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A Comparison of the Speech Patterns of Japanese and English Speakers in Discussions

Ami Tsukamoto

1. Introduction

In general, Westerners are thought to speak more eloquently than the Japanese. English speakers are thought to be especially eloquent, as it is sometimes claimed that they tend to state their opinions positively and object to others' ideas without hesitation (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). According to previous studies, a trait of Japanese language behavior is that frequent responses are given to the listeners, in order to make the conversation flow smoothly. It is said that the Japanese have a "cooperative" conversation style in which they pay close attention to others' needs (Mizutani 1993). For example, Maynard (1992) mentions that, compared to speakers of other languages, Japanese speakers use twice as much back-channeling (Aizuchi). Further, according to Maynard, Japanese listeners express their interest in the speaker's story by giving frequent responses. On the other hand, English speakers tend to think it is annoying when they receive responses too frequently in the conversation.

In this study, I gave two common topics to groups of Japanese and English speakers, and observed how differently the speakers behaved when they talked about each topic. I analyzed the recorded data to reveal how the participants' cultural or language background and occupation affected their speech. I then compared the data of this experiment (Experiment 2) to the data of a previously conducted experiment (Experiment 1).

2. Method

I conducted Experiment 2 based on Tannen's previous work, *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends* (1984). Twelve participants were divided into two groups according to their language (Japanese and English), and each group consisted of three males and three females. Unlike in Tannen's study, which recorded a two-hour free talk, in this experiment, the participants discussed two topics, talking for about 20 minutes on each one.

I listened to the recorded data and transcribed the contents of the discussions. I made two charts whose items show the statistical results collected from the data recorded in Experiment 1 and 2. The number of words used in each discussion was counted by the counting function in Microsoft Word.

First of all, the participants stated their standpoints on a given topic for one minute, before discussing the topic further. In cases where the discussion lasted more than 20 minutes, I waited for them to finish talking. The Japanese speakers were all elementary school teachers and the English speakers were language teachers at public junior high or senior high schools in Japan. All the participants were in their 20s or 30s. The first topic of discussion was "starting English education in elementary school" which is a familiar topic for teachers. The other topic they discussed was "what I think about euthanasia" that is a topic that anyone can be interested in, but it was considered that the teachers would not be as strongly involved in it compared to the first topic.

3. Participants

1 Japanese speakers

The discussion for Japanese speakers was conducted in a meeting room at an elementary school in Toyama Prefecture on January 15th, 2012. All the participants were teachers in their 20s and 30s who worked at the elementary school. The three men were as follows: M was 34 years old, the oldest of all the participants, and had been a teacher for ten years. 31-year-old Na had taught for eight years, and 23-year-old No had taught for two years. Three women were as follows: 30 -year-old To had taught for eight years and 30-year-old Ta had taught for seven years. Y was 27 years old and had taught for five years. Both No and To

taught English to fifth and sixth grade students.

2 English speakers

The discussion for English speakers was held at a café in Toyama Prefecture on December 10th, 2011. The nationalities of the English speakers varied, and they were all in their 20s and 30s. They were all ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers), who worked at public schools in Japan through the JET Program, organized by the Ministry of Education.

Three men were as follows: Je, from Trinidad and Tobago, was 28 years old; he is a former co-worker of mine. He was so friendly and talkative that he played a leading role in the discussion. Jo was a 24-year-old Vietnamese American who had taught at a junior high school in for three years and three months. L is a 26-year-old American who had taught at a junior high school for two years and four months. He seemed to be the shyest of all the English speakers. Three women were as follows: K was a 30-year-old Singaporean and had taught at a high school for one year and six months. S was a 28-year-old American who had taught at a junior high school for a year and a half. V was a 28-year-old Chinese American who had taught at a junior high school for three years and four months.

They had close relationships with each other. Je and S lived in the same building. They mainly taught at junior high schools or high schools, and because they also taught at elementary schools, they had their own opinions about English education for elementary school students. K and V also had experience in English-Chinese bilingual education.

