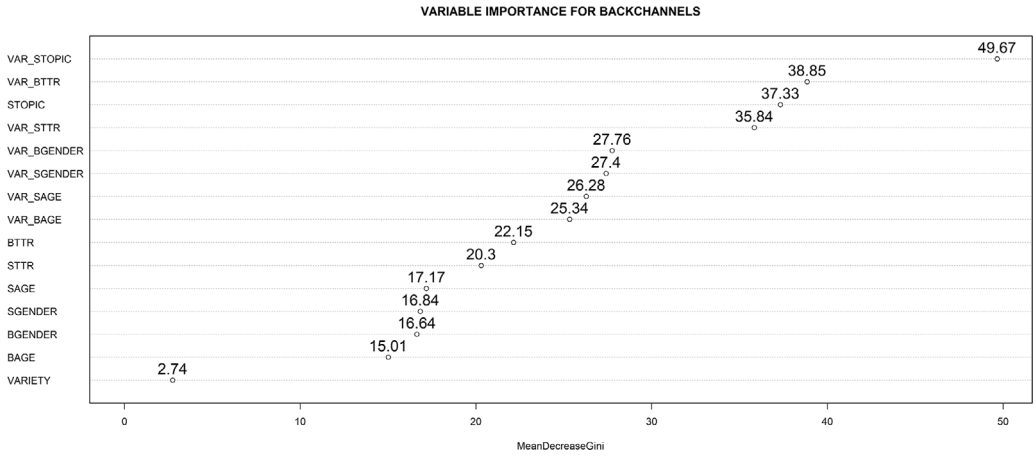

FIGURE 6 Variable importance scores for the choice of backchannels

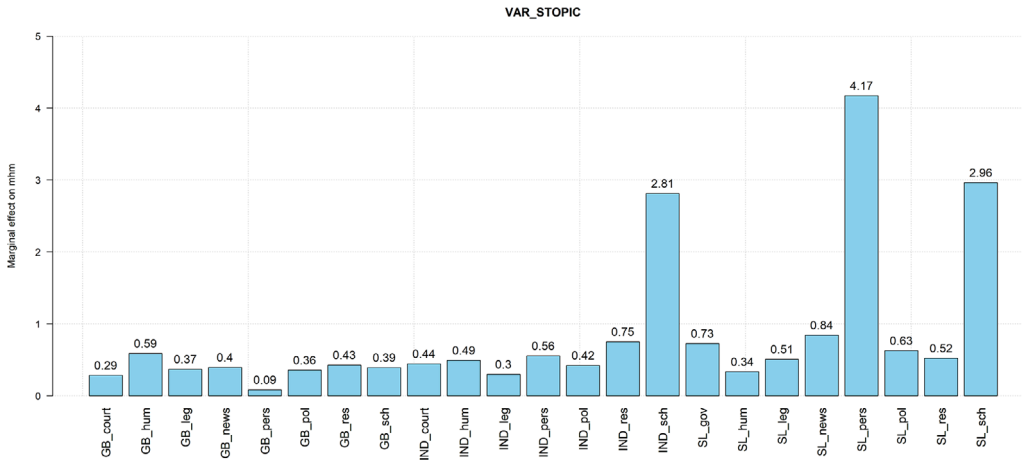

FIGURE 7 Marginal effect of VAR_STOPIC on backchannels in *mhm* group [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In the variable importance plot for backchannel choice in Figure 6, the relevance of VARIETY as a predictor is not apparent from the variable importance score of VARIETY on its own, but from the interaction predictors featuring VARIETY and another predictor consistently displaying higher variable importance scores than the respective predictors individually. As the main interest of this paper is uncovering potential cross-varietal differences with backchannels, it is expedient and statistically warranted to focus on the interaction predictors with VARIETY. The most important predictor is VAR_STOPIC followed by VAR_TTR and the interaction predictors of VARIETY with backchanneller and speaker age and gender. In Figure 7, the marginal effect of VAR_STOPIC on the most frequent backchannel group *mhm* is visualised.

