Japanese Learners' Point-Making Style

David Heywood
Kwansei Gakuin University

This paper is an analysis of the interaction of a group of Japanese learners of English working in the same multi-national company. It focuses on the point-making style used by the learners in English language meetings conducted in the classroom. From the data, it is apparent that the learners orient to a certain point-making style, which is characterized by the initial presentation of a statement of background knowledge or reasoning, followed by the main point. Listeners use continuers to notify the speaker that they are aware of the speaker's intent and to invite them to continue developing the point. The discourse is also achieved with the use of collaborative completions, particularly the use of evaluative words at the end of the point. The data also suggests that the use of collaborative completions signals agreement or alignment.

　本論文は、多国籍企業で働きながら英語を学ぶ日本人同士が行った討論を分析したもので、 英語で行われた会議での論議の仕方に着目したものである。データから明らかにうかがえるのは、論議の仕方にある傾向があり、それは物事の背景が先に述べられ、肝心のポイントが後からついて来るという事である。聞き手は話し手の意図を理解している事をあいづちや仕種で表し、これらの反応は又、話し手の話を主点につなぐ為の手助けとなる。このような談話の殆どは、最後に述べられる意見を共有する事で完成され、聞き手と話し手は見出された意見に共感している事が、これらのデーターより読み取れる。

POINT-MAKING STYLE refers to the logical presentation of an argument. This paper focuses on the contrast between the Western style of stating a conclusion first followed by supporting explanation and the Japanese style of stating background information before the conclusion. In particular, it examines the point-making style of Japanese learners of English attending an English class held at their large American multi-national company.

The learners are lower-intermediate to intermediate level with TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores ranging from 400 to 550. Weekly 2-hour classes were split into two parts: one part was a feedback session led by the teacher and the second was a meeting chaired by one of the participants. The stated objective of the meetings was to develop an idea to improve the workplace and at the end of 11 meetings, the group would present their idea to company management, who would then decide whether the idea be implemented or not. A previous group had had their idea successfully implemented, so it was established that the meetings were not mere simulations, but part of the participants' job, with their ideas rather than their language skill being judged by management. Each meeting was recorded using a digital voice recorder and feedback was provided whilst playing excerpts of the meeting the

following week. The meetings, then, were an attempt to provide a form of on-the-job training. The discussion focused on in this paper centers around the development of a map of the office for employees and visitors.

I felt unhappy with the students' interaction style during the group discussion components of the class. Although the purpose of the course was to act as a bridge between the classroom and the workplace, their classroom interaction style seemed somewhat different from what was required for work. The in-house published document on communication skills detailed expectations of desired English listening and speaking skills for employees. One explicitly stated guideline was that when speaking with Western audiences, employees should state a key conclusion first, followed by background or supporting explanation. The discrepancy between the stated goals and the reality of the classroom seemed to be the source of my intuitive dissatisfaction. Therefore, this current research was undertaken in order to discover how the learners were actually presenting their arguments.

Review of the Literature

A number of studies have been conducted on Japanese communication style, although there is relatively little that focuses specifically on point-making style in cross-cultural situations. Watanabe's (1993) study of Japanese and American group discussions found three differences in the framing of discussions. As well as differences in the opening procedure and the use (or lack) of contradictory elements in point-making, it was found that when giving reasons, Americans use what Watanabe terms a "briefing" strategy, which involves getting to the point quickly and providing little background information. Japanese, on the other hand, use a "storytelling" strategy, which usually entails giving a chronological account with extensive background information and delivering the main point at the end of the speaking turn.

Okazaki (1993) also looked at the way Japanese state opinions, although not in a business context. She characterized the listener-dependent strategies employed as relying on listeners' ability to make sense of an inductive approach to conversation. In particular, thesis statements do not appear at the initial position of utterances. Instead, background information, such as examples, is presented first in order to build up shared knowledge. When delivered, the main point, in fact, may be de-emphasised and with weaker stress, since listeners are supposed to be able to induce the conclusion by that point.

Yamada (1990) found differences in turn-distribution strategies in Japanese and American meetings. Japanese take short turns which are distributed evenly regardless of who starts the topic. In American meetings, on the other hand, there are uneven, long monologic turns, with the topic initiator taking the highest proportion of turns. The interdependency of the Japanese and the autonomy of the American topic organisation occur, according to Yamada, as a result of each capitalising on their cultural strength –that of the American individual and that of the Japanese group. She also found that both Japanese and Americans carry these strategies into cross-cultural meetings where potential misunderstandings could arise.