4. Turn-taking (Counting how many times each person spoke)

The analysis assessed how much each participant contributed to the discussions. Chart 1 in this section shows the statistical results of the data recorded for the two language groups for both topics. The first and the second columns show the results of Experiment 1 and 2, respectively. Chart 1 shows the number of turns taken, the number of opinions stated, amount of back-channeling (BC), the number of follow-up questions (FQ; questions about related matters), the number of comments, and the total number of words used in the conversation.

The total number of words used was counted by using the counting function of Microsoft Word.

As Chart 1 indicates, both Japanese and English speakers showed more interest in Topic 1, than in Topic 2, which is a very general topic. However, the Japanese group spoke more than the English group when talking about Topic 2. In Chart 1 below, the second column of the data on the Japanese speakers shows that the total number of words used for Topic 1 and 2 as 5363 and 5016 respectively. On the other hand, these numbers were 4883 and only 2908 respectively for the English speakers. This indicates that Japanese speakers contributed more to the discussion more earnestly than the English speakers, regardless of the topic. In addition, it could be said that they were more cooperative than the English speakers when they talked.

The topics I gave to the participants in Experiment 1 were "What do you think about elementary school children using cell phones?" (Topic 1) and "What do you think about the death penalty?" (Topic 2). The total number of words used by the Japanese group for Topics 1 and 2 were 5675 and 5624 respectively. These numbers are similar to the results of Experiment 2. However, the total number of words used by the English speakers was lower for both topics: 2335 (Topic 1) and 3475 (Topic 2). Due to the fact that, one of the participants, S was very interested in Topic 2, the English speakers talked more about Topic 2 than Topic 1 in this case. Therefore, the number of words the English group used depended more on how much interest they had in a given topic than in the case of the Japanese speakers.

Also, as I mentioned in the introduction, a previous experiment by another researcher, Maynard (1997) reports that Japanese speakers use more back-channeling than English speakers do when talking. This tendency was also observed in Experiment 1. The English speakers used words such as "Yeah" or "Exactly" a total of 22 times, whereas the Japanese speakers said "hai (はい)" or "ee (ええ)" 48 times. At the time of the experiment, one Japanese female participant said "soudesuyone (そうですよね)" 19 times out of 49 turns in Topic 1 and 17 times out of 53 turns in Topic 2. However, in Experiment 2, there was not much difference in the amount of back-channeling between the Japanese and English speakers (There were 55 counts of back-channeling in the Japanese group and 50 counts in the English group). I need to conduct more experiments, to confirm if the

tendency claimed in the previous work applies to my own research.

As well as back-channeling, follow-up questions and comments are categorized as tokens of cooperative speech acts. The sums of such acts are 19 for the Japanese group and 11 for the English group, which means that the former group spoke slightly more cooperatively than the latter one.

Chart1 statistical results of the data

		Japanese speakers				English Speakers	
		Exp.1	Exp.2			Exp.1	Exp.2
Topic 1	Turn taking	146	116	Topic 1	Turn taking	110	110
	Opinions	23 (16%)	32 (28%)		Opinions	35 (32%)	50 (45%)
	BC	19	26		BC	12	28
	FQ	7 (5%)	8 (7%)		FQ	3 (3%)	2 (2%)
	Comment	3 (2%)	3 (3%)		Comment	1 (1%)	3 (3%)
	Words total	5675	5363		Words total	2335	4883

Topic 2	Turn taking	158	124	Topic 2	Turn taking	149	67
	Opinions	20 (13%)	28 (23%)		Opinions	34 (23%)	22 (33%)
	BC	29	29		BC	10	22
	FQ	4 (3%)	4 (3%)		FQ	2 (1%)	4 (6%)
	Comment	2 (1%)	4 (3%)		Comment	0 (%)	2 (3%)
	Words total	5624	5016		Words total	3475	2908

Total	Turn taking	304	240	Total	Turn taking	259	177
	Opinions	43 (14%)	60 (25%)		Opinions	69 (27%)	72 (41%)
	BC	48	55		BC	22	50
	FQ	11 (4%)	12 (5%)		FQ	5 (2%)	6 (3%)
	Comment	5 (2%)	7 (3%)		Comment	1 (0%)	5 (3%)
	Words total	11299	10379		Words total	5810	7791

Turn taking = 100%

5. Other Characteristics of Speech

Another characteristic of speech acts is that the English speakers tended to use a filler expression (FE) such as "like" (74 times for Topic 1 and 43 times for Topic 2. 117 times in total), as shown in Chart 2 at the end of this section. "Like" is a word used in place of a pause and helps speakers to put their ideas in order. The frequency with which such words are used varies by the speaker. V is the participant who uses "like" the most frequently, using it five times within a short turn in Topic 2 discussion, as shown below.