Four conversational topics across the varieties studied notably deviate from the others in how they affect the usage of *mhm* backchannels. When personal issues are conversational topics in Sri Lanka, speakers display the strongest inclination to backchannel with *mhm*. Talking about school topics in India and Sri Lanka also boosts *mhm* backchannel frequencies, while personal topics in British English tend to negatively affect the occurrence of *mhm* backchannels.

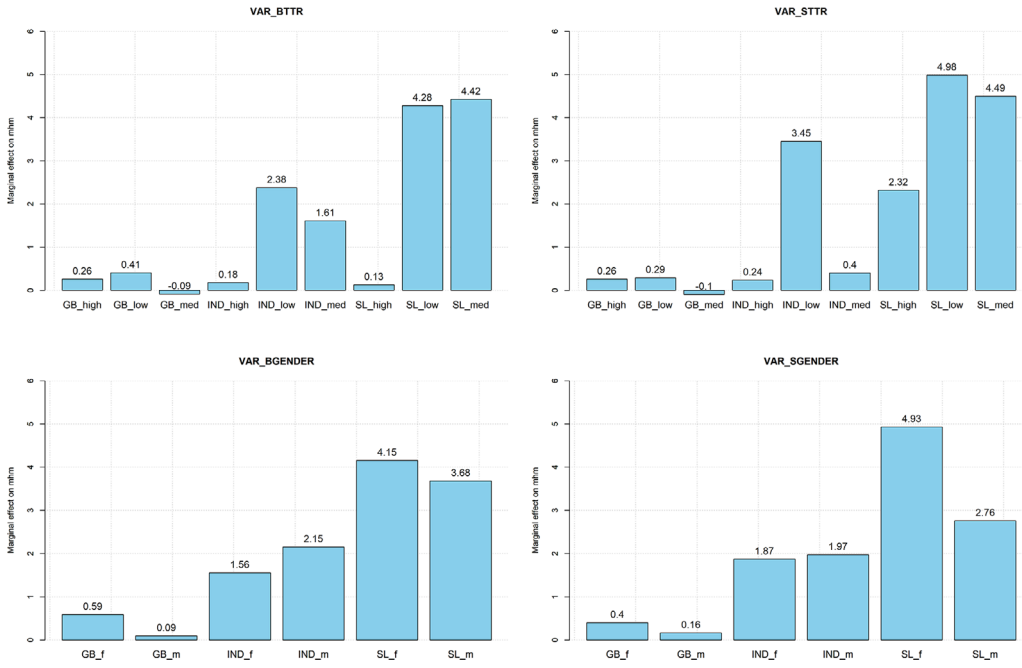

FIGURE 8 Marginal effect of VAR_BTTR, VAR_STTR, VAR_BGENDER and VAR_SGENDER on backchannels in *mhm* group [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The marginal effects of VAR_BTTR, VAR_STTR, VAR_BGENDER and VAR_SGENDER on *mhm* backchannels are displayed in Figure 8. Indian and Sri Lankan backchannellers with medium and low TTRs tend to favour *mhm* backchannels more strongly than British backchannellers with similar TTR levels, while Indian and Sri Lankan speakers with high TTRs show a notably lower likeliness of using *mhm* backchannels than speakers from these countries with lower TTR levels. The patterns in which the TTRs of speakers at whom backchannels are directed affect the use of the *mhm* backchannels are relatively comparable to those of VAR_BTTR. Sri Lankan English interlocutors with medium and low TTRs receive more *mhm* backchannels than speakers with higher TTRs, while only Indian speakers with low TTRs get to hear backchannels from the *mhm* group notably frequently. With British interlocutors, the TTR levels do not seem to affect *mhm* as notably. Gender affects *mhm* backchannel frequencies relatively independent of whether a speaker uses or receives a backchannel. With British and Sri Lankan speakers, females use and receive more *mhm*s than males, while the reverse is true for Indian speakers with local genderlectal differences being more visible with Indian users than receivers of backchannels.

