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Talking Back with Meaning: A Pragmatic Analysis of Response Tokens in Ghanaian English Discourse

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Abstract:
In interaction, interlocutors are expected to allow the talk to flow without difficulty. This smooth flow can be achieved with the use of little words (or response tokens) which do not appear to have any effect on the syntactic structure of the utterances but add important pragmatic value to them. This paper is a case study on the use of response tokens in Ghanaian English. It investigates the types and functions of the tokens as they are used in this variety of English. To achieve this, conversations were recorded from 50 students and analyzed qualitatively. Using Xudong's combined Lumping and Splitting approaches, the types and functions of the tokens were identified. The results revealed that there are minimal tokens (single words and non-lexical vocalizations) and non-minimal tokens (phrases, clauses, premodified tokens, clusters, extended responses, collaborative finishes). The tokens were utilized as continuers, convergence and divergence markers, and as engagement markers. Based on the results, it is argued that response tokens should be seen as meaningful elements which should be employed to maintain fluency in talk-in-interaction.

Keywords: *Response tokens, talking back, pragmatic analysis, Ghanaian English*

1. Introduction

We generally do one of two things in any interactional process; we either speak to others in turn, or listen to them. To listen to others means that we pay attention to what they say. However, being listeners does not mean that we remain completely silent throughout the interaction. While we listen, we may make appropriate responses to speakers' utterances. In this instance, Huq and Amir (2015) argue that we make use of brief responses instead of lengthy, elaborate turns to maintain an interactive listening behaviour. While these brief responses are mostly verbal, there are instances in which they can also be non-verbal in nature. McCarthy (2003, p. 2) observes that listeners tend to use 'small words' to communicate to their speakers that it is not only they (the speakers) who are involved in the conversation, but they, as listeners, also actively engage in the talk. In short, the listener's role is seen as not an entirely passive one, but rather, an active one, similarly to the role of the speaker. With such an active role, the listener can become the speaker or give some signals to show his/her involvement in the conversation. This, s/he does, to help keep the smooth continuation of the interaction and to ensure 'communicative economy' (McCarthy, 2003).

Listeners are able to coordinate with speakers to sustain interactions in a way that makes researchers interested in conversation analysis sometimes wonder how they (listeners) seem to know and follow the intricate rules of responding to everyday talk. This wonder is what compels Ward and Tsukahara (2000) to comment that '… there is the mystery of how 'coordination' is achieved when two people are talking together; their utterances seldom interfere with each other, despite the lack of any fixed protocol for who may speak when' (p. 1178). With the act of listening and responding to the speaker, Gumperz (1982) notes that Gricean pragmatics is based on an analysis which is sentence-based and is 'concerned with (shared) presuppositions in the interpretations of intent' (p. 17). In Gumperz's opinion, the intention of the speaker and its interpretation by the listener is an important part of the communicative event which cannot be ignored. He claims that 'we assume such interpretation is a function of (a) listeners' linguistic knowledge, (b) contextual presuppositions informed by certain cues, and (c) background information brought to bear on the interpretation (p. 17). Based on these assumptions, he considers contextualization cues as what help in the negotiation and interpretation of conversational cooperation between speakers and listeners. Consequently, one way by which these contextualization cues function is to serve as a guide for monitoring the progress of the talk.

It is therefore important to recognize that the listener is a significant pivot within the interactional process, and like Gumperz, this recognition is supported by researchers such as Heritage (1984), Jefferson (1984), Sacks (1992), and Schegloff (1982). These researchers, rather than searching for linguistic rules, focused entirely on identifying sociological patterns embedded in the interactions. Such patterns include how listeners respond to speakers during talk-in-interaction. For example, Schegloff (1982) intimates that researchers stand the risk of losing the very essence of the interactivity between conversational participants if they ignore bits of talk and behaviour which are not made by the main speaker, but by the listener(s). He further notes that when the listener is neglected while focusing only on the speaker, it leads to the discourse being considered as 'a single speaker's, and a single mind's, product' (p. 74).

Based on this, he argues that items such as 'uh huh', 'yeah', and 'mm hm' are extremely important and that it is when listeners *talkback* that interactional success can be achieved. These items may be verbal or non-verbal in nature. They are brief responses produced by listeners and are collectively known by different terms. Although different researchers have different nomenclature for these brief items, the present study adopts the term *response tokens*. The study presents a pragmatic analysis of the use of response tokens in Ghanaian English, the variety of English spoken in Ghana. It attempts to determine the forms as well as the functions of these tokens in this variety. Because of their role in talk, response tokens are considered extremely important in our daily conversations. Unfortunately however, they are very seldom attended to in a conscious way. This may be because they do not affect the actual arrangement of words within the utterance. For instance, in Extract 1, a man and his wife are having a conversation on the use of labels:

Extract 1

Husband: Dear, I have seen that the local manufacturers have become very wise these days.

Wife: *Hmm*, what do you want them do? They have to make profit. But why do you say that?

Husband: They try to look all sorts of funny labels for their products to make them look like they are imported.

Wife: *Oh*, the labels? They have become common these days.

From Extract 1, you realise that the wife uses two *little* words to prefix her responses to her husband's statement. The first one is *hmm* and the second is *oh*. Syntactically, these two words do not affect the sentence because they can actually be left out and the wife's reaction will still be well-formed. However, *hmm* and *oh* can be seen as performing an important pragmatic function which cannot be overlooked. Here, *hmm* can be seen as a way for the wife to satisfy herself that she really understands what the husband is saying. Similarly, *oh* may also mean '*is that what you are talking about*'? and this may be used by the wife to inform the husband that the labels are no news as they have been used for quite some time. This is especially confirmed by the second utterance *they have become common these days*.