(1)   V: I told, yeah, I already told my sister. I was **like,** if I can, **like,** if something bad really happens, **like** something horrible, I can't make a decision, I won't be able to **like**, to take care of myself. I was **like,** "Pull the plug".

K uses "like" eight times in a turn (114 words) when speaking about Topic 2. When I asked S, what sort of function the word has, she mentioned that it is used not because of lack of confidence, but for the purpose of collecting ideas. It is especially used when people talk about a topic for the first time. Additionally, the English speakers tend to use "like" much more frequently than "you know", which is another filler expression (They used "you know" 23 times). In Experiment 1, they used "like" 131 times and "you know" 37 times. This result shows the same tendency revealed in Experiment 2.

On the other hand, Japanese speakers do not frequently use filler expressions such as "eeto (えーと)" and "uunto (うーんと)", which are the counterparts of "like" in Japanese (22 times in total). Maynard (1992) mentions that the Japanese counterpart of "you know" is the sentence-ending particle "ne(ね)". In this experiment, the participants used it 32 times.

As the discussion went on, speakers in both groups became excited and there were some overlaps between their turns. There seemed to be little difference in the distribution of overlaps between the Japanese and English speakers. Both groups showed overlapping when talking about Topic 2 (euthanasia). In the experiment, the Japanese speakers overlapped 12 times in total, 10 of which were cooperative and two were not classified. The English speakers overlapped six times, 3 of which were interrupting, one of which was cooperative, and the

rest were not classified. The unclassified instances were times when two speakers happened to start saying something at the same time and did not complete their utterances.

The Japanese speakers tended to overlap when they presented examples of the topic under discussions, rather than when they fought against opponents in their argument. An example of overlapping is shown below. Overlaps are labeled in parenthesis.

(2)　　M: 手術する時になんかそれがあった。

To: ありましたよね、きっと。

Y: (overlap)検査するにもありますもんね。ね、なんか、どのくらい公表してほしいとか。

Ta: (overlap)ただの呼吸器とまたちょっと違う<u>が</u>(の)も、大きい機械とか作る<u>が</u>(の)もある<u>が</u>(ん)だよね、きっと(Underlining indicates a Hokuriku dialectal expression)。

Y: (overlap)そう、色々あるはず、選択肢が。

M: I think that the patient is asked this question (how much information about the physical condition his doctor should inform him).

To: Yes, I know that, too.

Y: (overlap) He is also asked the question before he undergoes a medical examination. The doctor asks him how much information about the result he wants.

Ta: (overlap) There must be a medical apparatus which is a little different from a respiratory one. There must be a large apparatus, too.

Y: (overlap) Yes. There must be various options for medical treatment.

[Translated by the present author]

In this scene, M, Ta, To, and Y give as many examples of terminal care as possible, which seems to demonstrate that this pattern of overlapping is a contributing speech act to the discussion.

In contrast, the English speakers tended to overlap when they argued against others' opinions. An example is shown below. This is a part of the conversation on Topic 2.

(3) S: I think, in general, because there are so many factors and because I think it's scary to give the power to a hospital, and to know just who has the right interest in mind, I would just keep it as having it be illegal. (Jo tries to say something) Even though it is tough case by case, but in general I still say I'm......

   Jo (interrupting): So you can think it's scary for your parents to have that power, too? For the family to give the consent?

In this scene, Jo, who is for euthanasia, tries to interrupt what S, who is against euthanasia, is saying. His speech is an act of interruption, as well as overlapping. First, Jo tries to say something but gives up, and S keeps the floor of her turn. Then, however, he interrupts her to ask her a question.

