

The Characterization of the Minimal Vocalizations of *UN*, *HU::N*, and *SO* -Successful Communication Strategies by Japanese Speakers of English

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短い発話 'UN,' 'HU::N,' 'SO' にみられる日本人英語学習者の コミュニケーション・ストラテジー

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Abstract

This study presents a characterization of the minimal vocalizations 'UN,' 'HU::N,' and 'SO,' which frequently occur in Japanese conversation and are often interpreted as back channels or listener responses meaning 'yes,' 'hmmm,' and 'uh-huh,' respectively. We have found that 'UN,' 'HU::N,' and 'SO' occur in our two sets of data of a female Japanese speaker conversing in English with a native speaker of English (NSE). In addition, many of these expressions systematically occur as speaker 'pre-and post-TCU (Turn Construction Unit) vocalizations.'

In this study, we focus on these three brief expressions occurring as pre-and post-TCU vocalizations used by the native speakers of Japanese (NSJs), and attempt to characterize the multi-functional features which seem to play a strategic role in the interaction with native speakers of English (NSEs).

Key words: back channel (BC), Turn Construction Unit (TCU), filler, discourse analysis

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抄 録

日本語の会話に頻繁に起こる「うん」(UN)、「ふうん」(HU::N)、「そう」(SO)の発話は、聞き手の話者に対する相槌と解釈されてきた。しかし、本研究の談話分析で、これらの短い表現が、日本人話者が英語を話す際、発話内の発話順序構成単位(TCU)の前後に頻繁に発せられることがわかった。本稿は、発話順序構成単位の前後に発せられるこれらの短い表現が、日本人女性が英語を母語とする話者と円滑にコミュニケーションを計るために、どのような方略的特性を持っているかを分析する。

キーワード: 相槌、発話順序構成単位、埋め込み表現、談話分析

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Introduction

Our study was initially inspired by past research on back channels (BCs), or *Aizuchi* in Japanese, as represented by Yngve (1970), Kendon (1967, 1977), Duncan and Fiske (1977), Schegloff (1982), White (1989), and Maynard (1986, 1993). BCs, originally termed by Yngve (1970), are observed when “the person who has the turn receives short messages such as ‘yes’ and ‘uh-huh’ without relinquishing the turn (p. 568).” Brief utterances of UN ‘yes,’ HUUN ‘I see,’ SOO ‘Right,’ accompanying by non-verbal signs such as nodding function as BCs, and they are frequently found in Japanese conversation (Maynard, 1990; White, 1989). Thus, when we first observed the frequent use of ‘UN,’ ‘HU::N,’ and ‘SO’ used by NSJs in the interaction with NSEs in English in our data, we categorized all instances of these tokens as BCs because they share the same phonetic features. However, closer observation revealed that these tokens occurred in conversational environments not associated with those defined for BCs, appearing at either the beginning or the end of a speaker’s turn. Thus, our focus shifted to the use of UN, HU::N, and SO in turn-initial and turn-final positions. Our analysis is largely qualitative, borrowing analytical techniques from the interactional sociolinguistics approach based on conversation analysis.

Aims

Canale and Swain (1980) provided researchers and teachers in the field with theoretical and operational definitions of communicative competence. Since then, attention has begun to be paid not only to the rules of grammar but also to other rules of language use. Canale’s (1983) four notions of communicative competence—grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic—can help teachers design effective ways of teaching communication strategies. Among the four types, the three vocalizations we are focusing on seem to be associated primarily with discourse and strategic competence, since these vocalizations are systematically deployed in interactional conversation. Thus, the main aim of this study is to examine the communicative strategies used by relatively advanced level speakers of English, focusing on the three minimal vocalizations. Specifically, we focus on identifying the characteristics of UN, HU::N, and SO when they occur as vocalizations in English discourse between NSJs and NSEs. In addition, we speculate on pedagogical implications for foreign language classroom learning from our findings.

Data

The data for this study consists of two sets of audio-taped and video-taped face-to-

face ordinary, non-argumentative conversations, which were carried out between two people of almost the same social status. Data Set 1 is a conversation in English between a Japanese woman and an American man. Data Set 2 is a conversation in English between a Japanese woman and an Australian woman. By focusing on interactions of the same social status, we hope to eliminate any significant effects caused by social inequality on the usage of the vocalizations under study. Also, we used only Japanese women for our analysis, since many researchers have found differences between male and female language (e.g., Tannen, 1982). However, since the interlocutor in Data Set 1 is a male and the one in Data Set 2 is a female, the interlocutors' gender difference might have affected the reactions of the female speakers to some extent.