One notices that the little words have meanings that cannot be easily gleaned just by looking at the syntax. Although these *little* words do not appear to have any effect on the syntactic structure, their absence may result in the speaker conveying a different meaning with the utterance. This example thus shows that while there may not be any problems with grammar, second language speakers of English are likely to have difficulty with oral skills. And, for learners to effectively acquire and use oral skills, they must be taught not only the grammar, but the rules of speaking and listening. These rules enable them to engage in effective conversation, where they apply them, including the use of these *little* words or expressions. This means that teachers have the responsibility to help learners to develop their speaking and listening skills in order to meaningfully engage in interactions. In view of this, Farr (2003) opines that the ability to 'express oneself and participate in 'engaged listenership' must be developed quickly so that one can participate in 'critical engagement'' (p. 72). In spite of the importance of these skills, it has been argued that teachers usually teach speaking and listening skills separately (Gardner, 2001), resulting in learners seeing them as two independent skills that must be treated as such, although they are strongly interdependent on each other. With this 'artificial' distinction, teachers tend to neglect the teaching of 'real conversation' where learners are taught how to keep conversations lively through the use of cues to signal that they are listening or following what the other person is saying. With the absence of such instruction, learners' everyday conversations may become boring. This is because they are not likely to use these cues or *little* words and so there may not be any real interactions.

Gardner (1998) is of the view that response tokens are a part of engaged listenership and that 'if language teaching is to prepare learners to talk in the real world, then part of that preparation would need to take into account participation in interactive talk that involves these very common vocalizations' (p. 204). This shows that it is important for teachers to teach the use of response tokens so that learners would utilize them. While it cannot be determined whether teachers prepare learners to be able to use these tokens, it is important to study how speakers of English in Ghana utilize these tokens in everyday conversations. Currently, there is only one study on response tokens in Ghana (Nyarko, 2017). However, this study is on response tokens in Asante Twi, a dialect of Akan, with no known study on their use in English in Ghana. According to Hess and Johnston (1988), the skill of responding is usually acquired late in both the L1 and L2. This means that while young learners may not be able to use these tokens *appropriately*, adult speakers of English are not likely to encounter any difficulties using them. This argument notwithstanding, Tao and Thompson (1991) observe that although these tokens are transferable (usually from the L1), they are one of the first skills lost when the second language becomes dominant. If this argument is anything to go by, then it goes without saying that as adults, speakers of Ghanaian English may have difficulty using these tokens.

A study of this nature enables us to understand whether speakers of Ghanaian English are able to use response tokens during conversations and whether they use them appropriately in terms of form and function. Such a study also broadens our understanding on the distributional selections, that is, at which points within the conversations they are used, who uses them, and how they shape the entire interaction. Finally, such a study adds to the literature and knowledge on the use of response tokens in English in general and to linguistic theory. In this regard, the study aims at examining:

- The structure/form of response tokens used in Ghanaian English
- The functions of these tokens in Ghanaian English

To achieve these, the following questions guide the study:

- What is the structure/form of response tokens used in Ghanaian English?
- What are the functions of these tokens in Ghanaian English?

The next section discusses the terminology used for these little words. This is followed with a discussion of response tokens, dealing with what they are, their categorization (or types) and their functions. The fourth section deals

with a discussion of the approaches used in the study of response tokens. Section 5 presents the methodology used in the present study with the results obtained from the analysis discussed in Section 6. The final section concludes the paper with a discussion on the role of response tokens in interactions.

2. Terminology

As mentioned already, many studieshave proposed different terms for response tokens. For example, (Kendon, 1967) refers to them as 'accompaniment signals'. Kendon has defined 'accompaniment signal' as 'the short utterance that is produced by recipients as an accompaniment during other interlocutor's speakership'. These signals are initially found in concurrence with speaker's gaze. Therefore, they are viewed as accompaniments to body conduct. However, this definition is ambiguous in that it does not capture the nature of the actions that response tokens may perform (Schegloff, 1982). As these 'signals' are believed to have many functions other than just being an accompaniment, the term 'accompaniment signal' is seldom used in more recent studies.

Another important term is 'backchannel' proposed by Yngve (1970). His study found that speakers receive 'short messages' from co-participants when speaking at length. These 'short messages' signal that co-participants are actively engaged in the current talk. This study describes both verbal and nonverbal backchannels. This term has exerted such a strong impact on later studies that many scholars have used this term in their study of response tokens. Now it is common to see 'backchannel' defined in two ways a narrow sense and a broad sense. In the narrow sense, 'backchannels' are non-lexical vocalic forms that demonstrate interest or understanding (Clancy et al., 1996). In the broad sense, backchannels include both non-lexical and lexical items that show a certain level of engagement (Iwasaki, 1997; Lambertz, 2011). However, both definitions are mainly concerned with the form of backchannels. This tends to obscure the distinctions among many functionally varied tokens (Gardner, 2001). This assertion is confirmed in what Drummond and Hopper (1993a) point out as

> The term back channel included a broad range of utterances. This range of materials was lumped into a single coding category… The failure… to distinguish between different classes of back channels and the consequences they may have for speakership incipiency has made the back channels category a hodgepodge. (Drummond & Hopper, 1993a, pp. 161-162)

The third widely-used term is 'response token'. According to Gardner (2001), 'response tokens are … one class of conversational objects whose primary functions are not to make reference to the world, but to provide some information on the course the talk is taking' (p. 14). His study was more concerned with the interactional functions of response tokens. Similar studies have mostly adopted this term (e.g. Aoki, 2008; McCarthy, 2003). The current research follows this definition and uses the term 'response tokens', as an umbrella term to refer to the activity involving vocal, verbal and non-verbal, non-floor-holding responses when a listener responds to the floor-holding message in a conversation.

