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Backchanneling in Kambaata conversations

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► **To cite this version:**

Yvonne Treis, Yoseph Yonas Zecharias, Teshome Dagne Madebo. Backchanneling in Kambaata conversations. LingCologne2025, May 2025, Cologne, Germany. <hal-05075610>

HAL Id: hal-05075610

<https://cnrs.hal.science/hal-05075610v1>

Submitted on 20 May 2025

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HAL Authorization

1. Introduction

Kambaata

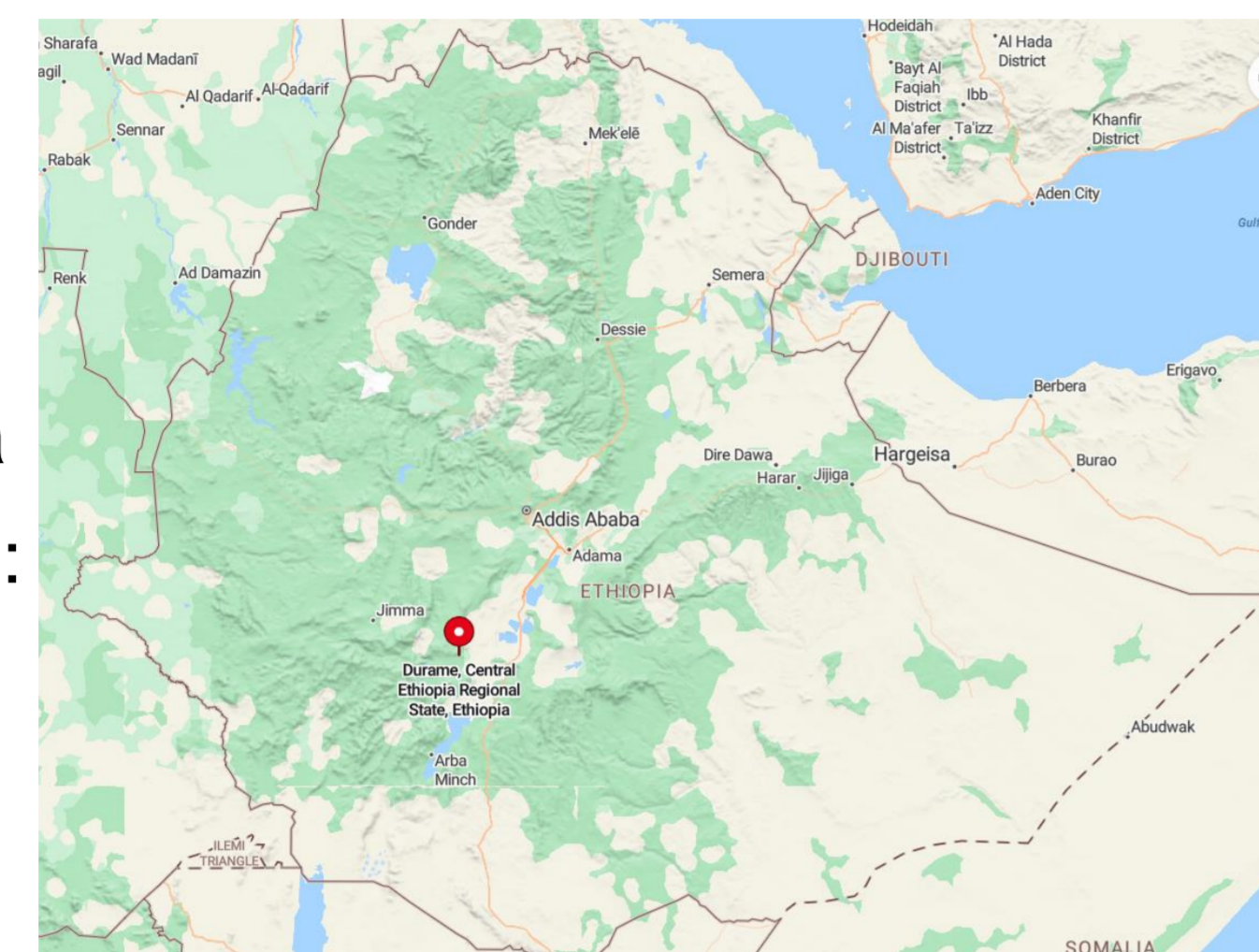
Endonym: *Kambaatissata*

Cushitic language spoken in SW Ethiopia
Capital of the Kambaata-Xambaaro Zone:
Duuraame

Last census (2007): 615,000 speakers
Recent estimations (2024): ~1.16 mln.

