

# Disfluency: An Opposite or an Absence?

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Although there exists a large literature on the concept of fluency (e.g., Chambers, 1997; Lennon, 1990; McCarthy, 2010), the opposite concept, disfluency (or dysfluency) is often touched on only briefly and by default assumed to consist of a “lack of fluency.” In this paper I suggest that an understanding of the actual nature of disfluency will be of benefit in helping to develop students’ speaking skills. I outline some recurrent behaviors in students’ spoken interaction that can be described as “disfluency markers.” These include: LI marking, pause phenomena, LI style backchannels, and minimal conversation turns. I suggest that awareness raising and active avoidance of disfluency markers will help students move towards a more naturalistic speaking style.

流暢性についての論文は多数あるにもかかわらず (Chambers, 1997; Lennon, 1990; McCarthy, 2010)、正反対の流暢性不全についての論文は少ない。この論文のテーマの流暢性不全の性質が分かれば、学生のスピーキングスキルを上達させる手助けになる。この論文は、学生の言葉のやりとりの中で頻発する言動である流暢性不全標識について述べる。例えば、母語談話標識、会話の途切れ、母語での相槌、短い会話のやりとり (順番) などである。事前に流暢性不全標識に対する意識を上げ、使用しない事によって、学生が自然的なスピーキングスタイルに近づく手助けになる。

**M**OST TEACHERS of a foreign or second language would at some level align with the proposition that part of the job is to move the learners towards higher levels of fluency, with learners being able to speak in a fashion which is smoother, faster, and less self-conscious than was the case prior to instruction. However, the precise definition of what constitutes spoken fluency is by no means a simple task. It seems that fluency is a multi-component concept, and that rather than a simple checklist of items that are deemed necessary and sufficient to define fluency, the interplay between components leads to the conceptualization of fluency as a gestalt.

In this paper, I propose that in addition to identifying likely components that constitute fluency, the concept can also be partially understood by reference to the concept of disfluency; disfluency is not entirely an absence of certain components of fluency, but rather, disfluency also has components and contours. It is both an opposite and an absence. To understand fluency and disfluency in these terms can aid teachers in the connected but distinct tasks of helping students develop fluency and avoid disfluency.



## A Metaphor of Teaching

Language learning usually follows a gradient, beginning with a state of unknowing, followed by partial or passive knowledge of components of the language and thence active ability to use the language, initially consciously and with effort and later in a more automatic manner. The gap between the unknowing state and the passive knowledge state is the main area of concern for many learners and teachers, and as Widdowson (1978) stated, “It has commonly been supposed that once [linguistic skills] are acquired in reasonable measure the communicative abilities will follow as a more or less automatic consequence” (p. 67). In this schema, the learner gains fluency as a by-product of lexis and grammar activities directed by the teacher.

In contrast to this acquisitional metaphor for language, part of language learning may also involve a subtractive process. That is, rather than a continuous increase of uptake of the *stuff* of language, there may be a place in language teaching for unlearning, avoiding, and actively setting aside aspects of language performance. In this schema, in addition to the absence of elements such as smallwords (also called fillers), disfluency also consists in part of the presence of discrete items, certain behaviors and traits in speaking that are recurrent and orderly and that hinder the ability of the speaker to interact in the target language in real time in a natural manner.

Developing fluency may consist of two separate teaching outlooks. The first is the additive process through which learners add elements to their existing language abilities and the second is subtractive, which involves focusing on items to be removed and actively removing them from the suite of behaviors of the speaker. This paper is based on observations I have made regarding the situation of Japanese learners of English both in institutional and noninstitutional settings. No claims are made regarding the comprehensiveness of the list of disfluency markers discussed below, nor their applicability to other L1 learners

of English. Nonetheless, the features of disfluency described are notable in that they are recurrent both within the talk of individual speakers and across a variety of different speakers in video data I have collected. Furthermore they are not exclusively related to strict notions of “level” as measured by scores on standardized tests such as TOEIC or other measures of lexical and grammatical knowledge.

## Fluency in the Literature

The word *fluency* is widely used and understood in a general sense by nonspecialists when describing the abilities of a speaker to use a language to engage in all of the normal transactional and interactional practices of daily life. However, to “tease out the empirical foundations of fluency” (McCarthy, 2010, p. 2) is a far from straightforward task. There exists a large and varied literature on fluency, (e.g., Brown, 2004; Chambers, 1997; Fillmore, 1979; Lennon, 1990) but Heike commented that there is also a plethora of “vacuous definitions” (cited in McCarthy, 2010, p. 2). In seeking to avoid vagueness, McCarthy (2010) described speed, chunking, marking, and turn-boundary behavior as some of the central components of fluency. Similarly, in this paper I seek to identify some of the central components of disfluency I have perceived.