2.1. Response Tokens

As already indicated, listeners utilize *small* words and expressions to show speakers that the information communicated is received and acknowledged, or simply, to indicate listenership. Research on these small words and expressions have received considerable attention from scholars of different research orientations. As a result, a number of terms have been used to describe this kind of listener behaviour. For example, Fries (1952) uses the term *signals ofcontinued attention*, Kendon (1967) uses the term *accompaniment signals*, while Dittman and Llewellyn (1968) and Bevelas, Coates & Johnson (2002) use the term *verbal listener responses*. In addition, Yngve (1970) used the term *backchannel*, and this refers to 'short messages' that a speaker receives while holding the floor (p. 568). Other terms used are *minimal responses* (Bennet& Jarvis, 1991; DeFrancisco, 1991), *reactive tokens* (Clancy, et al., 1996), *response tokens* (Gardner, 2001), and *minimal feedback* (Holmes 1997). As already indicated, the term *response tokens* is adopted in the present study.

The choice of *response tokens* is made for ease of categorization and analysis. It is chosen to reflect exactly what listeners do: they use mall and medium tokens to *respond* to talk. According to Gardner (2001), response tokens are defined as 'a class of conversational objects whose primary functions are not to make reference to the world, but to provide some information on the course the talk is taking' (Gardner, 2001, p. 14). From the definition, one realizes that respond tokens do not actually add anything to the verbal contents being produced. Rather, they are used to communicate to the speaker that their talk is being received and followed. Thus, it can be deduced that these tokens, when used for the purposes of *following* the talk, have pragmatic functions that they perform in any conversation. Similarly, to Gardner's assertion, McCarthy (2003, p. 4) also describes response tokens as 'high-frequency turn-initial lexical items which occur in responses in everyday spoken genres and which reveal various levels of the listener's interactional engagement'. From this definition, McCarthy differentiates between minimal and non-minimal response tokens: minimal response tokens are short utterances.

The explanations in the two definitions suggest that listeners show that they are engaged in any conversation with the use of these tokens. For instance, in Extract 2, the response token *yes* is used to urge a speaker to continue speaking about the nature of education:

Extract 2 **[**please see appendix for transcription conventions for all examples of data]

1	Sp 1:	Is not about [0.25] the issue is not about the quantity but what
2	sp 4:	Is not about
3	Sp 1:	Quality
4	Sp 5:	*Yes* [0.81]

5 Sp 1: Let's not forget that
6 Sp 5: *Yes*
7 Sp 1: Quality
8 Sp 5: *Yes* [0.25]
9 Sp 4: Just imagine no even for me four years I think I I have enough. Enough time to get to rest.

In Extract 2, we see that Speaker 5 signals that he is listening and that he wants Speaker 1 to continue making his point, without he (Speaker 5) trying to take the conversational floor. In order to achieve this, he utilizes the response token *yes* to keep the conversation going. Apart from being used to encourage the continuation of talk, *yes* is also seen here as signaling agreement or convergence. This way, Speaker 5 uses it to communicate that he agrees, concurs, or supports what Speaker 1 is saying. Ultimately, the speaker uses *yes* to display listenership. In the words of Tottie (1991), the token *yes* can be seen to 'grease the wheels of the conversation but constitute no claim to take over the turn' (p. 255). It must be emphasized that in all cases, we refer to the discourse functions of the tokens, rather than considering their word-class identity. This is important to note because similarly to some other discourse particles, these tokens can assume any grammatical class.

2.2. Categories of Response Tokens

Apart from the difficulty associated with terminology, one other equally difficult task is the categorization of these tokens. This is because most scholars mostly categorize them by combining both their form/structure and functions. In this section, the discussion will focus on both the formal (or structural) and functional categories of response tokens. With regard to their form or structure, these tokens have been divided into minimal and non-minimal forms (Gardner, 2001; McCarthy, 2002; McCarthy & Carter 2000; O'Keeffe and Adolphs 2008). According to O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008), minimal tokens are 'short utterances (for example yeah) or non-word vocalizations (such as mm, umhum) (p. 6). O'Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter (2007) also explain minimal response tokens as turn-initial short utterances or non-word vocalizations that function on their own and do not take over a turn. This suggests that listeners use these tokens for relatively short period of time within the interaction without any attempt to take over the floor from the speaker. With these, McCarthy (2003) is of the view that minimal tokens are used by a listener to signal that s/he has the willingness to remain largely silent, to refrain from interrupting the speaker, and to attend to the him/her, a way of encouraging them to continue with their turn.

Malyuga and McCarthy (2020) define a non-minimal response token as 'as a lexical item which reacts and responds to previous talk and which offers more than a minimal acknowledgement but does not constitute a change of current speaker' (p. 710). From this definition, it can be argued that the difference between a minimal token and a non-minimal token is that while minimal tokens can be short or non-words, a non-minimal token can be anything from one word to phrases or short clauses. It is thus not surprising that O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008) observe that 'they are mostly adverbs or adjectives functioning as pragmatic markers (e.g., good, really great, absolutely) or short phrases/minimal clauses (e.g., you're not serious, Is that so? by all means, fair enough, that's true, not at all)' (p. 6). This also means that we can have single words only, reduplicated words, or single words followed by other words, forming one response token (Nyarko, 2017). In fact, McCarthy (2003) notes that non-minimal tokens can occur with other expressions such as thanks, checks, confirmations, and greetings.