As explained in section 3 on methodology, backchannel candidates were extracted from the corpora by identifying single-word speaker turns in between the turns of another speaker. This obviously also yielded many lexical backchannel candidates which turned out to be single-word answers to questions or instances of the speaker double-checking with the interlocutor whether she or he had understood a word correctly and these instances were discarded. Still, exclusive to the Indian and the Sri Lankan data, there were a number of lexical backchannel candidates that were neither answers to questions nor – based on the reaction of the interlocutors – cases of the speaker double-checking a particular word.[7] Three examples of lexical backchannels from the Indian data are shown in (5) to (7) and two from the Sri Lankan data in (8) and (9).

(5) < ICE-IND:S1A-062#216:1:A > Yeah that is one pass time everybody loves
< ICE-IND:S1A-062#217–218:1:B > Television And another thing is just watching cricket

< ICE-IND:S1A-062#219:1:A > Cricket
< ICE-IND:S1A-062#220:1:B > I love cricket
< ICE-IND:S1A-062#221:1:A > That is one game I can not[!sic] stand […]

(6) < ICE-IND:S1A-063#55:1:A > There is lot of scope for uh research
< ICE-IND:S1A-063#56:1:B > For research
< ICE-IND:S1A-063#57:1:A > Researchers because there were many kingdoms small chieftains < ICE-IND:S1A-063#58:1:B > Chieftains
< ICE-IND:S1A-063#59:1:A > Uh belonging to the Vijayanagara Empire

(7) < ICE-IND:S1A-077#128:1:A > And uh I think you go sometime outside to have a better taste and better food
< ICE-IND:S1A-077#129:1:B > Food
< ICE-IND:S1A-077#130:1:A > Generally
< ICE-IND:S1A-077#131:1:B > Two three times a a week

(8) < ICE-SL:S1A-055#163:1:B > And where is your dad now
< ICE-SL:S1A-055#164:1:A > He's in Aussie
< ICE-SL:S1A-055#165:1:B > Aussie
< ICE-SL:S1A-055#166:1:A > He was here for like three months and then he went back

(9) < ICE-SL:S1B-065#167:1:B > It's it's a general knife
< ICE-SL:S1B-065#168:1:A > But it contained the accused fingerprints
< ICE-SL:S1B-065#169:1:B > Fingerprints
< ICE-SL:S1B-065#170:1:A > Tch can it be because it was found in the accused apartment

In none of these examples would it be warranted to consider the underlined element either (a) an answer to a question because the interlocutors use declarative sentence structures before the backchannel candidates which in these cases would probably not be interpreted as questions or (b) an instance of the speaker lexically double-checking with the interlocutor whether she or he understood the preceding word correctly because the interlocutor does not provide an answer after the backchannel candidate like *yes*, *yeah*, *exactly* or a repetition of what was said earlier that would allow such an interpretation. These what will be referred to as lexical echo backchannels may represent particularly South Asian ways of backchannelling in the sense that they replicate the turn-final nominal head used in the conversational contribution preceding the backchannel. Lexical echo backchannels and their pragmatic effects will be discussed further in the following section.

5 | DISCUSSION

To connect with the research questions that motivated this study, it can be observed that backchannel frequency is affected by the regional background of the speakers in conjunction with – in order of descending importance – the speaker's TTR, gender and age. Sri Lankan speakers of English use almost six times as many backchannels as British speakers and Indian speakers approximately four times as many. Backchannels are used more frequently the higher the TTRs of the backchannellers, which is a trend that holds uniformly – though to different degrees – across the varieties concerned, and more often by Indian women than men and younger than older speakers in Great Britain and India. As regards the choice of intensifiers, *mhm* backchannels are boosted when school topics are discussed in India and Sri Lanka or personal topics are covered in Sri Lanka, while personal topics do not trigger comparatively many