State of documentation:

- Since the early 2000s: study of Kambaata grammar, see works by Treis
- Lexical documentation: dictionary by Alemu (2016)
- Since 2023: ongoing work on a **Kambaata Digital Language Archive** with audio-recorded, transcribed and translated tales, myths, conversations, poems, eulogies, readings etc. > to be published in open access
- **Collaborative transcription process** in ELAN between a linguist in France and Kambaata native speakers in Ethiopia



2. Corpus

- Focus on two- and three-party conversations recorded in 2023 on the topics of beekeeping (~ 7 hours) and blessing and cursing (~ 7 hours)
- Supplemented by earlier recordings (from 2016): dialogues about picture stories, traditional narratives, interviews on various culturally relevant topics, etc.
- All backchanneling interjections are being annotated: so far 1005 minutes of transcribed and translated dialogue data with 6404 interjections (19/05/2025) > number of annotations might increase as transcriptions are being revised



3. Research questions

- Which backchanneling strategies are attested in the corpus?
- How is their choice determined?

→ Report about **research in progress**

Caveat: Gestural backchannels cannot be studied in our audio-only corpus

4. Types of backchannels

4.1. Means to give feedback other than by interjections (incomplete list)

- Repetitions of words (mostly predicates) from the interlocutor's turn: (i) as a positive response to a question, (ii) to express agreement.

Source: BM2023-10-06_001_p3_159-161

SP1	::wodawu:: immediately[AMH] 'And immediately, ...	magán-u God-M.NOM	dikk-is-áno. be_supported-CAUS1-3M.IPFV '... God supports (him).	
SP3			dikk-is-áno-s be_supported-CAUS1-3M.IPFV-3M.OBJ 'He supports him.'	

- Other signals of agreement: *gárita* 'it's true', *ekku* 'okay', *ishshi* [AMH] 'okay', *líkkaa* [AMH] 'it's right', etc.

Source: KW2023-10-07_002_p2_115-116

SP1	manch-ú man.SGV-M.ACC	ikk become.3M.PFV.CVB	ba'is-úmb-u make_mistake-3M.NEG4-M.NOM	
	yóo-ba'a. COP1.3M-NEG1			
	'There is no one who is a person and who doesn't make a mistake (i.e. every human makes mistakes).'			
SP2			gár-i-ta truth-F.PRED-F.COP2 'It's true.'	

4.2. Backchanneling interjections

Backchanneling interjections "establish and maintain communicative contact" (Ameke 1992: 114). In Kambaata, they divide into:

- **Default** backchannel: a nasal *(mh)mm* or nasalized high or mid vowel *(ūh)ūū ~ (əh)əə* – Annotation: [BChu]
- Backchannel of **understanding**: Open, nasalized *(āh)āā*, whose short variant is homophonous with the word for 'yes' in the language – Annotation: [BCha]
- **Ingressive** (inhaled) backchannel [↓], so far only anecdotal evidence about its use in other languages in Northeast Africa (Eklund 2008). This study is the first to explore its use in natural data – Annotation: [BChingr]
- **News** backchannel: front vowel, non-nasalized *ee*, especially as ritualized response to narratives, but also a news marker in conversations, paraphrased as 'that's interesting! now I am curious, continue!' by native speakers – Annotation: [BChe]