Turning now to functional categorization, Hess and Johnston (1988) argue that response tokens are multifunctional and 'quintessentially met communicative' (p. 332). This means that one response token can perform multiple functions depending on the context of interaction. Typically, O'Keeffe, McCarthy, and Carter (2007) as well as Schegloff (1982) group tokens into continuer, convergence, engagement, and information receipt tokens. Gardner (2001) postulates two additional ones as news marking and change-of-activity tokens. Continuer tokens are those that are used by listeners to maintain the continuous and smooth flow of talk. That is, they are used to encourage speakers to continue with their talk (Gardner, 1998, 2001). In addition, they can be used to pass the opportunity to the speaker for more substantial talk, if any. In this sense, Schegloff (1993) observes that a listener utilizes them 'to show that he or she understands that [a unit of talk] is in progress but is not yet complete' (p. 105). Tottie (1991) also indicates that the listener is able to recognize this and so shows the desire to 'grease the wheels of conversation but constitute no claim to take over the turn'. Gardner (2001) opines that they are usually realized by using minimal tokens such as *mm*, *uh huh*, and *yeah*.

Convergence response tokens are those that listeners produce to show agreement or alignment or simply to converge opinions or topics relating to the conversation. O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008) identify convergence tokens as those that appear 'where there is a topic boundary or closure or where there is a need to converge on an understanding of what is common ground or shared knowledge between participants' (p. 16). This means that they are produced to show 'understanding of common knowledge or known information' (O'Keeffe, 2006, p. 118), to show an interactional bonding or closeness between them, thereby helping them to maintain good relations.

The third function of response tokens is engagement. Here, they are utilized by listeners to show their level of affective involvement in the content of the message. Typically, listeners use them to express genuine emotions, surprise, shock, horror, sympathy, or empathy at what the speaker is saying without taking the floor from him/her (O'Keeffe &Adolphs, 2008). They also give an indication that the addressee is highly engaged with the content of the message. The fourth functional type is information receipt. The tokens mainly perform organizational functions. With this, Lenk (1998) also argues that they serve a global discourse marking function within an interaction.

2.3. Approaches to the Study of Response Tokens

The conceptual framework adopted for the present study is hinged on two major strands of study proposed by Xudong (2008). Xudong (2008) argues that these strands are representative of two different approaches in this field. These are the lumping approach and the splitting approach. According to Xudong (2008), response tokens may be studied by using one or a combination of both approaches. She is of the view that the lumping approach to the study of response tokens focuses on their structural description. Here, different forms of response tokens are treated as a single class or group. Within the class or group, the categorization is done according to their structural characteristics: whether they are verbal or non-verbal. Verbal forms which are identified are single words, short phrases or clauses, while non-verbal forms comprise of gazes, head nods, and smiles. In addition to the structural forms, the roles or functions of the tokens are also studied.

The splitting approach is deeply rooted in ethno-methodological conversation analysis. Here, the focus is mainly on the sequential context of the tokens, where one or more discrete tokens are analyzed. To understand how these tokens work, researchers try to demonstrate that each token can perform distinctive interactional functions. Unlike the lumping approach, the splitting approach does not deal with the relationship between the occurrences of the tokens and any external variables. Rather, it is mainly concerned with their turn taking functions. In the conversation analysis tradition, response tokens have been studied and each has been found to be distinctive in terms of its placement and role in the sequential environment and its consequences for subsequent turns. For example, Gardner (2001) argues that response tokens are seen to be overwhelmingly placed at transition relevance places (TRP or points of possible completion). In relation to their turn taking functions, Schegloff (1982) advises that in order to understand response tokens, discourse must be studied as an interactional achievement, partially shaped by its turn-taking organisation. He intimates that vocalizations such as *uh huh* can have two main but related usages: One, as a continuer, that is, to encourage the previous speaker to continue talking, and Two, to pass an opportunity to take a fuller turn at talk (p. 81). In sum, both approaches combine to help the analyst determine the categories of response tokens with respect to their types, structural characteristics (or form), and their functions or roles.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Participants

This study is a qualitative case study aimed at understanding the use of response tokens in Ghanaian English. The data used for the present study are selected from 40 conversations that form a corpus of approximately 100,000 words that was created for a larger research project. The entire corpus consists of conversations that centre on an issue of national interest in Ghana, and the participants are considered appropriate as they had direct and first-hand experience and knowledge about the issue. The participants for the project were 200 students of a public university in Ghana who speak educated Ghanaian English, the variety of English used by students and university graduates alike. To begin, participants who volunteered to be part of the project were screened by means of a short questionnaire to elicit basic background data such as language spoken and studied, proficiency level, and age. All participants aged between 18 and 30 years. For this paper, recordings from 50 participants were analysed.

3.2. Data Collection

The discussions on the task presented were produced in the form of conversations because conversations are interactive and usually spontaneous in nature, and mostly tend to focus on a particular subject or topic. For example, Clark (2001, p. 2744) suggests that conversations are 'social creations which are produced as participants coordinate with one another to succeed'. Besides co-coordinating with one another, what participants say is usually not predetermined but emerges as they negotiate their way through the activities they carry out. In relation to this, Clark and Schaefer (1989) also emphasize that conversations can only succeed when participants ground what they say. In other words, they have to establish the mutual belief that the hearer understands the speaker well enough for current purposes, usually, by forming an adjacency pair. In conversations, as opposed to read speech, participants engage in natural interactions and utilize certain interactive features including response tokens to achieve mutual understanding (Samuelsson, 2009).