## Components of Disfluency

As with fluency, disfluency can only partially be understood by reference to a discrete list of items that are necessary and sufficient. It may be more fully comprehended in terms of a gestalt, that is, a whole that is different in nature from the parts from which it is constituted. None of the items outlined below, which will be referred to as disfluency markers, are sufficient in and of themselves to label talk as disfluent if present individually in the speech of learners. Rather, the placement and

frequency of the disfluency markers and the interplay between the disfluency markers and fluency markers contribute to the sense of language use being more or less fluent or disfluent. The points outlined below are offered as possible contenders in the interplay of unfolding speech components that may or may not constitute a sense of disfluency in any particular case.

The following points are all derived from video recordings of Japanese university students over a 3-year period, 2011-2013. Students (2011:  $n = 13$ ; 2012:  $n = 14$ ; 2013:  $n = 20$ ) were non-English majors ranging from 2nd- to 4th-year university, enrolled on an elective English course meeting twice a week. In each year the students were videoed in April, July, and December, yielding approximately 150 minutes of video. The data were transcribed according to conversation analysis transcription conventions (see Appendix A). The students were engaged in a variety of classroom activities, ranging from formal language-learning activities, to free activities, in which students exercised autonomy over topic selection and negotiation, group membership, and so on. The points will be illustrated by examples from transcripts of the recordings. Although many of the disfluency markers are highly individuated, they are recurrent across various speakers (e.g., one speaker used the Japanese marker *eto* 12 times in a 5-minute stretch of discourse, and a different speaker in a different setting used the same marker three times in 5 minutes.) This recurrence is taken to show that they count as disfluency markers, rather than idiosyncrasies that are unique to that speaker and that speaker only, at that time and that time only.

### Silence and Pausing

Ellis (1991) stated that Japanese learners of English are more likely to use silence as a strategic resource when interacting in the target language. Silences can seem unbearably long and disconcerting to people who are expecting the interactional norm of “no-gap no-overlap” (Schegloff, 1987). See Nakane (2007)

for a comprehensive account of silence in Japanese L1 speaker interactions.

Silences often occur at speaker transition points, especially in sequences that resemble the first two parts of a three-part classroom exchange structure as shown in Excerpt 1. Speaker Y has constructed a recognizable turn construction unit (TCU) and has reached a transition relevance place (TRP) which is oriented to as such by speaker M. (This is a dyad so no other speaker is or can be nominated by Y.) M engages in a repeated finger-to-palm gesture, with averted gaze, possibly signaling a word search, but the lengthy pause at line 4 is not normative in fluent interaction, in which the metric is “one beat of silence” (Jefferson, 1989). A related point is the use of so-called “word-by-word” utterances (line 1), in which each individual word is separated by a micro-pause.

#### Excerpt 1

01 Y: Whato (1.1) did you (1.0) do  
 02 (2.1)  
 03 Y: weekend this (0.9) last weekend? weekend  
 04 (4.8)  
 05 M: >Part time job<

It may be hard to define accurately what constitutes a disfluent pause from a normative pause, because pausing is certainly a feature of normal speech by monolingual and native users of a language. The placement of pauses (between turns or within turns), the duration of pauses, and the overall frequency of pauses in the interaction all are factors to consider when considering pause phenomenon and its contribution to a sense of fluency or disfluency.

## Reversion to L1

The use of the L1 by learners engaging in L2 speaking is a multi-faceted phenomenon, encompassing at one end of the spectrum codeswitching and translanguaging that are, or can be, deliberate, conscious, and serving some interactional purpose, including an element of recipient design. At the other end of the spectrum is the unconscious use of the L1 or L1 use that is essentially a sign of failure to proceed in the L2. As with many aspects of fluency, the frequency, nature, and placement of L1 utterances informs a subjective, localized evaluation of degree of fluency or disfluency of the speaker. Nonetheless, some L1 usage clearly has a role in contributing to a sense that the L2 utterance is less than fully fluent.

Firstly, there is the use of the L1 that is conscious and deliberate and multi-turn (Excerpt 2, lines 8-17) and constitutes a conscious abandonment of the L2 interaction.