In Data Set 1, the Japanese female is Sayuri (not her real name), a 30-year-old office clerk at an English language school. The American male is Ken, a 32-year-old, who teaches at the same English language school. Their relationship is close: Ken always makes Sayuri feel relaxed through his use of humor; therefore, the conversation between them is always casual. Though she has never lived overseas, Sayuri speaks English well, with a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score above 600.

In Data Set 2, the Japanese female is Miho, a 39-year-old office clerk. Although she lived in Australia for four years, her present work in Japan has nothing to do with English. Miho's TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) score is 806, and she studies English at a culture center in order to maintain her English ability. Her conversation partner is Kate, a 43-year-old woman from Australia who used to teach English to Miho, but who is now a good friend. Miho feels relaxed talking to Kate because she has known her for quite a long time. Kate has been in Japan for 16 years, and she speaks Japanese very well. Their conversation was recorded in Kate's office room at a language school where Kate works.

To minimize the influence of the presence of the videotape on the data, the initial two minutes of film was excluded from the analysis. Out of the thirty-minute conversation, a twenty-minute segment following the first two minutes was chosen and transcribed according to the Jefferson transcription system (See Appendix for conventions). Also, individual interviews were held with each of the participants to elicit their interpretations of selected passages from the taped conversations.

Functions of *UN*, *HU::N*, and *SO* in Japanese

In this section, we will provide a brief explanation of the terms related to our study: 'back channel,' 'filler,' 'opener,' and 'post-completion filler' as defined by other researchers in order to characterize the tokens we have found in our data as accurately as possi-

ble. We hope to avoid automatically categorizing the tokens under those terms; rather we would like to use this information to distinguish our findings from theirs. For this purpose, first, we will explain these four terms briefly, and then explain the terminology: ‘pre-and post-TCU vocalizations’ used in our analysis.

Back Channel (BC)

BC behaviors have been discussed by many researchers in different ways. Hayashi and Hayashi (1993) claim that previous studies on BCs present two distinct but related problems: a) the characterization of BC varies among researchers; and b) BC and speaker-state turns are considered to be distinct notions, and yet they cannot always be treated in an unequivocal fashion (pp. 119–120).

On the other hand, researchers such as Schegloff (1982) take a different view and do not even accept the term ‘BC.’ Instead, Schegloff identifies coherent sets of conversational phenomena such as minimal vocalizations and demonstrates their functions in particular sequential environments. For example, he shows that in certain sequential environments the use of a minimal vocalization can indicate that the hearer recognizes that a multi-unit speaker turn is in progress.

A comparative analysis between English and Japanese BCs was conducted by Maynard (1986, 1990). Maynard (1986) claims that Japanese display a great deal of listener feedback through the use of brief utterances, head movement, and laughter. She(1990) also claims that this listener activity is considered good manners, and Japanese speakers may feel uneasy when speaking to an American who just listens quietly, even if he or she listens attentively. On the other hand, she finds that Americans use BC behavior less frequently than Japanese. Our data support Maynard’s claims, that is, we found more diversified BC devices in the NSJs’ English than in that of NSEs. However, in this study we exclude these UN, HU::N, and SO identified as BC devices since they are part of listener non-turn behavior.

Fillers

Conversations are filled with fragments that do not carry meaning in a strict sense. Speakers’ turns are interposed with fillers, such as ‘uhh’ and ‘like’ in English conversation, as in “uhh, you know, he’s like he is really crazy.” Conversation fillers may appear anywhere in a speaker’s turn and may simply fill a pause, or they may signal speaker hesitation or trouble spots (Maynard, 1990). The three vocalizations of UN, HU::N, and SO in our data were also identified to have functions of fillers. They seem to be effectively placed to fill an unnecessary pause to compensate the speakers’ weakness in

their speakership. In this study, we will be focusing on uses of these three expressions as fillers at the beginning of a turn (openers) and at the end of a turn (post-completion fillers).