After they signed a consent form, the participants were put into groups of five. Thus, there were 10 groups with five students in each group. Each sat around a big conference table in a very quiet room to begin the recording process. The quietness of the room was to ensure that the microphone captured only the voices of participants, and not any outside noise. This also ensured that high-quality recordings were obtained. The conversation prompt was presented to them to study. After this, a Crown Sound Grabber II PZM Condenser Microphone connected to an Olympus voice recorder was placed in the middle of the table. Once the recording session started, only the participants were left in the room. This was to enable them make their contribution without thinking that someone was listening to them. It was also to allow them to discuss issues as independently as possible. Each session lasted 20 minutes, giving a total of 200 minutes of recording in total.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data obtained were analysed using a conversation analysis-oriented approach. Here, all the sound files were played back for orthographic transcription. That is, every word heard was typed in a Word document. After the transcription, the data were cleaned to ensure that every word had been captured in the transcript. All occurrences of

response tokens were then recorded and counted. In addition to this, the response tokens were grouped according to structure/form (whether minimal or non-minimal) and functions. These are discussed in the next section.

4. Results and Discussions

From the analysis, different response tokens were identified. This section presents the results of the study in accordance with the analytical framework of Xudong (2008), that is, a combination of the lumping and splitting approaches. The response tokens identified are subcategorized with respect to their structure/form and functions.

4.1. Form/Structure of Response Tokens

The form/structure of response tokens identified in the data can be grouped into minimal and non-minimal. These are discussed as follows:

4.1.1. Minimal Tokens

As indicated by McCarthy (2003), the minimal tokens comprised single words and non-lexical vocalizations. Examples of the lexical single words are *good*, *really*, *fine*, *yeah*, *yes*. Extracts 3-5 illustrates the use of single word response tokens:

Extract 3
[Single word]
Sp 2: We are from poor background
Sp 5: Poor
Sp 2: Poor family
Sp 3: *Yeah*
Sp 2: And the money involved the school fees especially those who are in the boarding house
Sp 1: *Yeah*

In Extract 3, we see four (4) students discussing the fees that they need to pay if they have to stay in school for four (4) years. One of them (Speaker 2) tries to let the others know that she comes from a poor background. Although she does not finish talking, Speaker 3 comes in with *yeah*. Once she finishes speaking, Speaker 1 also supports her with *yeah*. Similar occurrences of lexical minimal tokens such as *good* and *exactly* are found in Extracts 4 and 5 respectively.

Extract 4
[Single word]
Sp 5: But you are all talking about short period of 3 years instead of money but I don't buy that one
Sp 1: *Good*
Sp 5: Cause you Xuedong can attend the 3 years so that you afford to complete

Extract 5
[Single word]
Sp 4: But for that of the 3 years the child will pass out and then will not be able to
Sp 2: If only the person will beXuedonger is ready to learn I think the person can perform at the end of the 3 years
Sp 3: *Exactly*

For the non-lexical vocalizations, examples such as *huh*, *uh huh*,*mmhuh*, and *hmm* were produced. Extracts 6-8 show the use of some of these vocalizations:

Extract 6
[Vocalization]
Sp 2: But we don't have much [accommodation for them
Sp4: [because of the FCUBE
Sp 5: For them
Sp 3: *Uh huh*

Extract 7
[Vocalization]
Sp 4: Wait I'm not through. You just have to learn prepare yourself before even the teacher what comes in //
Sp 2: *Huh*

Extract 8
[Vocalization]
Sp 1: The our we are thinking [+] I personally think this whole thing needs not to be [+] argued for many minutes
Sp 3: *Hmm*
Sp 2: *Hmm*
Sp 1: It's very clear
Sp 2: *Hmm*
Sp 1: You have to be battling it out to see wh-whe-re it will go [+] as time goes
Sp 2: *Hmm*
Sp 1: And to start I would say I'm in favour with the 4 years
Sp 2: *Hmm*

In Extracts 3-8, we notice that only one token is produced; there were instances where we find combinations of two or more tokens in the same interaction. Examples are shown in Extracts 9-11:

Extract 9
[Combination]
Sp 1: Ok uh I think everybody here has been to SS actually
Sp 2: *Uh uh*
Sp 1: Uh most of us most of us are [+] from er 3 year [+] re- u-hm [+] product
Sp 3: *Mm yes*
Sp 1: I am 4 year
Sp3: 4 years
Sp 1: U-hm [+] the uh our we are thinking [+] I personally think this whole thing
Sp 3: *Hmm yeah*
Extract 10
[Combination]
Sp 5: But you need to know that money is also very important in this whole duration thing
Sp 1: *Hmm*
Sp 5: I tell you, you can attend the 4 years and not be able to pay your fees
Sp 2: *Uhhuh*
Sp 5: But er whereby when the child is completed
Sp 3: *Uhhuh*
Sp 3: *Exactly*
Sp 2: If only the person will bewhener is ready to learn I think the person can perform at the end of
Extract 11
[Combination]
Sp 3: There are other things there you can even make it ten years. If you don't pay the teachers well
Sp 1: *Okay*
Sp 3: Because already you are overcrowded in the room
Sp 1: *Okay*
Sp 4: Does it mean that some people will have transfer?
Sp 1: No, like when those people in fourth year when they completed
sp 2: *Right*

We notice that speakers used either combinations of lexical vocalizations and non-lexical minimal tokens as in Extracts 9-10 or different minimal lexical tokens as seen in Extract 11 as a way of showing good listenership in the discussion.

