Interruptions and Silences in Discourse:
A Comparative Study

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談話におけるわりこみと沈黙

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study which compared interruptions and silences in discourse of Japanese Speakers of English (JSE's) with Canadian Native Speakers of English (NSE's). Contrary to expectation there was no significant difference in either the total number of interruptions, for each speaker or between the two cultural groups. With silences, in depth statistical analysis was not carried out due to the very few silences that were observed. However, simple mathematical calculations showed that contrary to expectation, the NSE group had more long silences than the JSE group. Overall, the JSE group had an equal amount of inter- and intra-turn silences while the NSE group had twice as many intra-turn silences as inter-turn silences.

Key words: intrusive interruption, cooperative interruption, turn boundary, turn construction unit, transition relevance place.

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　本稿は、日本語を母語とする人と、カナダで英語を母語とする人の談話において、わりこみと沈黙に焦点をあて、母語の異なるふたつのグループの、英語による談話を比較した研究について報告する。予想に反して、個々の話者のあいだにも、ふたつの異なった文化をもつグループ間にも、統計上の有意なちがいはなかった。沈黙に関しては、データがとぼしく統計的な分析はできなかったものの、単純な計算の結果は、意外にも英語を母語とするグループの方が、日本語を母語とするグループより、長く沈黙していることを示した。全体としては、自分のターンの最中の沈黙 (intra-turn silences) は、両グループともほぼ同じで、一方英語を母語とするグループはターンとターンの間の沈黙 (inter-turn silences) が、自分のターンのなかでの沈黙の2倍の頻度でおこった。

キーワード：じゃまなさえぎり、協調的さえぎり、ターンの区切れ、ターン構成単位、トランジション・レレバンス・プレイス

Interruptions and silences in discourse:

According to Sacks et al., 'occurrences of more that one speaker at time are common, but brief' (1974, p.706). This is explained by the fact that simultaneous talk occurs around Transition Relevance Places (TRP's, the completion point of a Turn Construction Unit such as sentential, clausal, phrasal and lexical constructions) and is referred to as 'overlap'. In contrast, where simultaneous talk occurs that is far from a TRP, it is referred to as an interruption. This rather technical definition of interruption contrasts with the more intuitive approach of Edelsky (1981) where 'participant sense' of the 'interrupter' and 'interruptee' needs to be taken into account.

Interruptions are generally seen as violations of speaking rights (Bilmes, 1997). Jefferson (1983: 6) describes interruptions as "starting up 'in the midst of' another's turn at talk, not letting the other finish". According to James & Clarke (1993: 273) "the word 'interruption', both in ordinary usage and in the usage of most researchers, has negative connotations, implying violation of another's right to speak". Bilmes sees interruption as "special; and conversationalists, it is thought will generally avoid doing it" (508).

While some claim that all overlapping speech is interruptive (Wiens et al. 1965). Others site instances where this is not the case such as with 'backchannel utterances' which are not aimed at taking the turn away from the current speaker. Based on the Sacks (1974) definitions it is mid-utterance overlaps that are interruptive as opposed to overlaps at a point where the end of an utterance can be projected.

Murata (1994) classifies interruptions into two main types: cooperative (CI) and intrusive (II). The latter is subdivided into three categories, topic changing, floor taking and disagreement interruptions. Comparing Native Speakers of English (NSE) with Native Speakers of Japanese (NSJ), and Japanese Speakers of English (JSE), with NSE-NSE, NSJ-NSJ and NSE-NSJ, she found that the frequency of use of different types of interruptions varied across cultures. Interruptions usually take place at non-TRP's and often but do not always result in overlap. Murata found that CI's and II's were used equally in the English interactions (NSE-NSE and NSE-JSE), and that the total number of interruptions in the English interactions was higher than in the Japanese interactions. In the NSJ-NSJ interaction, the number of interruptions was less than in the English interactions, with fewer CI's and significantly fewer II's.