Openers

Openers refer to a type of filler which is produced at turn-initial points. When assuming the speaker's turn, the speaker often starts with an opener, such as the conjunction 'so,' as in "so, what's up?" Thus, openers are brief expressions claiming the turn and alerting others that the speaker is about to say something (Maynard, 1990, p. 258). Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki, and Tao (1996) provide a notion of 'Resumptive Openers' for particular openers which are used at turn-initial points. They specify the characteristics of Resumptive Openers as follows: 1) they are realized in short (typically monosyllabic), non-lexical, vocalic forms; 2) they tend to appear as a separate intonation unit; 3) normally only short pauses occur after a resumptive opener; and 4) they appear at the beginning of a new turn (pp. 362–363).

In our two data sets, quite a few of these types of 'so' are produced by NSJs, though 'so' is not "non-lexical" as Clancy, et al. define it. The reason for this tendency may derive from the fact that 'so' has meanings both in English, like the one in the example above, and in Japanese, although, unlike English 'so,' Japanese 'SO' can function not only as an opener but as a BC as well. To distinguish Japanese 'SO' from English 'so,' we have transcribed Japanese 'SO' in capital letters, while English 'so' is transcribed in small letters in our transcription data. We will include both 'SO' and 'so' in our study and characterize each more extensively later.

Post-Completion Fillers

M. Hayashi (1995) focuses on the use of *U::N* by a speaker after a possible completion of the speaker's own talk. In his study of Japanese conversation, he refers to these tokens as 'post-completion *U::N*.' Instances of post-completion *U::N* suggest that participants orient to such a production of *U::N* as a display of its producer's preparedness to shift from speakership to reciprocity and also of its producer's recipient alignment. The frequent use of *UN*, *HU::N* and *SO* placed in the completion of the speakers' conversation are somehow similar to the function of the post-completion *U::N* defined by M. Hayashi.

Initial Observations of *UN*, *HU::N*, and *SO*

As mentioned above, frequent use of Japanese expressions such as *UN*, *HU::N*, and

SO was observed in both sets of data. However, many instances of these expressions did not function as listener BCs. That is, these vocalizations were uttered not by the listener during the speaker's turn, but by the speaker within her turn. This observation led us to a deeper analysis of these utterances. Interestingly, most of the utterances under consideration occurred at either the beginning or the end of a speaker's turn construction unit (TCU), where a "TCU" is taken to be a minimum unit with which a speaker may set out to construct a turn (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). TCUs are primarily syntactic units whose unit-types for English include sentential, clausal, phrasal, and lexical constructions. We refer to those tokens used at the beginning of a TCU as 'pre-TCU vocalizations' and at the end of a TCU as 'post-TCU vocalization.' We noted also that vowel length and nasalization in words like 'UN,' 'HU::N,' 'SO,' varies; we include variations such as 'U:N,' 'HU::M,' 'HUN,' or 'SO:.' in our analysis to represent these differences. The excerpt in Example 1 involves the production of these vocalizations:

Example 1 (Data Set 1: lines 15 – 24)

- 1 Ken: How about you?
- 2 Sayuri:→ UN, actually I was a little bit sick, too: I think I had a cold.
- 3 Ken: Really?
- 4 Sayuri: HU::N.
- 5 Ken: The whole time?
- 6 Sayuri:→ U:N, no:, so, the end of last year (0.3) I went out with some friends.=
- 7 Ken: =Uh huh.
- 8 Sayuri:→ so, I (0.4) visited a friend who lives in Osaka.=
- 9 Ken: =Uh huh.
- 10 Sayuri: and I spent two days with her. And it was a long time for us to, it was
→ the first time to see each other in a long time so, HU::N.

We exclude the "HU::N" in line 4 from our analysis because this is interpreted as a response to Ken's question "Really?" and is thus not one of the instances under consideration. However, we analyze "UN" in line 2, "U:N" and "so" in line 6, and "so" in line 8 as pre-TCU vocalizations and "so, HU::N" in line 10 as post-TCU vocalizations. As indicated by the use of small letters, we interpreted all of the 'so's in this example as English ones, since these 'so's are syntactically and contextually sound utterances with a typical English low-rise intonation contour indicating continuation. Consider another example from Data Set 2.