mhm backchannels in Great Britain. This quantitative regionalised preference of distinct backchannel forms – also in the light of the conversational topics at hand – could be argued to be a manifestation of localisation processes on the pragmatic level of discourse organisation or – in other words – probabilistic pragmatic nativisation. In relation to the TTRs of backchannellers and interlocutors, low and medium TTRs favour *mhm* backchannels more strongly in India and Sri Lanka than in Great Britain and while female backchannellers and interlocutors both catalyse higher frequencies of *mhm* backchannels in Great Britain and Sri Lanka, the reverse is true for India. In addition to these quantitative variety-specific trends, lexical echo backchannels, which occur exclusively in the two South Asian Englishes among the varieties studied here, could also be empirically identified, namely a backchannel that replicates the last nominal head used by the preceding interlocutor.

Under consideration of nation-specific cultural analyses based on Hofstede's (1991) multidimensional framework, backchannel frequencies in the varieties studied appear to resonate with the degree to which the respective societies are oriented towards individualism or collectivism. While inhabitants of the United Kingdom are assigned high scores for individualism and, thus, rather tend to focus on the wellbeing of the individual than the various groups it is part of, India – and particularly Sri Lanka – get low scores for individualism, which implies that, in these countries, the welfare of social networks is often considered more important than that of the individual agents in it. Although it is understood that tendencies towards national individualism or collectivism cannot single-handedly account for the overall distribution of backchannel frequencies across the respective varieties of English, it is certainly revealing to empirically observe that the degrees of individualism in a particular nation appear to be negatively correlated with the frequency of backchannels in the respective variety of English. British English – with the United Kingdom having the highest scores for individualism – features (by far) the fewest backchannels, Indian English – with India displaying a slight tendency towards collectivism – features four times as many backchannels as British English and Sri Lankan English, where collectivism is dominant, features notably more backchannels than both British and Indian English.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the five speakers with the highest amounts of backchannels live in South Asia. A case in point is given in (10), where speaker A, a younger Sri Lankan female, backchannels comparatively excessively in a telephone conversation with a younger Sri Lanka male.[8]

(10) < ICE-SL:S1A-099#33:1:B > So that makes my time
< ICE-SL:S1A-099#34:1:A > Mmh
< ICE-SL:S1A-099#35:1:B > Uh So we
< ICE-SL:S1A-099#36:1:A > It saves you time mmh
< ICE-SL:S1A-099#37:1:B > Yeah
< ICE-SL:S1A-099#38:1:A > Mmh
< ICE-SL:S1A-099#39:1:B > Time saved
< ICE-SL:S1A-099#40:1:A > Mmh

As backchannels mainly serve to signal the turn holder that the other party involved in the communicative exchange is still actively involved in it, it not only follows that South Asian speakers of English signal their attentive listening more frequently, but they – on occasion – apparently also mark the degree of detail with which they pay attention to what their interlocutor is saying. While the backchannels *mmh* of the young Sri Lankan woman in (10) are – with regard to their formal realisation – equally adequate for whatever the content of the turn holder's contribution is, this is not true of the lexical echo backchannels in (5) to (9), which could exclusively be attested with South Asian speakers. These lexical echo backchannels signal the turn holder that the interlocutor is actively listening by formally duplicating a lexical element of the turn holder's preceding contribution, thus implicitly providing lexical proof of the fact the turn holder's contribution has been actively processed – the kind of proof of cognitive processing a universal backchannel like *mmh* in (10) can probably not provide to a similar extent.

In this light, Lange (2012) identifies various non-canonical syntactic structures in Indian English, which also have a currency in Sri Lankan English (Götz, 2017). One of these non-canonical syntactic arrangements is left-dislocation as in (11), where an interlocutor reacts to another speaker's contribution by duplicating the salient noun phrase at the beginning of her/his contribution and picking up this salient noun phrase in the form of a resumptive pronoun later in this contribution again (Lange, 2012, p. 165).