Murata (1994) looked at interruptions and identified two main types. First, a co-operative interruption "takes place when a conversational partner joins the speaker's utterance by supplying a word or a phrase for which the speaker is searching, or even completes it" (p. 387). It encourages the present speaker's continuation of talk and shows interest and participation. Second, intrusive interruptions are more aggressive and aimed at topic-changing, floor-taking, or disagreement. Murata found that native speakers of English use interruptions more often with each other than native speakers of Japanese. When Japanese use interruptions, they are predominantly cooperative.

To summarize, in point-making, Japanese tend to mention background information first, with the main point coming at the end (Watanabe, 1993, Okazaki, 1993). Listener-dependent strategies are used (Okazaki, 1993) and interruptions are predominantly cooperative (Murata, 1994). Japanese also tend to carry these strategies into cross-cultural meetings (Yamada, 1990) in what Chick (1996) would call "sociolinguistic transfer," and this creates potential for misunderstandings. Americans, on the other hand, get to the point quickly (Watanabe, 1993).

Garcez (1993) examined cross-cultural business interaction and noted stylistic differences in point-making between American and Brazilian businessmen. The American style is direct – "there is a straight line of development from the statement of communicative intent, the point...and on through the supporting evidence" (p. 106). Also, "this style of point-making makes no a priori assumptions about the listener's role in sense-making" (p. 107). The Brazilian style, on the other hand, carries an assumption that the listener will take an active role while the speaker makes his point. In an inversion of the American style, the point-making organization has the main point coming only at the end of a long turn, which contains increasingly coherent and relevant background information. The conflicting expectations of the two styles caused numerous conflicts because the flow of the negotiation was hindered, much time and energy was spent on clarifying misunderstandings, and a sense of "not communicating properly" developed.

Garcez's description of Brazilian point-making style appears very similar to the Japanese style described above by Watanabe (1993) and Okazaki (1993) . It may be reasonable to assume, therefore, that similar conflicts could occur if Japanese point-making style was used with American interlocutors.

Methodology

Each discussion was recorded with a centrally placed digital voice recorder during the meetings. Although the discussions were not initially recorded for the purpose of this research, it was clear to the learners that listening to extracts from the recordings provided integral feedback.

For this research, I selected some of the later recordings on the assumption that the learners would have become accustomed to being recorded. I took general notes on interesting events during a first listen and then chose one recording on the basis that in the meeting concerned (the sixth of 11), there appeared to be a fair amount of discussion amongst participants (rather than just presentation of information) and agreement reached. I then transcribed the segments containing most of the discussion. There were six participants in the meeting, one woman (S) and five men (I, K, M, O, T).

Results and Discussion

The approach I took to analyze the data draws on conversation anaylsis (CA). I wanted, at least intially, to reach a description of the interaction using only evidence contained within the data. A basic idea of CA is that "interaction can ... be analysed so as to exhibit stable organizational patterns of actions to which the participants are oriented" (Heritage, 1984, p. 241). According to Heritage, it is also assumed that any communicative action is context-shaped and context-renewing. This is to say that any utterance can be understood only by referring to the context in which it occurs; this utterance will also become part of the context from which the ensuing utterance can be understood. There is "a strong bias against a priori speculation about the orientations and motives of speakers" (p. 243).

Three features of the discusions will now be examined. The main feature is the structure of point-making, which is taken

as "the organization of statement of communicative intent and supporting evidence" (Garcez, 1993, p. 105). A common pattern of point-making in the data is the presentation of background information followed by the main point. There are two other features which are part of the point-making organization. First, the point-making organization is listener-dependent and "continuers" (Schegloff, 1982) are used by other participants in constructing the point interactively. Second, point-making may also include collaborative completions, in which a speaker will complete another's utterance with an interruption or overlapping speech.