4.1.2. Non-Minimal Tokens

The non-minimal tokens appear in different forms: phrases, clauses, and premodified tokens, clusters as well as extended responses, and collaborative finishes. For the phrases, expressions such as *that one* are present. The clauses are *I disagree*, *that's true*, *it's never true*, *thank you*, *thank you for that*, *that's it*, and *you see*. Some of these are illustrated in Extracts 12-17 as follows:

Extract 12 (Phrase)
Sp 1: Because the teachers think that because we have four years on our hands we have er full of work on our hands
Sp 3: Yeah
Sp 4: *Thatone*
Extract 13 (Clause)
Sp 2: Well i think that they never complete the syllabus
Sp 3: True
Sp 4: No
Sp 5: uh huh
Sp 3: Consider this thing when you go to school you see that you will be getting more marks
Sp 5: uh huh
Sp 3: In the electives than the core subjects
Sp 2: *Thank you*
Sp 5: It's never true
Sp 3: Yes
Extract 14 (Cluster)
Sp 3: You understand what I'm saying
Sp 2: Yes s- yes
Sp 1: So this comes to
Sp 2: The issue of
Sp 1: Motivation
Sp 3: This will encourage those who are behind to also put certain seriousness

Sp 1: So yours is that brilliant but needy students [must be helped
Sp 3: [*Very good yes*
Extract 15 (Duplicated form)
Sp 2: Eh I yeah [must be catered for
Sp 1: [scholarship must be awarded
Sp 2: *Yes yes*
Sp 3: Scholarship be introduced
Extract 16 (Extended response)
Sp 5: You see that there are a lot of things also there extra classes can also help [so even if the duration is short
Sp 2: *I II think i think i will agree with you*
Sp 5: And that can help
Sp 2: It is it [is the weakness of the system
Sp 5: [even eveneven look at the teachers they way they are the government is treating the teachers
Sp 2: Huh
Extract 17 (Collaborative finish)
Sp 3: I said even if you get part sponsorship. For instance if er maybe the agreement is that they are going to sponsor you for two years then you should also be preparing to sponsor yourself [*for the rest of the two years*
Sp 2: [*for the rest of the two years true*
Extract 18 (Premodified form)
Sp 2: So if another year is added then the last year could [have ample time
Sp 3: [it depends on
Sp 1: to:: revise all the years
Sp 2: yes
Sp 1: so that you can pass and pass [very well
Sp 2: [*very good*
Sp 4: [okay
Sp 1: [that's my point
Sp 4: [thank you for that

We notice from the extracts that in 12 for instance, a speaker uses the phrase *that one* as a response token to a submission from a previous speaker. Similarly, speakers use the clauses *thank you* and *it's never true* as tokens to respond to an interlocutor in Extract 13. Also, speakers use clusters *very good yes* and *yesyes*, extended tokens *I II think i think i will agree with you*, the collaborative finish *for the rest of the two yearstrue*, and the premodified token *very good*. Within the extended tokens, we also find duplicated tokens such as *yesyes*. These examples suggest speakers of Ghanaian English use a variety of response tokens during interactions and that the form or structure of the token largely depends on what the speaker intends to achieve.

4.2. Functions of Response Tokens

The analysis shows that speakers chose the response tokens to perform different functions. Notable among them are continuer, convergence, divergence, and engagement. These are discussed in the following section:

4.2.1. Continuer

As already indicated, continuer response tokens are those that speakers use to urge speakers to continue with the talk and to main its flow. The continuers identified in the data were mainly used to perform this function and this is shown in Extract 19 as follows:

Extract 19

1 Sp 1: They should just make it like the three years
2 Sp 5: Uh for that one is human for that it is bound to
3 Sp 3: Uh you're you're saying that is human
4 Sp 5: No for that one is bound to happen
5 Sp 1: That's why I'm saying that consider all those factors
6 Sp 3: *Uh huh*
7 Sp 1: So that's why I'm saying that you have to consider those factors

In Extract 19, Speaker 1 argues that the four-year senior high school (SHS) programme should be restored rather. He however notes that they should not let students encounter the problems they faced in the three-year programme. The exchanges ensue, and Speaker 1 comes in again to suggest that if this is done, then certain important factors must be considered before it takes off. In order for Speaker 1 to know that someone is listening to him, or he has received the message and wants him to continue talking, Speaker 3 communicates this by producing *uhhuh*(Line 6). By uttering *uhhuh*, Speaker 3 signals to speaker 1 that he has 'no problem' (Gardner, 2001, p. 28) with Speaker 1's immediately-finished turn. Right after he finishes producing *uh huh*, he withholds from taking the floor. This means that he understands that Speaker 1's turn is still in progress, and so *uh huh* is used as a continuer produced to encourage him to continue. In respect of its placement, we see that *uhhuh* was uttered at a transition relevance place (cf. Gardner, 2001), a clear indication that there is no desire to take the floor. In addition, Gardner identifies uh huh as a prototypical continuer.

Another continuer function found in the data is shown in Extract 20 as follows:

Extract 20

1 Sp 2: The one year fees can be used for something else
2 Sp 3: *Uh huh*
3 Sp 4: Hmm
4 Sp 5: For entering institution
5 Sp 3: Yes you can save that for entering the tertiary institution
6 Sp 2: *Yeah*
7 Sp 3: So I think the 3 years is ok
8 Sp 2: *Yeah*
9 Sp 4: So 3 against 1
10 Sp 3: Haha

In Extract 20, we see four colleagues having a conversation. Here, Speaker 2 argues that the SHS duration should not be extended to four years because the extra fees that can be used for something else. This is receives a response *uh huh* (Line 2) from Speaker 3 who then allows Speaker 2 to continue. This also attracts another response *hmm* (Line 3) from Speaker 4. As the conversation goes on, Speaker 3 now takes the floor and says that that extra money can be used to pay part of one's tertiary fees. This receives a response, *yeah* (Line 4), from Speaker 2 and produces another one (Line 8) while Speaker 3 also ends her turn. In this extract, we realize that interlocutors listen to one another and then urge them to continue talking. In this sense, the conversation flows smoothly without any interruptions or overlaps. This confirms O'Keeffe and Adolphs' (2011) observation that continuers serve to maintain interaction. Typically, Drummond & Hopper (1993b) intimates that when used as a continuer, *yeah* is rarely followed by any further talk in the same turn. This is exactly what we see in the analysis, showing that speakers of Ghanaian English use *yeah* just so they can encourage the current speaker to continue, showing that they make meaning when they talk back.