(11) < ICE-IND:S1A-007#9:1:D > How do you find the mess food over here Madhumita?
< ICE-IND:S1A-007#9:10:A > : Mess food < , > it's a bit too hot I think so

The communicative effect of left-dislocation – as well as other non-canonical syntactic constellations such as topicalisation, where salient elements of the last turn of the preceding speaker are fronted – can be summarised as follows:

> A very common strategy to achieve positive politeness […] is to repeat a part of what the other interlocutor has said. For example, consider the following piece of Hindi conversation:

A:	varma:	sa:hib	kya:	ba:za:r	gae haĩ?
	Mr. Verma	honorific suffix	yes/no Q-marker	market	has gone
'Has Mr. Verma gone to the market?'					
B:	ji:	nahi:,	ghar	par	haĩ
	honorific marker	no	home	at	is
'No, sir, he is at home'.					
A:	accha:,	ghar	par	haĩ	
	I see	home	at	is	
'I see, he is at home'.					

> The repetition of *ghar par haĩ* […] does not communicate any new information and should be considered as phatic communion. Yet it appeases the positive face of B and is a polite way of indicating that A has taken notice of what B said. (Subbarao, Agnihotri, & Mukherjee, 1991, pp. 46–47 as quoted in Lange, 2012, p. 173)

As the lexical echo backchannels in (5)–(9) also duplicate salient noun phrases of the last turn of the preceding speaker and these lexical repetitions are licensed by languages indigenous to South Asia, it appears plausible that the pragmatic function of achieving positive politeness in a given conversational context not only holds for non-canonical syntactic constructions, but also for lexical echo backchannels. The suggestion that lexical echo backchannels are markers of positive politeness is certainly also compatible with other observations in this paper such as the large amounts of backchannels in the South Asian Englishes studied and the collectivist mindsets of their speaker populations.

The present paper employed state-of-the-art multifactorial statistical models to understand which and how often backchannels are employed in two postcolonial Englishes spoken in South Asia – Indian and Sri Lankan English – in comparison to their historical input variety British English. In the light of the reported findings on cross-varietal differences with regard to (a) overall frequencies of backchannels, (b) speaker-specific backchannel frequencies, (c) the choice of frequent backchannel forms and (d) lexical echo backchannels as used in South Asian Englishes, Indian and Sri Lankan English can certainly be regarded as pragmatically nativised. The notion of pragmatic nativisation, although

the term is used with a different meaning when it first occurs in the literature (Bamgbose, 1998, p. 2), here entails that the ways in which speakers perform interpersonal actions via linguistic exchanges have over time been gradually adapted to the local sociolinguistic realities where they are in frequent use.

Yet, further details on the ways in which backchannels have been and are pragmatically nativised in Indian and Sri Lankan English as well as other South Asian Englishes are still to be uncovered. Research that could fruitfully relate to the findings presented here might focus on how different communicative settings affect backchannel frequency and choice. As already discussed, (10) stems from a telephone call while most of the other examples come from face-to-face conversations and it would be enlightening to understand to what extent differences in context moderate the backchannel patterns documented here. Further, the present study has restricted itself to single-word backchannels because they have been shown to be more frequent than multi-word backchannels (Peters & Wong, 2017, p. 506) and allow for comparatively efficient corpus searches, but this means that backchannels like *ahh okay* or *mmh right* still need empirical description – similarly, backchannels transferred from the indigenous languages of India and Sri Lanka (*accha* or *haan* in the Indian data at hand) would also be worth exploring in more detail. Particularly under consideration of the culturally-motivated argument constructed around positive politeness in Indian and Sri Lankan in the light of their orientation towards societal collectivism, it would also be highly desirable to examine backchannel patterns in other South Asian countries or compare backchannel choices and frequencies across countries notably different in their degrees of collectivism/individualism. Furthermore, to validate that higher frequencies of backchannels are in fact linguistic repercussions of more collectivist societies in South Asia and not results of supplementing linguistic comprehension with non-native as opposed to 'native speakers' of English, replicating this study with non-native speakers of English from non-collectivist societies (as, for example, in Scandinavia) would certainly be enlightening since this would allow judging to what extent higher frequencies of backchannels are rooted in a collectivist culture as opposed to non-native speaker status. Lastly, lexical echo backchannels in South Asian Englishes could not be explored in any further detail due to a lack of data, but any further empirical exploration of these – if possible also by resorting to sociolinguistic profiles of their users and to the structures of the local languages – would certainly uncover more nuances of the nativised pragmatics of South Asian Englishes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funding was provided by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Grant/Award Number: BE 5812/2-1. The authors would like to thank Julia Degenhardt and Nina Funke for their support with the manual coding of the backchannel data.

Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

ORCID

Tobias Bernaisch https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0122-1975

NOTES

[1] For a more detailed description of the history of Indian English, please refer to Kachru (1986).

[2] TTR measures are included to see to what extent lexical flexibility of a speaker and/or interlocutor affects the frequencies and forms of backchannels employed. For backchannellers and speakers, the regular TTR was calculated instead of the standardised TTR since Baker (2006, p. 52) implicitly argues that the regular TTR can provide meaningful insights with texts that feature no more than 2,000 words. As none of the speakers contributed more than 2,000 words to a text, the regular TTR was calculated.

[3] The process of topic modelling probabilistically models frequencies of word forms in a set of given texts. First, the frequencies of its words forms – generally without a set of high-frequency stop words – are established for each text. These frequencies are used to identify re-occurring clusters of words, which can be interpreted as topics (for example, a cluster consisting of words such as *students*, *school*, *day* is likely to represent the topic school). Once the topics have been derived, each text is assigned a dominant topic based on how often a text addresses elements of the topics modelled. In this context, we would like to thank Benedikt Heller for his invaluable support with the topic modelling procedure implemented here and for his insights concerning the validation of random forest models.

[4] Methodologically, it is remarkable that the interaction predictor VAR_BTTR is the most important predictor among the ones modelled while BTTR and particularly VARIETY on their own are notably less central for the frequencies of backchannels per speaker. This also holds – though not as pronouncedly – for the interaction predictors of VARIETY with BGENDER and BAGE, which highlights the incentive of adding these kinds of interaction predictors to random forest models and – probably more generally – to decision-tree models. Note that interaction predictors are also consistently more important than their dependent variables on their own for the analysis in 4.2 as evident from Figure 5.

[5] With the frequencies of backchannels in 4.1, it was not possible to also include speaker-related characteristics in the statistical model since the total number of backchannels a backchannellers uses, which – in a normalised form – instantiates the dependent variable in 4.1, was directed at different speakers with some of the backchannellers.

[6] Please note that the model formula for the conditional inference tree does not feature interaction predictors because their inclusion resulted in a worse model compared to the one presented here.

[7] In the British data (ICE-GB:S1B-073#140–141), there is one instance of a British speaker repeating *shelf* from the turn holder's preceding contribution. Although this is difficult to judge without access to the original audio recording, the conversational context suggests that this is rather a lexically filled pause while the speakers coordinate a topic shift than a lexical backchannel.

[8] Admittedly, the lack of non-verbal cues in telephone conversations might boost backchannel frequencies in comparison to direct face-to-face conversations.

REFERENCES

Anthony, L. (2018). *AntConc* (3.5.7) [Computer Software]. Tokyo: Waseda University. Available from https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software

Baker, P. (2006). *Using corpora in discourse analysis*. London: Continuum.

Balasubramanian, C. (2009). *Register variation in Indian English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Bamgbose, A. (1998). Torn between the norms: Innovations in world Englishes. *World Englishes*, *17*, 1–14.

Benus, S., Gravano, A., & Hirschberg, J. (2007). The prosody of backchannels in American English. In J. Trouvain & W. J. Barry (Eds.), *16th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences* (pp. 1065–1068). Saarbrücken: Universität des Saarlandes.