### Excerpt 2

- 01 R: What kind of job (.) what °do you° will  
 02 you:: have part time job  
 03 C: Uh::I want to(.) some(.) café (6.0) I (1.6)  
 04 don't don't decide a (1.0)  
 05 C: uh  
 06 R: I don't decide ah (2.9) [café, ] eh?  
 07 A: [((inaudible))]  
 08 R: Kimeta?  
 (Have you decided?)  
 09 C: mada (.) not I don't decide.  
 (not yet)

- 10 R: kimeteinai?  
 (you haven't decided?)  
 11 C: Uh.  
 (That's right.)  
 12 R: >Baito kimeteinai<  
 (You haven't decided on a part time job?)  
 13 C: So.  
 (Yeah)  
 14 R: >Kedo hataraku no?<  
 (But you're planning to work?)  
 15 R: Eh!↑  
 (Right?)  
 16 C: >raigetsu chujun<  
 (middle of next month)  
 17 R: Kimaru hahaha  
 (You decide. hahaha)

Secondly, there is the semi-conscious use of the L1, which may be corrected or excused (see Excerpt 3, line 2). This fragment displays two separate but related uses of L1. The first incidence is the seemingly initially unconscious use of the Japanese word *tanjoubi* (birthday), which the speaker immediately notices and then adds an insertion in Japanese that is a kind of meta-discourse about the need for correction, literally “No, not *tanjoubi*,” before supplying the appropriate English word, *birthday*. This kind of insertion of a stretch of L1 meta-discourse dealing with procedural matters is a recurrent behavior among many Japanese students. Other examples of this kind of L1 meta-discourse insertion sequence are *ja nakutte* (no, not that) and *chigau* (wrong).



## Excerpt 8

01 J: . . . are watching very closely to see what  
 02 happens next.  
 03 G: >Do you do you< get the sense, er listening  
 04 to Hilary Clinton this week  
 05 G: >and and<

## Excerpt 9

01 G: purely coincide[ntally] no doubt this week=  
 02 J: [yah ]  
 03 G: =I mean >ah th i i i< they are the  
 04 kingmakers aren't they?

## Excerpt 10

01 B: >abuh< hundreds of thousands of people were  
 02 killed and also the  
 03 B: the Ame >you know< the West lost more than  
 04 two trillion dollars

## Excerpt 11

01 G: Jonathon?  
 02 J: Well >I I I< I'm not saying that there is a

In these excerpts, one kind of hesitation and restarting in native speaker English seems to comprise very rapid repetition of a single lexical item, often a monosyllable, two or possibly three times, often with a marker such as *well* or *you know* and then a pauseless transition to a full turn. On the other hand, the nonnative speaker in Excerpts 6 and 7 uses a prolonged nonlexical utterance (Ah:::) and then builds the turn over successive restarts

from the very first word, and in Excerpt 7, four repetitions of the turn initial *I* with progressively longer additions. This restart phenomenon is a feature of many learners' utterances in spontaneous speaking. It seems clear from these excerpts that forward planning of turns at talk often requires speakers, native or not, to engage in restarts. However, the way that native or highly proficient speakers perform restarts is different from that of learners, both in terms of speed and the number of repetitions. The progressive building of the turns with one-word increments is a characteristic of many Japanese learners of English.

**Backchanneling**

In normal spoken interaction, listeners do not sit silently while the speaker completes his or her turn. Instead, they engage in constant verbal and nonverbal behaviors that signal attentiveness, interest, agreement, and so on. Such behavior is termed *backchanneling* (Yngve, 1970). In Japanese, these kinds of listener practices are referred to as *aizuchi* (LoCastro, 1987). Japanese *aizuchi* differ from normative English backchannels in several ways. Many are nonlexical in nature, such as *ah*, *eh*, and *so*. They are often prolonged and can have sharply rising intonation. *Aizuchi* are often accompanied by nonverbal motions, such as raised eyebrows, direct gaze, and rounded mouth. The use of Japanese *aizuchi* during English language interactions is often habitual, prominent, and seemingly unconscious by many Japanese speakers (see Excerpt 12) and as was the case of L1 marking, is not a noticeable feature of non-Japanese learners of English.