Extract 1

```
8   S:   In:: FCOP (.) questionnaire result er they
         confirmed the telephone number in
9                 (..) Akanet list=
10  M:   =yeah yeah yeah=
11  S:   =mm so:: if we [create map
12  M:   [(could have) yeah
13  S:   so I [my idea is to combine the (.)
                          telephone [number
14  M:       [uh uh]                 [uh uh=
15  S:   =and [map
16  M:       [yeah yeah=
17  S:   =it's er=
18  M:   =convenience=
19  S:   =convenience=
20  T:   =easy=
21  S:   =easy (1) I think so::=
22  M:   =I see so you have a telephone map,
```

```
         a telephone list, we don't
23       have a problem
24       (8)
25  S:   So::=
26  I:   =(xxx) I agree with Shimada san.
```

In this first extract (see Appendix for the transcription conventions utilized for this research), we can identify the point-making structure of background information followed by main point and the active role taken by one of the listeners, M, while S makes her point. After S states in lines 8 and 9 a result from a questionnaire, M seems to identify the end of a turn constructional unit, but passes up the opportunity to take a turn, by saying simply "yeah yeah yeah". With this utterance, M is not simply showing interest or attention, but orienting to the fact that S has not yet completed what is in fact a longer extended turn. According to Schegloff (1982), a common purpose of utterances such as "yeah," "uh-huh," and "mm," which are referred to as "continuers," is "to exhibit on the part of its producer an understanding that an extended unit of talk is underway by another" (p. 81), and to indicate that the speaker should continue talking. M's "yeah yeah yeah" is then an invitation for S to continue. The evidence for this is that S takes up the invitation to continue in line 11. Similarly, M uses continuers in lines 12, 14, and 16 while S puts forward her suggestion to combine the telephone list and map. Having presented background information in lines 8 and 9, S begins the main point in line 11 and reformulates it in lines 13 and 15. In line 18, M appears to predict the end of S's extended turn and completes S's utterance by interrupting with the word "convenience," which S repeats. D then offers another similar evaluative term, "easy," which S then again repeats. These repetitions appear to be an indication of agreement or alignment on the part of S and this is further evidenced by S finishing with "I think so" in line 21. This "I think

so" also demonstrates that S is attending to M's interruption not as an intrusive, but a cooperative one. The extract, then, shows a point-making structure of background information followed by main point, achieved interactively by M's use of continuers and by collaborative completion.

Extract 2

```
149 S:    I think that this this is convenience for
          email user but it is not convenience
150           (.) visitor.
151 T:    Mm
152 S:    So:: if (.) we describe (.) the (.) full
          name on the map,
153 T:    Mm.
154 S:    It can find email address and er (3) and=
155 T:    =Ah::=
156 S:    =people
157 T:    I see
158 S:    People for (.) for the visitor ka na
159 T:    Ah, I see if you know that=
160 S:    =(xxx) I can find the (.)
161 M:    Desk?
162 S:    Correct correct person's desk.
163 M:    By the way, which language is good for us,
          English or Chinese character?
164           {discussion continues about the options
          available and the decision is
165           deferred until the next meeting}
```

Here again in Extract 2, a main point is made after providing background information, and T, as a listener, is playing an active role. S points out a problem in lines 149 and 150, T 's responses in lines 151 and 153 are continuers, which invite S to develop the point, which S does in lines 152 and 154. T, therefore, is demonstrating the same orientation to the point-making style as M did in Extract 1. In 155, T's reponse "Ah" suggests that T has understood the reasoning and has induced the rest of the point, and after S continues with "people," T immediately follows up with "I see," confirming the understanding of the point projected by the "ah" in line 155. A short collaborative sequence follows from lines 159 to 162. S interrupts T 's utterance, and M in turn interrupts by offering a possible ending "Desk?" which S confirms with an elaboration, "correct person's desk." In line 163, M then brings in a new topic, suggesting that the interruptions in the preceding sequence were considered as cooperative, not intrusive and that the participants were all in agreement with the statement collaboratively produced. Agreement, it seems, can be assumed through collaborative construction of a point and need not require explicit articulation.

In sum, as in the first extract, the point-making structure has the main point coming after the background information and the organisation of this structure is achieved interactively, again evidenced by the use of continuers and collaborative completion.

Extract 3

```
49 M:    er this er map described er family name
         and phone number, just family
50       name and phone number.
51 T:    And first initial.
52 M:    No not everybody.
53 T:    Oh some people.
```

```
54 M:     Yeah. So if I input, if we input first name
          and numbers, example S dash two
55        Shimada er we can (..) er:: (.) send email
          [easily.
56 S:     [easily, uh.
```

In Extract 3, the point is organized in the same way as the two previous extracts. First, in lines 49 and 50, M describes a map and in lines 51 to 54, there is a clarification sequence which serves to further develop this shared background knowledge. After this, M states the main point, beginning with "So" in line 54. The end of the point is again a positive evaluation, "easily". S seems to predict the end of the turn and, simultaneously with M, completes the turn by uttering "easily" in line 56. This collaborative completion shows S's orientation to the point-making style and that this style allows or even requires the listener to induce the main point before the speaker has actually completed it. The final "uh" in line 56 seems to confirm that S has not only understood, but is in agreement.