Interestingly Murata found that while Japanese speakers very rarely used II's in the Japa-

nese interaction, they did use them more frequently in the NSE-JSE interaction. Some of the reasons given for this include adjustment or over adjustment to the target conversation style and interruption originating from delayed response. To this I would add the likelihood of the problem of identifying TRP's by the JSE's due to their lower level of proficiency of English.

Murata probes further the cultural values associated with interruption and explains that due to 'its power to change topics or conversational turns unwarrantedly, interruption often conveys negative meaning' (p.386), but cautions that interpretation of interruption may vary across cultures. Thus while in some cultures interruptions may be viewed as a sign of active participation, in other cultures, 'it may be considered rude, aggressive or showing disrespect to the speaker' (p.387). She uses Widdowson's terminology of 'cooperative imperative' ('which provides for the need for social interaction'), in the former and 'territorial imperative' in the case of the latter ('which provides for individual security'). Scollon & Scollon (1995) refer to the same phenomena as 'involvement' and 'independence' and also solidarity and 'deference' (p.36 − 38). Thus interpretation depends on relative cultural values hence the likelihood of misunderstanding and conflict in cross-cultural interaction.

McLaughlin (1984) points out that interruption is often regarded 'as a correlate of speaker dominance or power' (p.125), but asserts that 'most speakers do not regard them as significant and take them in their stride. This is borne out in this study where all three NSE's and two of the three JSE's stated in their questionnaire that they were 'not annoyed at all' when interrupted by another speaker.

Schegloff (2000), studied interruptions with reference to repair to test the claim that there 'are rarely interruptions by other initiation' i.e. interrupting in order to 'repair' and found 16 instances of interruptions, in a sample of 350, by other initiation (p.228).

For the purpose of this study, Murata's definition of Intrusive Interruption will be used: intentional actions of interrupting at non-TRP's where there is an attempt by the interrupter to take the floor, change topic, or express disagreement.

As with interruptions, cultural perceptions regarding silences in discourse make it a central issue in cross-cultural communication. Indeed Scollon (1981) cites studies conducted by several psychologists and psycholinguists which show that 'pausing is a factor of considerable significance in human communication' (ibid).

The Sacks et al. (1974) model of turn-taking allows for the occurrence of silence in turn-taking:

(a) speaker change recurs, or at least occurs;

(b) transition with no gap and overlap are common;

(c) talk can be continuous or discontinuous.

In (a) and (b), the model refers to speaker changes at TRP's and allows for slight 'gaps' (silence after a possible completion point) or 'pauses' (silence after a turn where a next speaker has been selected) (Sacks et al. 1974, p.715). Rule 14 allows for 'discontinuities' at TRP's 'when a current speaker has stopped, no speaker starts (or continues), and the ensuing space of non-talk constitutes itself as more than a gap...a lapse' (ibid). Lapses in conversation are usually preceded by minimal responses. Topic failure is also acknowledged as a possible cause of lapses; 'the roots of interactive silence in conversation must for the most part be found in extra-conversational sources, such as the knowledge and interests of the parties to talk' (McLaughlin, 1984: p.122).

Four kinds of pauses are recognized by Scollon and Scollon, those taken for time to think (cognitive), those taken so that the other conversationalist may take over the floor (interactive), those taken so that the other may give feedback without actually taking the floor (backchannel), and those caused by other factors such as a 'cough' (Scollon and Scollon, 1995: p.64).

Terminology used by McLaughlin is 'hesitation' pauses (within turn silences), 'switching' pauses (inter-turn, or post/pre-turn silences) and 'initiative time latencies' which refer to the 'length of time it takes the current speaker to retake the floor after she realizes that her partner is not going to respond'. Thus both hesitation pauses and initiative time latencies are bounded on both sides by the same speaker.