## Excerpt 12

01 M: I have, teiki (.) dakara I want to::: eto:  
 02 M: Sanomi[ya or Umeda ]  
 03 K: [Ah:::~::~:::] Ah:::~::~:::

04 M: Want to (.) [new (.) job]  
 05 K: [ Ah:::~::~:]=  
 06 K: = ah:::~::~: (( Nodding vigorously))

### Lack of Marking

One central difference between the spoken and written variants of English (and other languages) is the presence in spoken language of certain words “that help to keep our speech flowing, yet do not contribute essentially to the message itself” (Hasselgreen, 2004, p. 162). Hasselgreen reported that the presence or absence of these words are key indicators of fluency. These words are termed *smallwords*, but elsewhere they are called *discourse markers* or sometimes *fillers*.

McCarthy (2010), citing corpus evidence, reported on the very high frequency of these words in spoken language, and reported that they are usually spoken more quickly and quietly than the surrounding discourse. It stands to reason that if the words contribute to perceptions of fluency, then their absence must contribute to perceptions of disfluency, although listeners may be hard put to identify that it is the absence of these words that is causing the disfluency perception. In my video recordings of students speaking, in the initial recordings, smallwords were completely absent in all cases. Consider the following two excerpts (13 and 14) from April and January respectively.

#### Excerpt 13 (April)

01 R: What what are you doi::ng what will you:: be  
 02 doing in Golden week?  
 03 A: (2.0) I might( 0.3) go to Aquarium  
 04 R: Aqua?  
 05 A: °Aquarium [suizokan°]  
 06 C: [Aquarium]

07 C: [Ah::]  
 08 R: [Ah:::], sounds good. How about you?  
 09 C: Uhm (1.0) I (0.8) maybe I think I (0.9) I  
 10 work every day.

#### Excerpt 14 (January)

01 C: >yeah yeah yeah yeah< I think so oh actually  
 02 I wi- I I’m going to::  
 03 C: snowboarding in February  
 04 R: Oh nice  
 05 C: with my boyfriend=  
 06 R: =Yeah, yeah, yeah=  
 07 C: =So you you know >I mean< I maybe I will  
 08 go::  
 09 C: >Akakura Onsen[shiki< area]  
 10 R: [°yeah yeah°]  
 11 C: Do you know >Akakura Onsen< oh >have you  
 12 ever been to<  
 13 C: snowboarding or skiing  
 14 R: Well I don’t know Akakura Onse[n ]

Notice that despite being similar in treatment of topic (enquiries into plans for upcoming vacations) the two excerpts are very different in the use of smallwords. Excerpt 13 has zero occurrences and Excerpt 14 displays automatized use of *you know*, and *I mean* (line 7), spoken more quickly than the surrounding discourse and line 14 showing the use of *well* in a turn initial position after a complex question sequence, which is a normative practice.

### Sudden Topic Shift

Management of topic can also contribute to an impression of disfluency. One feature of much learner talk is the occurrence of sudden topic disjunctures, as illustrated in Excerpt 15, line 4.

#### Excerpt 15

- 01 C: I got up toda:::y eh::: five (0.3) fifty (0.8  
02 fifty  
03 A: °Five fifty°  
04 C: Five fifty fifty  
05 R: Ah:: do you have boyfriend?  
06 C: Yes I have [Hahaha]  
07 R: [Hahaha]

In this case, a short series of turns concerning wake up times comes to an end and R introduces the new topic of boyfriends. Not only is the new topic introduced without any kind of marking or preamble (its sociocultural appropriateness notwithstanding), the preceding topic is simply abandoned, without any of the topic closing sequences common to normative interaction. Throughout this conversation similar disjunctures recurred. Drew and Holt (1998) dealt with one particular way that topic shift is managed, namely the summarizing of the discourse so far using a figurative expression, followed by several short turns of mutual agreement, then a new topic being introduced preceded by realignment expressions such as *well* or *anyways*. In addition to this practice they also stated, “There are, of course, other means besides figurative assessments by which a current topic can be brought to a close; e.g., repetition is commonly associated with terminating a topic” (p. 504).

These other means do not include simple termination. Such an abrupt topic shift is nonnormative, the more so if done repeatedly during the discourse and after very brief treatment of the previous topic.

### Minimalized Turns

Cook (1989) described short turns as one of the defining characteristics of conversational discourse. He notes that if a speaker continues a turn for 20 minutes the discourse can no longer be said to be a conversation. However, a series of too short turns is also nonnormative. Reichman (1990) described normative expectations of participants in daily talk:

Educated, mainstream middle class adults expect a lot of feedback on topics that they introduce into the conversation. They expect their coparticipants to engage in the topic with them. They expect them to develop the topic, discuss alternatives to the proposed content and provide variations on a same theme with them. (p. 28)

In contrast to this set of expectations, many Japanese speakers engage in English interactions with very brief turns at talk (see Iwata, 2010, for an account of “underelaboration” in Japanese speakers’ talk in English). A single short turn is not a disfluent event, but a series of short turns in succession may be viewed as a marker of disfluency, as in the exchange in Excerpt 16.