Example (4) is taken from a discussion in Experiment 1. The speakers used offensive acts of speech by overlapping, when discussing Topic 2 (the death penalty). This offensive overlap was also observed in Experiment 2.

(4) Me: OK. I guess I know that. But I don't think that ...... (Me tries to say something, but Je cuts in.)

   Je: Yeah. But it sort of scares, instills like, fear into people and prevents them from committing a crime. That's what I think.

In this case, Je interrupts Me's turn, and states his opinion. Me also criticizes Je's ideas in her turn in this discussion. This demonstrates that discussions among English speakers differ from those among Japanese speakers, in that English speakers state their opinions freely and often become offensive in order to criticize others.

Another characteristic of their speech is physical gesture. For example, Je knocked on the desk twice in his turn as seen in (5).

(5) Je: But if you think about it and maybe, God forbid something happens to me (**Je knocks on the table**), and like, and maybe I like, I'm in an accident or anything like that, (**Je knocks on the table again**) **right**? (V laughs.) **You know** you can't communicate articulately how you feel, **right**? But **you know** how you the mental ability to still process

what people are saying. ...

In Je's turn, he strongly insisted on his opinion, which is shown in his speech behavior. He uses "you know", and also used the tag question "right?" at the end of two sentences. According to Azuma (1994), people use "you know" almost unconsciously to mean "I don't know what to say, but I know that you will understand my feelings". People use this expression in their speech when they want their listeners to comprehend what they are trying to say. None of the Japanese speakers in the experiments have knocked on the desk in my two experiments just as Je did.

Chart 2 other characteristics of speech

		Japanese speakers				English speakers	
		Exp.1	Exp.2			Exp.1	Exp.2
Topic 1	FE	2	10	Topic 1	FE (like)	63	74
	ne	14	12		you know	22	6
	overlap	8	1		overlap	7	2
Topic 2	FE	7	12	Topic 2	FE (like)	68	43
	ne	17	20		you know	15	17
	overlap	18	12		overlap	16	6
Total	FE	9	22	Total	FE (like)	131	117
	ne	31	32		you know	37	23
	overlap	26	13		overlap	23	8

6. Conclusion

Throughout this experiment, there were some differences in the speech patterns between the Japanese and English speakers. The speech patterns of the English speakers were more offensive than those of the Japanese speakers. The interest of an English speaker is more directly reflected in their contribution to the discussion, as demonstrated by the difference in the total number of words they used to talk about each topic.

It could be thought that English speakers understand discussion differently from Japanese speakers. For English speakers the purpose of a discussion is to state their opinions clearly, and they never hesitate to challenge others' opinions; hence they overlap with others' words when they get excited and argue against their opponents. In contrast, the discourse the Japanese speakers have had in my experiments cannot be called a "debate" but rather a "cooperative talk".

In my next research project, I will look more closely into the function of back-channeling, to see how the findings of the previous works can be applied to the next experiment. In addition to this, I will explore the function of the filler expression "like" by observing the number of the expression used by English speakers and the way they use it.

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SUMMARY

A Comparison of Speech Patterns of Japanese and English Speakers in Discussions

Ami Tsukamoto

In general, Westerners are thought to speak more eloquent than the Japanese. In this study, I gave two common topics to groups of Japanese and English speakers, and observed how differently they behaved when they talked about each of the topics.

The participants were divided into two groups, Japanese speakers and English speakers, each of which contained three men and three women. Each of the two topics was discussed for about 20 minutes in the discussion. One topic I picked up was "starting English education in elementary school" which is a familiar topic for teachers. The other topic was "What I think about euthanasia" which is a general topic.

Both groups of speakers talked more about Topic 1 than about Topic 2. The total number of the words in the Topic 2 discussion, used by Japanese speakers, is larger than that of English speakers. This shows that the Japanese speakers contributed more to the discussion more earnestly than the English speakers, regardless of the topic, and it can be said that they were more cooperative than the English speakers when they talked.

As the discussion went on, the speakers became excited, and as a result, there were some overlaps between their turns. The Japanese speakers tended to overlap when they presented examples of the topic under discussion, while the English speakers overlapped when they argued.

Additionally, I analyzed some more different behaviors observed in the discussions between Japanese speakers and English speakers' discussions.