Example 2 (Data Set 2: lines 134 – 143)

- 1 Miho:→ so uh (.) same as last time (0.2) last before?
2 Kate: Yes, I think so.
3 Miho:→ HU:M okay (0.2) so just collect un ten thousand.
4 Kate: Uh hum (.)
5 Miho: UN UN
6 Kate: But then (.) of course we have to ask him first.
7 Miho: Yes.
8 Kate: If he is busy that night [(.)] we can't decide it (.) u:m
9 Miho: [UN]
10 Miho:→ so how many (0.2) people

We do not include the token in line 5 because it is not clear whether “UN UN” is pre- or post-TCU vocalization; in either case, it seems to function as a turn pass. Also “UN” in line 9 is excluded from our study because it is interpreted as BC behavior. However, we treat each “so” and “HU:M” produced in lines 1, 3, and 10 as pre-TCU vocalizations. “HU:M” can be considered as a variation of “HU:N.”

The Characterization of UN, HU::N, and SO

On closer observation, we found several important characteristics of these tokens, some of which are similar to the functions of the terms explained above, but some of which are not. Since the brief vocalizations we are dealing with are uttered by NSJs conversing in English with NSEs, we cannot automatically identify the occurrences we have found with existing terms such as ‘BCs,’ ‘filler,’ ‘opener,’ or ‘post-completion U::N’ which appear in Japanese conversation. For example, the term ‘post-completion U::N’ used in M. Hayashi’s (1995) study was derived from a conversation in Japanese between two Japanese. We must consider that the usage of ‘UN,’ ‘HU::N,’ and particularly ‘SO’ that we are focusing on may be more diverse than the usage he claims.

In the following subsections, we will present several characteristics found in our two data sets. However, we would note that the brief vocalizations under study are not always limited to one function, but rather may have multiple functions, and it is sometimes difficult for us, as a third party, to tease them out.

Pre-TCU Vocalization to Take the Turn

The following two excerpts indicate that UN, HU::N, and SO/so are frequently used

as pre-TCU vocalizations in order to claim a turn.

Example 3 (Data Set 1: lines 98 – 100)

- 1 Sayuri: ((laughs)) but actually I think more and more foreigners like Karaoke
→ because a: more more Karaoke boxes have English songs. HU::N, becau:se
before they had [
- 2 Ken: ya:
- 3 Sayuri: =Beatles songs or Elvis Presley. But UN, there are now various kinds of
songs.

Example 4 (Data Set 2: lines 396 – 404)

- 1 Kate: but Miho=
- 2 Miho:→ =so so depends on the personality [I know it]=
- 3 Kate: [of course] of course
- 4 Miho:→ =so (.) but Kate especially middle-ag(h)(h)ed lady=
- 5 Kate: ((laughs))
- 6 Miho: they didn't give me a seat and they didn't give me ha:nds so (.) <I'm so
shocked> (“I’m” is said in a creaky voice))

In Example 3, line 1, Sayuri immediately continues her turn by saying “HU::N” after Ken’s agreement in line 2, giving another reason why more and more foreigners like Karaoke. If she had not continued her turn immediately, Ken could have thought she had finished her turn, and might have started a turn in line 2, since Sayuri finished her turn in line 1 with falling intonation on “songs”. In Example 4, lines 2 and 4, Miho does the same thing by saying “so so” and “so” respectively in order to claim her turn and alert Kate that she is about to say something. These instances conform to Maynard’s characterization of an opener.

Pre-TCU Vocalization as a Pause or Silence Filler

The second functional characteristic that we noticed in our data is the use of these vocalizations to fill a pause or silence. Consider the following example.

Example 5 (Data Set 2: lines 112 – 115)

- 1 Kate: =they can leave a message [(.)] and she doesn't want
- 2 Miho: [uhn hun]
- 3 Kate: and she doesn't want to bother [to answer] the telephone.

- 4 Miho: [ah ha]
 5 Miho:→ (0.4) so:: uh (0.4) so Kate we'd better to talk about the Shozaburo's party.

In Example 5, after a 0.4-second pause following a turn by Kate, Miho utters “so:: uh,” but does not start talking, and another 0.4-second pause follows; finally she produces a meaningful sentence following the second “so.” Particularly the first long “so” seems to fill the silence, (a function associated with fillers). This occurs in Example 3 above, too. Although Sayuri immediately continues her turn, she starts it out with a long “HU::N,” followed by a prolonged “becau:se.”