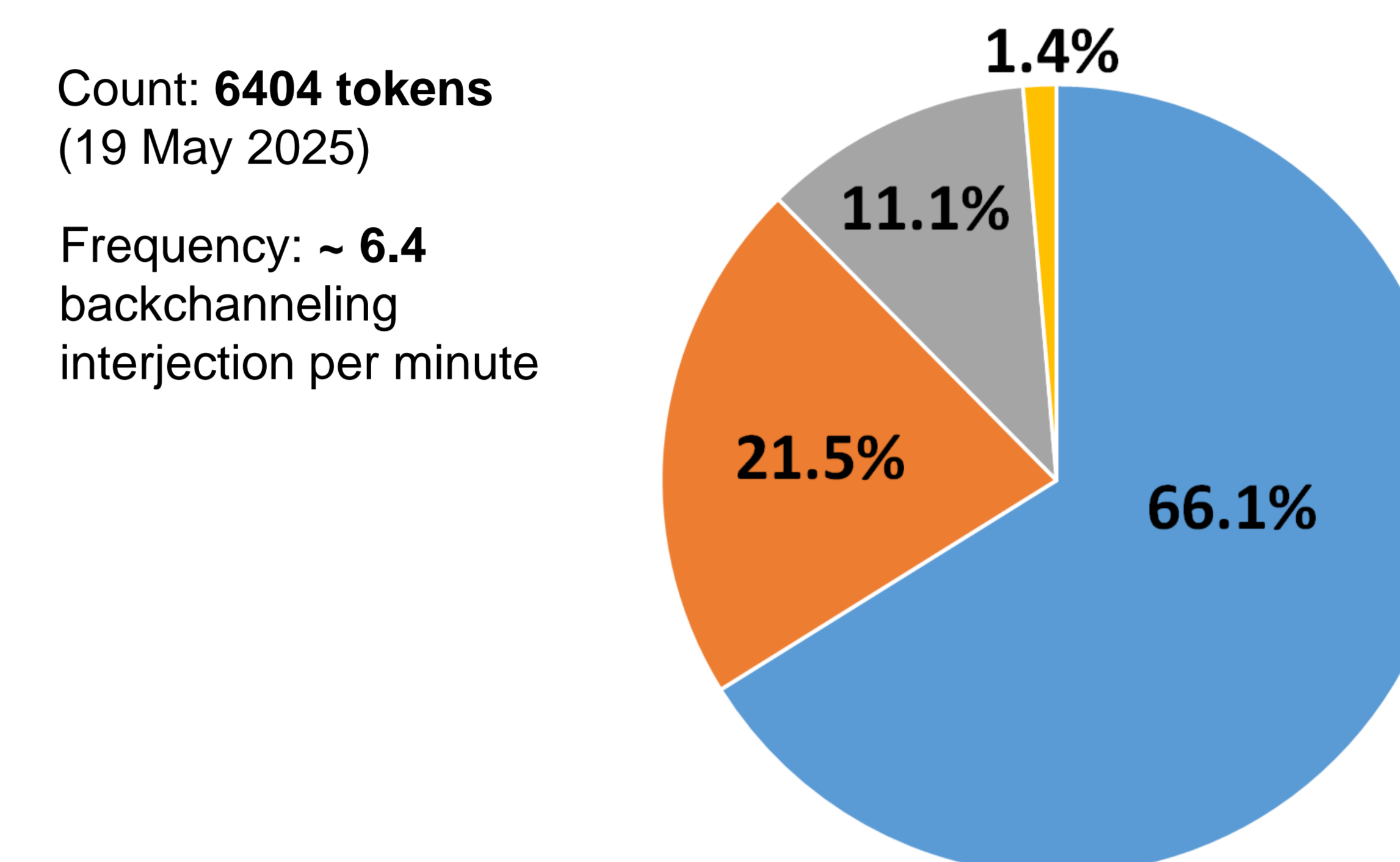
Possibly also to be included:

- **Religious** backchannel: *amii'nn ~ amii'nniyyé ~ amiin* 'amen', conventionalized response to blessings in ceremonial as well as daily interactions – Not yet annotated

5. Distribution

Count: **6404 tokens**
(19 May 2025)

Frequency: ~ **6.4**
backchanneling
interjection per minute



- Default: *(mh)mm ~ (ūh)ūū ~ (əh)əə*
- Understanding: *(āh)āā*
- Ingressive ↓
- News: *ee*

6. Metalinguistic comment

Local proverb: Backchanneling is a culturally appropriate, even expected behaviour

ūū yeenumbu haasaawwu hiyyeessaa (Alamu & Alamaayyo 2017: 152)
ūū y-eenúmb-u haasáaww-u hiyyéess-a-a
mhmm say-3HON.NEG.REL-M.NOM speech-M.NOM orphan-M.PRED-M.COP2
'Speech to which no one says "mhmm" is an orphan.'

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