Bernaisch, T. (2012). Attitudes towards Englishes in Sri Lanka. *World Englishes*, *31*, 279–291.

Bernaisch, T. (2015). *The lexis and lexicogrammar of Sri Lankan English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Bernaisch, T. (forthcoming). Comparing generalised linear mixed-effects models, generalised linear mixed-effects model trees and random forests: Filled and unfilled pauses in varieties of English. In J. Schlüter & O. Schützler (Eds.), *Data and Methods in Linguistics: Comparative Approaches*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bernaisch, T., & Koch, C. (2016). Attitudes towards Englishes in India. *World Englishes*, *35*, 118–132.

Bernaisch, T., & Lange, C. (2012). The typology of focus marking in South Asian Englishes. *Indian Linguistics*, *73*, 1–18.

Bernaisch, T., Gries, S. T., & Mukherjee, J. (2014). The dative alternation in South Asian Englishes: Modelling predictors and predicting prototypes. *English World-Wide*, *35*, 7–31.

Breiman, L. (2001). Random forests. *Machine Learning*, *45*, 5–32.

Castello, E., & Gesuato, S. (2019). Holding up one's end of the conversation in spoken English: Lexical backchannels in L2 examination discourse. *International Journal of Learner Corpus Research*, *5*, 231–252.

Cutrone, P. (2014). A cross-cultural examination of the backchannel behavior of Japanese and Americans: Considerations for Japanese EFL learners. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, *11*, 83–120.

de Silva, K. M. (1981). *A history of Sri Lanka*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.

Götz, S. (2017). Non-canonical syntax in south-Asian varieties of English: A corpus-based pilot study on fronting. *ZAA - Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, *65*, 265–281.

Gries, S. T. (forthcoming). On classification trees and random forests in corpus linguistics: Some words of caution and suggestions for improvement. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory*.

Grün, B., & Hornik, K. (2011). Topicmodels: An R package for fitting topic models. *Journal of Statistical Software*, *40*, 1–30.

Gunesekera, M. (2005). *The postcolonial identity of Sri Lankan English*. Colombo: Katha Publishers.

Hasegawa, Y. (2014). *Japanese: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heinz, B. (2003). Backchannel responses as strategic responses in bilingual speakers' conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *35*, 1113–1142.

Heldner, M., Edlund, J., & Hirschberg, J. (2010). Pitch similarity in the vicinity of backchannels. *Proceedings of the 11th Annual Conference of the International Speech Communication Association, INTERSPEECH 2010*, 3054–3057.

Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. London: McGraw-Hill.

James, G., Witten, D., Hastie, T., & Tibshirani, R. (2015). *An introduction to statistical learning with applications in R*. New York: Springer.

Kachru, B. B. (1981). The pragmatics of non-native varieties of English. In L. E. Smith (Ed.), *English for cross-cultural communication* (pp. 15–39). New York: Springer.