McLaughlin quotes several studies where there is the possibility of different cultural interpretations (McLaughlin 1984: p.113). Inter-turn pause length is discussed by the Scollons with longer pauses attributed to independence politeness strategies usually associated with Western cultural values and shorter pauses attributed to involvement politeness strategies usually associated with Eastern cultural beliefs. Thus the three politeness systems of solidarity and deference are associated with relatively shorter, and longer pause lengths respectively, while hierarchical systems are characterized by different pause lengths of the superior and subordinate (Scollon, 1995, p.65) Interestingly the Scollons have observed that 'even a very small difference in timing of inter-turn pauses can lead conversationalists to

develop negative attitudes toward each other' (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, p.63). Eades (2000) who studied the use of silences in courtroom discourse of Australian Aboriginal witnesses, acknowledges 'the importance of communicative style differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people' (p.167). Her earlier research found that Aboriginal people 'often feel comfortable with quite lengthy silences in their conversations' and that 'silences are not interpreted by Aboriginal interlocutors as indicating that communication has broken down'. By contrast she quotes studies of discourse in mainstream Western English-speaking societies which show that 'interlocutors feel uncomfortable with silences that are longer than about one second'.

Wong, having observed Non-native speaker discourse in L2, surmises whether the silences were the result of 'heightened concern' about 'misunderstanding or miscommunication' (Wong, 2000, p.255)

For the purpose of this study, both intra-turn and inter-turn silences of between 1 and 1.9 seconds and those of 2 seconds or more will be considered. While intra-turn silences will be attributed to the current speaker, inter-turn silences will not be attributed to any speaker.

Research method

Two discussion groups of three speakers each were set up. The first group consisted of three Japanese Speakers of English (JSE's) A, B and C, and the second group consisted of three Native Speakers of English (NSE's) D, E and F. The groups were given three topics X, Y and Z and asked to discuss each topic for fifteen minutes. Both groups were given the same predetermined topics, presented in the same order. The topic was revealed immediately prior to the discussion. The topics were discussed in the same order in each group, viz. X, Y and Z. The topics were chosen so as not to give one group an unfair advantage over the other. Therefore care was taken in choosing topics that were not too culture specific or taboo and where much background information was not necessary. They were topics which the participants could relate to directly through their own day-to-day experiences. The topics were:

X: Leisure and entertainment in the year 2050

Y: Lifestyles in the year 2050

Z: Employment in the year 2050

The discussions were recorded on audio tape. The recorded discussions were then tran-

scribed and analyzed for interruptions and silences.

The rationale for using three participants per group was that the speech event under study was 'natural' conversation among friends (McLaughlin, 1984, Ch. 7). Three was therefore considered an optimum number for the study which was based on audio recordings only, making transcribing more manageable. With larger groups, there is also the possibility of the conversation breaking down into two-party exchanges (Langford 1994, p108).

Limitations of the research method (see Wanduragala, C. 2000 "Turn-Taking a comparative study of Backchannelling Behavior of Japanese and Native Speakers of English," Journal of Osaka Jogakuin (Vol. 30: 148)).

Variables

In order to increase comparability of the two groups, key variables needed to be controlled. Seven variables, cultural background, gender, age, participant acqaintanceship, English proficiency and familiarity with the other group's culture were controlled. The personality variable was measured but not controlled.

Method of Analysis

The taped discussions were transcribed and coded. The raw data was analyzed using simple totals and averages and then subjected to more rigorous statistical analysis. In particular, the chi-square test was used to test the hypothesis.

Limitations of the method of analysis (see Wanduragala, C. 2000 "Turn-Taking a comparative study of Backchannelling Behavior of Japanese and Native Speakers of English," Journal of Osaka Jogakuin (Vol. 30: 148)).

Results:

1. Interruptions

Table 1 : Number of interruptions

	JSE					NSE			
	A	B	C	Total		D	E	F	total
X	13	4	7	24	X	6	18	10	34
Y	14	5	5	24	Y	9	14	5	28
Z	13	2	3	18	Z	10	13	9	32
Total	40	11	15	66	Total	25	45	24	94
(ave)	13	4	5	22	(ave)	8	15	8	31
%	60%	17%	23%	100%	%	27%	48%	25%	100%

The results show a slight difference in the number of interruptions between the two groups with the JSE's accounting for fewer than the NSE group. Both groups showed one speaker

interrupting much more than the other two speakers in the group. In the JSE group the dominant speaker A accounted for most of the interruptions while in the NSE group it was speaker E, rather than the dominant speaker D, who did the most interrupting.