One possibility is that because of their inadequate speaking ability, both Miho and Sayuri need time to construct a grammatically correct utterance. While saying “so::” in line 5 of Example 5 and “HU::N” in line 1 of Example 3, they may be deciding what they are going to say in English. In the interviews conducted after the conversation, both Japanese speakers mentioned that one reason for their use of these vocalizations may be their lack of confidence in their English ability, which results in a need for more time to formulate utterances. Also, they say that they feel uncomfortable imposing unnecessary pauses between turns, and feel they have to say something quickly to fill the silence. In this way, pre-TCU vocalizations play an important role for them in carrying on a smooth conversation.

Since the speakers are not NSEs, they need time to say something in English. Hence, when they are asked a question, and the floor is relinquished to them, they seem to need some kind of cushion or pace-maker to start to speak at their own pace. Consider Example 1 again (repeated below as Example 6).

Example 6 (Data Set 1: lines 15 – 24)

- 1 Ken: How about you?
 2 Sayuri:→ UN, actually I was a little bit sick, too: I think I had a co:ld.
 3 Ken: Really?
 4 Sayuri: HU::N.
 5 Ken: The whole time?
 6 Sayuri:→ U:N, no:, so, the end of last ye:ar (0.3) I went out with some frie:nds.=
 7 Ken: =Uh huh.
 8 Sayuri:→ so, I (0.4) visited a friend who lives in Osaka.=
 9 Ken: =Uh huh.
 10 Sayuri: and I spent two days with her. And it was a long time for us to, it was the
 → first time to see each other in a long time so, HU::N.

In Example 6, each of Sayuri's utterances in lines 2 and 6 follows a question from Ken and begins with some variation of "UN." In line 2, Sayuri responds to Ken's question, "How about you?" This is not a yes/no question; however, Sayuri utters "UN" before providing an answer. This suggests that "UN" in pre-TCU position after a question does not necessarily mean 'Yes.' This becomes more obvious in line 6. Sayuri again answers a question "The whole time?" with "U:N." Thus, her response could be interpreted as 'yes'. However, 'yes' is not the answer Sayuri intends; she gives her intended answer "no" immediately afterward. In this way, 'UN' following a question does not always mean 'yes,' but may simply mean 'well' or 'ah:.'

Sayuri frequently uses 'UN' before responding to a question, and starting with this vocalization, she speaks at her own pace. She seems to adjust her pace with these vocalizations since Ken's speaking pace is faster. Thus, this type of 'UN' may function as a cushion or a pace-maker before she begins speaking English at her own pace. The pressure she has to answer or talk seems to trigger this type of pre-TCU vocalization. In the interviews, both Japanese speakers mentioned that they utter these tokens unconsciously. Thus, this type of token may represent a subconscious strategy employed to help the NSJs to interact in English with NS-like speed and fluency.

Post-TCU Vocalization Prior to Relinquishing a Turn or Receiving Agreement or Support

The following Examples 7 to 9 include post-TCU vocalizations which seem to give the interlocutor a signal that the speaker wants to relinquish the turn.

Example 7 (Data Set 1: lines 179 – 181)

- 1 Sayuri: We only want, we want to taste only a little,
2 Ken: Mm.
(0.5)
3 Sayuri:→ because eating is the main thing, so.
(0.5)
4 Ken: I don't know this is true, but someone told me that there is the amount calories in one beer is the same amount of calories as a steak.

Example 8 (Data Set 1: lines 92 – 96)

- 1 Sayuri:→ But they were polite. ((laughs)) U::N.
2 Ken: They, it was obvious they were shocked.=
3 Sayuri: =UN. Shocked. ((laughs))

- 4 Ken: At how bad I was.
 5 Sayuri:→ I think they expected >too much< because you are kind of musician, so.
 UN.
 6 Ken: Right. They expect me to go like, <feelings>.