Kachru, B. B. (1986). *The alchemy of English: The spread, functions, and models of non-native Englishes*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
Kachru, Y., & Smith, L. (2008). *Cultures, contexts, and world Englishes*. New York: Routledge.
Kjellmer, G. (2009). Where do we backchannel? On the use of *mm*, *mhm*, *uh huh* and such like. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, *14*, 81–112.
Kuhn, M., & Johnson, K. (2016). *Applied predictive modeling*. New York: Springer.
Kumara, S. M. D. S., & Mendis, D. (2010). Making out SLE: A corpus based study of Sri Lankan English phrasal verbs. Paper presented at the 6th International SLELTA Conference, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 15–17 October 2010.
Lange, C. (2012). *The syntax of spoken Indian English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Lange, C. (2016). The 'intrusive as'-construction in South Asian varieties of English. *World Englishes*, *35*, 133–146.
Mathai, S. (1951). The position of English in India. In E. Partridge & J. V. Clark (Eds.), *British and American English* since 1900 (pp. 96–101). London: Philosophical Library.
Maynard, S. K. (1986). On back-channel behavior in Japanese and English. *Linguistics*, *24*, 1079–1108.
Mehrotra, R. R. (1982). Indian English: A sociolinguistic profile. In J. B. Pride (Ed.), *New Englishes* (pp. 150–173). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
Mehrotra, R. R. (1998). *Indian English: Texts and interpretation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Mendis, D. (2010). Formality in academic writing: The use/non-use of phrasal verbs in two varieties of English. In M. F. Ruiz-Garrido, J. C. Palmer-Silveira, & I. Fortanet-Gomez (Eds.), *English for professional and academic purposes* (pp. 11–24). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Mukherjee, J. (2007). Steady states in the evolution of New Englishes: Present-day Indian English as an equilibrium. *Journal of English Linguistics*, *35*, 157–187.
Mukherjee, J. (2012). English in South Asia – ambinormative orientations and the role of corpora: The state of the debate in Sri Lanka. In A. Kirkpatrick & R. Sussex (Eds.), *English as an International Language in Asia: Implications for language education* (pp. 191–208). Heidelberg: Springer.
Pavlenko, A. (2000). L2 influence on L1 in late bilingualism. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, *11*, 175–205.
Purwanti, I. T. (2018). Backchannels in the interactions of Indonesian L2 speakers of English in Australian academic context. *International Journal of Educational Best Practices*, *2*, 39–53.
R Core Team (2018). *R: A language and environment for statistical computing*. Vienna: R Foundation for Statistical Computing. Available from https://www.R-project.org/
Revis, M., & Bernaisch, T. (2020). The pragmatic nativisation of pauses in Asian Englishes. *World Englishes*, *39*, 135–153.
Ruede, R., Müller, M., Stüker, S., & Waibel, A. (2019). Yeah, right, uh-huh: A deep learning backchannel predictor. In M. Eskenazi, L. Devillers, & J. Mariani (Eds.), *Advanced social interaction with agents: 8th international workshop on spoken dialog systems* (pp. 247–258). Cham: Springer.
Rühlemann, C. (2007). *Conversation in context: A corpus-driven approach*. London: Longman.
Schilk, M. (2011). *Structural nativization in Indian English lexicogrammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Schneider, E. W. (2007). *Postcolonial English: Varieties around the world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Sedlatschek, A. (2009). *Contemporary Indian English: Variation and change*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Subbarao, K. V., Agnihotri, R. K., & Mukherjee, A. (1991). Syntactic strategies and politeness phenomena. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *92*, 35–53.
Tolins, J., & Fox Tree, J. E. (2014). Addressee backchannels steer narrative development. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *70*, 152–164.
Tottie, G. (1991). Conversation style in British and American English: The case of backchannels. In K. Aijmer & B. Altenberg (Eds.), *English Corpus Linguistics: Studies in honour of Jan Svartvik* (pp. 254–271). London: Longman.
Vennila, G. (2018). Role of missionaries in Indian education. *International Journal of Advance Research and Development*, *3*, 313–318.
White, S. (1989). Backchannels across cultures: A study of Americans and Japanese. *Language in Society*, *18*, 59–76.
Wong, D., & Peters, P. (2007). A study of backchannels in regional varieties of English, using corpus mark-up as the means of identification. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, *12*, 479–509.
Yngve, V. H. (1970). On getting a word in edgewise. *Chicago Linguistics Society*, *6*, 567–578.
Zipp, L., & Bernaisch, T. (2012). Particle verbs across first and second language varieties of English. In M. Hundt & U. Gut (Eds.), *Mapping unity and diversity world-wide: Corpus-based studies of New Englishes* (pp. 167–196). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

How to cite this article: Kraaz M, Bernaisch T. Backchannels and the pragmatics of South Asian Englishes. *World Englishes*. 2022;41:224–243. https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12522