A chi-square test was conducted using the above data. Based on a 0.05 (5%) level of significance and 2 degrees of freedom, if x>5.991 it shows a difference in the number of interruptions by the two different groups. The chi-square value for the above data was 1.07 proving that there was no significant difference in the total number of interruptions for the two different groups for all three topics.

2. Silences*

Two categories of silences were identified:

Short pauses=1.0−1.9 seconds

Long pauses=2 seconds or longer

The table shows inter-turn and intra-turn silences as inter/intra respectively e.g. for the JSE's topic X had 4 inter-turn and 4 intra-turn silences shown as 4/4 in the table.

Table 2: Number of inter-turn/intra-turn silences (in seconds)

	JSE					NSE			
	short	long	total	G. tot		short	long	total	G. tot
X	4/4	1/1	5/5	10	X	2/7	5/2	7/9	16
Y	2/9	−/−	2/9	11	Y	−/8	1/1	1/9	10
Z	7/2	3/3	10/5	15	Z	−/5	4/0	4/5	9
Total	13/15	4/4	17/19	36	Total	2/20	10/3	12/23	35
G. tot	28	8	36	—	G. tot	22	13	35	—
%	78%	22%	100%		%	63%	37%	100%	

*the terms 'silence' and 'pause' are used interchangeably in this study.

Overall there were very few silences in the discussions, averaging around 12 per topic. Therefore further statistical analysis was not carried out. The two groups did not differ very much in the total number of silences. Surprisingly, the NSE group had more long silences than the JSE group. Overall, the JSE group had an equal amount of inter and intra-turn silences while the NSE group had twice as many intra-turn silences as inter-turn ones.

Discussion

1. Interruptions

The total number of interruptions was less in the JSE discussions. This is consistent with

cultural expectations. The dominant speaker A accounted for most of the group's interruptions. This could possibly be explained by her more extroverted personality. The interruptions were mainly of the floor taking type (77%). There were very few disagreement interruptions (13%) and even fewer topic-changing interruptions (10%).

In the NSE discussions too, the most frequent type of interruptions was the floor taking type (70%), however disagreement interruptions accounted for 29% of all interruptions. There were only two topic-changing interruptions in the NSE discussions. The greater frequency of interruptions in the NSE discussions, with a large proportion of those being of the disagreement type, might be seen as rude from the Japanese perspective although it is usually expected and accepted by NSE's as a stimulating challenge, showing active participation in the discussion. In certain discourse situations, such as academic discussions, business meetings and negotiations, such disagreement interruptions are commonly used and are often positively viewed by participants.

Silences

There were very few silences overall for both groups. This is most probably due to the type of discussion; i.e. informal conversation among friends. Besides, controlling other variables, such as gender and age also helped to keep pauses to a minimum. This is particularly significant in the case of the JSE's where hierarchical relationships based on factors such as age and gender could affect discourse behavior.

Silences observed were mainly of the short type (between 1.0-1.9 seconds). NSE's had more long pauses of which the majority were inter-turn silences. This could be accounted for by the relatively more frequent instances of topic exhaustion (four times) in the NSE discussions. Short pauses for both groups were mainly cognitive or hesitation pauses (Scollon and Scollon 1995: p.64).

Summary and conclusion

This study showed that contrary to the stereotypical image of the Japanese as a result of which relatively more silences and fewer interruptions would be expected, Japanese could be just as talkative as native speakers showing tightly latched turns, interruptions and only a few pauses. It would be worth reminding Japanese EFL learners that they are not so different behaviorally from NSE's in the above respects. This is important in terms of confidence building since Japanese students often come to the EFL classroom with a negative, defeatist attitude about their communication skills. While language proficiency is undeniably an important factor, the significance of effective communication strategies and affec-

tive factors such as a positive attitude, should be emphasized by EFL instructors.

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