Example 9 (Data Set 2: lines 609 – 611)

- 1 Kate: Hu:m.
 2 Miho:→ Ten times (.) so.
 3 Kate: By the way speaking of KAISUUKEN, why don't RIKISHI buy the
 ((commuter pass)) ((sumo wrestlers))
 KAISUUKEN during the Tokyo BASHO.
 ((commuter pass)) ((tournament))

In Example 7, Sayuri produces “so” with falling intonation at the end of her turn, signaling an end to her turn. There is a significant 0.5-second pause after Sayuri’s “so”; then Ken starts to speak, introducing a new topic which does not directly relate to what Sayuri said in lines 1 and 3.

In the next excerpt, Example 8, line1, Sayuri utters a relatively longer “U::N” after she laughs; in line 5, she sends two post-TCU vocalizations “so” and “UN” with falling intonation indicating her preparedness to shift the turn to Ken. This double post-TCU token may be an indication that she wanted an agreement or a response from Ken on the opinion she has just expressed, since before the double post-TCU vocalization she has given Ken her interpretation by saying “I think . . .” In both cases in Example 8, Ken responds immediately after the post-TCU tokens.

Miho in Example 9 also utters this type of post-TCU vocalization “so” with falling intonation after a pause at the end of her turn. According to Sayuri and Miho, they used the post-TCU vocalizations in the same way they use final particles in Japanese such as ‘YO’ ‘DAYO’ or the tag question ‘DESHO’ on some occasions, to receive some kind of support or show of concern from their conversational partner.

SO as Transfer

The brief expression ‘SO’ is unique because a) it is a word; b) this word has meanings both in Japanese and English; and c) often the meanings or functions of English and Japanese ‘SO’/‘so’ overlap. Japanese ‘SO’ can function as an opener meaning ‘Well,’ as a BC meaning ‘I see,’ as an adverb referring to the previous statement (as seen in Example 12), and as a response, meaning ‘Yes.’ English ‘so’ also has many functions, includ-

ing that of opener, as in “So, what’s up?,” and adverb, as in “I think so,” or “It is so.” Because of this, ‘SO’ seems to be easily transferred positively in English discourse by NSJs. Consider Examples 10 and 11.

Example 10 (Data Set 2: lines 94 – 102)

- 1 Kate: She sent me once but it didn’t come clearly.
2 Miho:→ AH SO he: he: ah
(Is that so?)
3 Kate: So I asked her t-((looking at fax)) ah this one [(.)]
[uh]
I had to send her a message and said [(.)] please send it again.
[[UN]]
4 Miho:→ UN AH SO.
(Is that so?)

The “AH SO”s in lines 2 and 4 are not pre-TCU signals but listener responses, or BCs. However, in order to explain why ‘SO’ is easily transferred, we would like to use this excerpt. These “AH SO”s are Japanese since ‘AH SO’ is usually uttered almost as one word, a typical occurrence in Japanese interaction and English ‘so’ does not follow ‘AH’. However, the meaning of this ‘SO’ is similar to English ‘so’ because it can be translated into ‘Is that so?’ Consider another example.

Example 11 (Data Set 2: lines 178 – 181)

- 1 Miho: And but we’d better to ask Shozaburo.
2 Kate: Yes [of course?].
3 Miho:→ [UN]. SO JA. You check Shozaburo’s schedule NE.
(Yes. Well then.) ((Okay))

This Japanese expression is also unique. If “JA” is omitted, the “SO” could be interpreted as English ‘so.’ Moreover, the omission does not sound ungrammatical, nor does it change the original context much. Of course, the original “SO” is the response to Kate, meaning ‘Yes,’ and “SO” with continuing intonation and without “JA” would become a pre-TCU vocalization, like the one used in Example 5. Perhaps because of this flexibility, Miho tends to use ‘so’ frequently in English conversations and it seems that this is her strategy for carrying on a smooth conversation with Kate. The following example shows how ‘so’ is used by Miho to perform various functions in Japanese and English.