4.2.2. Convergence

The second function that the response tokens were to perform is convergence. This function implies that speakers use them to show agreement and to show understanding of common ground. In the analysis, single words such as *sure*, short expressions such as *that's true*, *that one*, and extended responses such as *I II think i think i will agree with you* were identified to be used for such functions. Extract 21 is an example of such use:

Extract 21

1 Sp 1: So simply put teachers are to be motivated
2 Sp 2: [*Sure*
3 Sp 1: [Very well
4 Sp 2: *Sure*
5 Sp 1: So that they will be able to deliver
6 Sp 2: *Sure*
7 Sp 1: And that will lead to good performance
8 Sp 2: *Sure*

In the extract, Speaker 1 summarizes the conversation by repeating their suggestions one after the other. Lines 1, 5 and 7 contain some of the suggestions and their consequences on the educational sector. In other words, Speaker 1 says that the group has come to the conclusion that when teachers are well motivated, they will teach well and this will help the students to perform well in the examinations. Every line speaker 1 produces receives an agreement *sure* from Speaker 2, an indication that he perfectly agrees with him on that. Apart from signaling agreement, Speaker 2's use of *sure* shows that the information Speaker 1 provides is shared between them. As pointed out in the discussion, the participants share some common knowledge regarding their SHS education. As such, both relate easily with any discussion around that, making it comfortable for them to create this common ground with meaning.

Another occurrence of convergence tokens is illustrated in Extract 22 as follows:

Extract 22

1 Sp 5: You see that there are a lot of things also there extra classes can also help so even
2 if the duration is short
3 Sp 2: *I II think i think i will agree with you*
4 Sp 5: And that can help
5 Sp 2: It is it [is the weakness of the system
6 Sp 5: [even even look at the teachers the way they are the government is treating the teachers
7 Sp 2: Huh

In Extract 22, the group tries to weigh the role of extra classes in the educational system. Here, Speaker 5 argues that it can actually augment the tuition that teachers provide even if the duration is only three years. This receives a quick agreement from Speaker 2 (Line 2) who uses an extended response that also shows explicit verbal content. That is, the pragmatic function coincides with the morpho-syntactic structure, where what the speaker produces is actually what he means. This is noteworthy because in the majority of the occurrence of the response tokens, speakers used words whose pragmatic meaning is only gleaned from the context of interaction. However, with Extract 22, the words match the meaning/function.

4.2.3. Divergence

The third function that the tokens were used to perform is divergence. Here, divergence is explained as showing disagreement during interaction. Disagreement is a situation where a speaker can communicate dissent through the delivery of differing perspectives to a point of view or action (Sifianou, 2012). In the analysis, while some tokens were used to communicate agreement or convergence, others were used to communicate the opposite; divergence. The analysis shows that expressions such as *that one that one I disagree* and *I disagree* were utilized by speakers to show disagreement. An example is shown in Extract 23:

Extract 23

1 Sp 1: And you can see that a whole term. Even a whole termstudents go to school they
2 don't they don't study for a whole term no exams
3 Sp 4: [Huh?
4 Sp 1: [No exams for [no exams at the [end of
5 Sp 2: [That one [*that one that one I disagree*
6 Sp 4: [That one
7 Sp 4: Yeah
8 Sp 2: At the end of
9 Sp 1: *I disagree* be[cause
10 Sp 2: [Because when ererer even a builder or you want to build a house you have to take your time
11 Sp 4: [Yes
12 Sp 2: [So that the foundation will be laid properly
13 Sp 1*:* [Uh huh
14 Sp 4: [Properly

In Extract 23, we notice that there is a mixture of convergence and divergence response tokens; however, the focus here would be on divergence. In this extract, students are still arguing about the behaviour of teachers at the SHS and then Speaker 1 takes his turn and claims that students do not usually write any end-of-term examinations because they do not get tuition (Lines 1-2). This particular assertion is in response to a previous speaker's statement that if the four years is maintained, teachers would not teach and so students would just waste their time being there. To this, Speaker 4 shows surprise by producing the token huh?, an indication that he does not appear to believe it. Because of this, Speaker 1 tries to emphasize on that point and at a TRP (Line 4), but Speaker 2 overlaps him and says that he does not agree with him with the expression *that one that one that one I disagree* (Line 5). At the same time, Speaker 4 also appears to collaborate with Speaker 1 with *that one* (Line 6) but stops. This may be because he realizes that Speaker 2 completed the same statement that he wanted to make. This collaboration is confirmed with Speaker 4's yeah (Line 7), meaning that he also does not agree with Speaker 1 but agrees with Speaker 2. From this, Speaker 2 tries to provide a reason for his disagreement and stops along the way.