#### Excerpt 16

- 01 Y: Whato (1.1) did you (1.0) do  
02 (2.1)  
03 Y: weekend this (0.9) last weekend? weekend  
04 (4.8)  
05 M: Part time job

- 06 Y: Oh? eh what whato what job?  
 07 M: Conbini (.) ence store  
 08 Y: Eh where? where?  
 09 M: (1.9) Near (.) my home.  
 10 Y: My home? (1.0) °my° near.  
 11 M: Near.  
 12 Y: Near eh? Seven Eleven?  
 13 M: No circle K.  
 14 Y: Circle K? Circle K Circle K ah ah ah:::

In this exchange, speaker M engages in a series of short turns that treat the questions of speaker Y as transactional in nature rather than interactional and fulfills none of the functions referred to by Reichman (1990). Such turn structure, if pursued, would probably result in swift termination of the interaction in real-world conversational settings.

## Discussion

If we accept that (an increased level of) fluency is a goal for learners, it follows that there must be such a thing as suboptimal fluency, which may in some cases be termed disfluency. But the thing called disfluency consists of both an absence (e.g., consistent lack of smallwords) and also a presence (e.g., the recurrence of L1 markers or grammatical infelicities), and also the presence of absence (e.g., prefacing turns with multi-second silences in which the absence is noticeable in a way that lack of smallwords may not be.) The gestalt nature of fluency and its interrelationship with its counterpart, disfluency, and the partly subjective nature of assessments of these two concepts render any empirical account of either a problematic task. In addition, there may exist disfluency markers that are typical of a particular L1. These difficulties make any discussion of disfluency problematical, but not impossible.

In *reductio ad absurdum*, if a speaker prefaced *every* turn with a multi-second silence, began *every* turn with multiple and incremental restarts, produced only minimized turns, resorted to frequent L1 expressions both consciously and unconsciously, proceeded in *all* turns in a word-by-word fashion at a rate slower than normative L1 speakers, and whose speech included the other points referred to above, we would then have some empirical basis for labeling the talk as disfluent. It is highly subjective to speculate about the point between *every turn* and *no turns* at which the assessment of disfluency would start to be leveled, and which particular aspects contribute most to the sense of disfluency. Nonetheless, the items referred to in this paper may serve as a starting point from which to identify something of the nature of disfluency.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined a number of behaviors that recur in the speech of Japanese speakers of English that appear, in my opinion, to contribute to a sense of disfluency. Some of the items are based on temporal aspects of talk; others focus on turn structure, vocabulary use, and use of the L1. None of these in isolation is sufficient to render talk disfluent, but when they occur in clusters, repeatedly and prominently, there comes a tipping point when they overshadow other positive aspects of the speaker's interactional competence. I suggested that awareness by learners and teachers alike of the multi-component but orderly nature of disfluency can only be of benefit for students as they develop the ability to speak. An avenue for further research may be to assess to what extent awareness of disfluency can be raised in the classroom and investigate the ways in which classroom practice can address issues of disfluency and lead to concrete improvement of learners' fluency.

## Bio Data

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## Appendix A Transcription Notations

### Simultaneous utterances

I went [with my] friend

[ yeah ]

Left square brackets mark the start of overlapping talk.

Right square brackets mark the end of overlapping talk.

°nice°

Degree signs indicate speech that is quieter than the surrounding talk.

NEVER

Uppercase indicates speech that is louder than the surrounding talk.

### Contiguous utterances

= Equals signs show:

a) that talk is latched; that is there is no pause between the end of one turn and the start of the next turn

b) that a turn continues at the next equals sign on a subsequent line

### Pauses

(0.6) Numerals in parentheses show pauses in tenths of a second.

(.) A period in parentheses indicates a micropause.

### Characteristics of speech delivery

Weekend Underlining indicates marked stress.

Job? A question mark indicates rising intonation.

Finish. A period indicates falling intonation.

>you know< Inward facing indents indicate talk which is faster than the surrounding talk

Ni:::ce One or more colons indicates a lengthening of the preceding sound. More colons prolong the stretch.