Example 12 (Data Set 2: lines 387 – 393)

- 1 Kate: =YOKUWAKATTANE=
(((that) made me fully aware))
- 2 Miho:→ SO WATASHI-MO SO.
((Yes I feel the same way))
- 3 Kate: TOKUNI JR-NO EKI-HA KAIDANBAKKASHI-DE=
((Especially JR stations are all stairs))
- 4 Miho:→ SO SORE-MO ARUSHI: and so (.) gentleman is so kind to (.) to me I mean
((Yes that is right, and))
uh disabled or some injured person=

The first “SO”s in lines 2 and 4 are answers in Japanese to the previous statements and mean ‘Yes.’ The latter “SO” in line 2 is an adverb referring to the previous statement, like English ‘so’ in ‘I think so.’ The second “so” in line 4 is a pre-TCU vocalization, indicating that the speaker intends to continue speaking and the last “so” is an English adverb modifying “kind” and shows the degree of kindness. In this way, Miho frequently uses ‘so’s in various ways both in English and Japanese. This indicates that the word ‘so’ is unique in the following ways: first, it has meanings both in Japanese and English; second, both English and Japanese ‘so’ share some similar meanings; and third, both English and Japanese ‘so’ appear in similar places in an utterance such as at the beginning or at the end of a TCU, often with similar functions. Thus, Japanese may tend to use ‘so’ frequently when speaking English, and this phenomenon may be considered a kind of positive transfer when it is used naturally in English conversation. As the above Examples 10, 11, and 12 show, Miho uses Japanese ‘SO’ in Japanese TCUs and English ‘so’ in English TCUs. In this sense, she does not seem to mix Japanese and English ‘so.’

Frequent use of English ‘so’ occurs also in Sayuri’s speech in Data Set 1 as we have shown in previous examples. She, however, does not use obvious Japanese ‘SO’ in English discourse and rarely uses Japanese ‘SO,’ while Miho frequently uses Japanese ‘SO’ in the conversation with Kate in English, though as mentioned above, she does not seem to mix both ‘so’ at the TCU level. Perhaps this is because Ken, Sayuri’s interlocutor, does not use Japanese as well as Kate, Miho’s interlocutor. Another reason lies in the fact that Sayuri’s English level is higher than Miho’s, and thus Sayuri may depend on Japanese less than Miho.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have analyzed the characteristics of three vocalizations UN, HU::N, and SO and found that these expressions can serve a number of important discourse functions and can help NSJs conversing in English to (1) claim a turn; (2) fill otherwise awkward pauses and make up for their lack of fluency in English; (3) adjust their speaking pace; (4) construct a systematically sound utterance; and (5) relinquish a turn. In this way, these brief expressions can be useful tools to enhance smooth communication with native speakers of English.

Both Japanese speakers in our data successfully communicated with the native speakers with whom they were interacting. They participated actively in the conversation, frequently using these brief expressions as pre-TCU or post-TCU vocalizations. The reactions of both native speakers were favorable. They felt comfortable with the Japanese speakers' conversation style. This suggests that placement and timing may be more important than the nature of the expression. Thus, appropriate use of these signals can be an important strategy for ESL learners. Therefore, perhaps teachers should be made aware that there are tools and strategies to enhance the smooth flow of conversation. At the same time, we must be cautious not to generalize our findings, as the data are limited and the native speakers in our data have lived in Japan for a long time and understand Japanese norms well. Thus, further research will be necessary to see whether these tokens are useful in communication with native speakers of English who are not familiar with Japanese culture and Japanese norms.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions List

[or []	Overlapping utterances.
=	Contiguous utterances.
(0.0)	Length of pauses or silence in tenths of a second.
(.)	An untimed pause or micro-pause.
:	A colon indicates an extension of the sound or syllable.
:::	More colons prolong the stretch.
.	A period indicates a stopping fall in tone, not necessarily the end of a sentence.
,	A comma indicates a continuing intonation, not necessarily between clauses of sentences.
?	A question mark indicates a rising inflection, not necessarily a question.
—	Emphasis is indicated by underlining.
CAPS	Utterances interpreted as Japanese.
hh	Audible outbreath.
(h)	The aspiration which occurs inside the boundaries of a word.
(())	Double parentheses are used to enclose a description of some phenomenon such as vocalizations that are not spelled gracefully or recognizably, other details of the conversational scene, or various characterizations of the talk or laughs.
><	The combination of “more than” and “less than” symbols indicates that the talk between them is compressed or rushed.
<>	The inverse order of “more than” and “less than” symbols indicates that a stretch of talk is markedly slowed or drawn out.
—	A dash marks the cut-off of the current sound.
bold	The target utterances discussed such as pre- or post-TCU vocalizations.
→	The lines which contain boldfaced target utterances.