From here, Speaker 1 takes his turn and counters it with another disagreement with a reason, *I disagreebecause* (Line 9) but is overlapped by Speaker 2 who then completes his turn with what he wanted to say (Line 10) with a contrasting viewpoints (Bardovi-Harlig&Salsbury, 2004) and Speaker 4 again, agrees with him. Finally, Speaker 1, sensing that he does not have any support, gives in with *uh huh*, showing that with 2. In all cases, we see strong disagreements with explicit disagreement expressions, without any attempt to save face. This action may be because of the fact that the interlocutors are of equal status and simply wish to interact. As such, they do not need to hedge their disagreement (Zhu, 2016).

4.2.4. Engagement

The fourth and final function identified in the data is engagement. O'Keeffe and Adolphs (2008) note that engagement tokens are those used by listeners to express genuine emotions, surprise, shock, horror, sympathy, or empathy at what the speaker is saying without taking the floor from him/her. By so doing, they show their affective involvement of the message. The analysis shows that the expressions used to show engagement are *really*, *this is not happening*, and *youdon'tmean it*. Extract 24 is an example that illustrates engagement:

Extract 24

1 Sp 3: When you look at the number of students failing Mathematics and Science during the three years period and compare it to this four year programme now you see that
2 Sp 2: Eh
3 Sp 3: That time they were failing
4 Sp 4: They were failing *really*? haha
5 Sp 3: More than this
6 Sp 2: Yes

Extract 24 starts with a comparison between the three-year and four-year SHS programmes. Here, Speaker 3 continues from a previous conversation where he argues that those who went for three years did not perform like those who attended four years. Specifically, he says that the number of students who failed Mathematics and Science from the three-year groups were more than those from the four-year groups. This assertion evokes disbelief and surprise from Speaker 4 with an extended response *they were failing really*? Speaker 4 is a product of the three-year programme so it really surprised him that his colleague would make such a claim. This surprise is followed by a short laughter, a clear indication that he does not believe the claim. The response also acts as a follow-up question to Speaker 3 to clarify what he

just said. In his clarification, Speaker 3 insisted that they were even failing more than what is being witnessed presently, and as soon as he finishes, Speaker 2 shows that he agrees with what he is saying by saying *yes*.

5. The Role of Response Tokens in Conversations in Ghanaian English

The results suggest that listeners employed different types of response tokens in showing listenership. As a way of showing listenership, the tokens were used to urge speakers to continue talking, to show agreement and disagreement, and to indicate engagement with the content of the talk. From the types and functions utilized, it can be argued that response tokens serve important purposes in talk-in-interaction. One important role that these tokens assume in conversation is that they maintain the flow of talk. We notice that in all the examples that listeners only employed these tokens as a way of talking back, without having the desire to take over the floor. Although the floor is immediately handed back to the current in all cases, the use of these tokens shows that they are meaningful, rather than a lack of anything to say (Ward, 2006). Another important role of these tokens is that they help listeners to be active participants in the conversational process. We realize from the extracts that listeners did not show passive recipiency (Jefferson, 1984) but an active one. This shows that they followed everything talked about in the conversation and could 'talk back' at the speakers to show different levels of recipiency.

We also notice from the data that the listeners' use of response tokens allowed them to probe for important information. For instance, in the extracts, we see a situation where a listener becomes surprised at the speaker's utterance and so although he shows his level of affective involvement, we also him using the token to literally ask for more information on a claim. Finally, the use of response tokens affords listeners to show or state their point of view. This is true in the sense that listeners are able to question whatever speakers say so as to understand the talk. For example, in some of the extracts, we notice listeners showing disagreement with speakers and then providing reasons for such. There are also instances where there is agreement among interlocutors accompanied with specific reasons. In all of these, it can be argued that the use of response tokens actually serves as a way of showing meaning and giving it back. McCarthy (2003) observes that response tokens are not elements that just sit in the gaps between transactional episodes, an indication that they are very useful in talk. He further notes that they facilitate speakers and enhance their efficiency, and by so doing, social action is co-ordinated on different levels. No interlocutor can make any contribution to a talk, no matter how small, if they do not understand the talk. It is this understanding that will allow them react to or talk back; and when they talk back, they do so with meaning, showing that they understand the dynamics of talk-in-interaction and they are prepared to contribute to making it successful.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the discussion has shown that different types and functions of response tokens are found in the data; minimal, non-minimal, continuer, convergence, divergence, and engagement tokens. We notice that with the exception of a few, all the tokens occur at points of possible completion, an indication that participants are following the turn-taking rules without any problems. And even where we have such instances, they have not been placed haphazardly; neither have they been done at random, but rather, at an 'opportunity space' (Lerner, 1996, p. 245). Lerner (1996) describes an opportunity space as 'a point of partial grammatical completion, such as after an initial subordinate clause, but before a subsequent main clause' (p. 251). With all these examples and functions shown, response tokens show that immediately listeners utter them, they go back into listening mode until the floor is handed to them. Thus, they can be seen as turn-yielding elements. The use of a variety of tokens suggests that speakers of Ghanaian English understand which tokens to use at what time, showing their ability to effectively contribute to communication in this variety.

It is argued that speakers (who are listeners prior to uttering the response tokens) use these to show their involvement in the interactions. As such, they tend to hand over as soon as they finish with the response and then allow the talk to move on smoothly. Looking at their nature, types, and functions, response tokens can be described as being highly relevant in conversations, and even though they may appear trivial, their contribution to the interactive nature of discourse cannot be ignored. In conclusion, if conversations are to be constructed and understood in a way which communicates meaning, both speakers and listeners have a responsibility to make sure that essential elements such as response tokens, no matter how minimal, are utilized so that fluency can be maintained. In effect, it is significant to remember that 'the person primarily responsible for effective communication is the listener' (Hinds, 1987, p. 143), and without response tokens, no effective communication can take place.

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