Extract 4

```
123 T:    If you put the (.) first name in there, ho-
          how do you (.) (xxx)(2) ho- how do
124       you write (.) where?
125 O:    First name?
126       (5)
127 T:    If you put the first name, where=
128 M:    =Ah:::
129 T:    Where do you write it?
130       (3)
131 M:    Oh ah usually we don't use first name in
```

```
          Japan, so we er the family name is
132       very important for us, so family name is
          first=
133 T:    =Mm=
134 M:    =I think.
135 S:    Mm.
136 M:    Er but in case of find out email address, we
          need first name.
137 T:    Yeah.
138 M:    So, family name, first name and numbers (.)
          is good (.) I think.
139       (3)
```

In the final extract, the same point-making structure is found, although we do not see the use of collaborative completion as in the other extracts. In answer to T's question in line 129, M begins by offering general background information–"usually we don't use first name in Japan, so ... the family name is very important for us" –and follows with a deduction–"so family name is first". T then twice uses "Mm" as a continuer, and M continues his point in lines 134 and 136-8. Interestingly, towards the end of the point, M pauses slightly just before the evaluative "is good". In extracts 1 and 3, the final evaluative terms are collaboratively completed ("easy," "convenience" in Extract 1, "easily" in Extract 3). M seems to be inviting a collaborative completion and its absence prompts him to finish the point "is good"; after another slight pause, he adds "I think," after which there is a much longer pause. Following this are contributions from T and S in line 140:

```
140 T:    So all all of it?
```

and 149/150:

```
149 S:    I think that this this is convenience for
```

```
         email user but it is not convenience
150      (.) visitor.
```

These lines suggest that T and S, who in other extracts show alignment, are not in total agreement with M and this may explain their non-use of collaborative completions. This final extract seems to offer a possible clarification of the meaning of active listening strategies in this context. While the continuers show an orientation to the point-making style, the collaborative completion may also be a signal of the listener's alignment to the point being made.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the data that the participants orient to a point-making style that comprises a statement of background knowledge or reasoning followed by the main point. This orientation is evident from the use of continuers, which the listeners use to notify the speaker that they are aware of the speaker's intent (to make a point) and to invite them to continue developing it. The interactive achievement of the discourse is also conducted through the use of collaborative completions. In this meeting, it was often evaluative words at the end of the point. There was also a suggestion that the use of collaborative completions signalled agreement or alignment. The use of this point-making style was not accompanied by communication problems as found in Garcez (1993).

Considering the discourse itself, the point-making structure was not problematic. This is unsurprising since the participants are Japanese, and therefore communication problems that might appear in cross-cultural negotiation did not occur. The company's guidelines, in fact, urge employees to adapt their communication style to their audience. With Japanese customers, they suggest that arguments be presented with background first, building towards a conclusion, which is actually what the participants did. From a language training perspective, though, that the learners did not produce the target point-making style recommended for Westernized audiences (conclusion first, followed by supporting information) casts some doubts on the effectiveness of this teaching approach. The course was considered successful, but this may be due to only surface considerations—that the participants were able to produce a workplace improvement idea by using only English in the meetings. However, as the original goal was to prepare the learners for actual English language meetings with non-Japanese participants, a closer examination of the participants' interaction style indicates that the suggested interaction styles were not actually being used. It may therefore be appropriate to reassess the teaching approach adopted by the company. This might involve looking at more factors than simply whether or not English was used to reach the meeting's goals and investigating whether suggested interaction styles were used correctly.

Further Research

Further research using the recordings of the other meetings might include exploring possible connections between the interactive construction of point-making and the formation of alliances between the participants. It may also be useful to record actual meetings of the same participants with non-Japanese people to analyse the point-making strategies used. It could be that the patterns of interaction in this classroom are influenced by previous classroom experiences and that it has its own unique style. The participants themselves may indeed be able to adapt their style to a Westernized audience if they are in that situation. If this is the case, then this research will serve to highlight the difficulty of effectively teaching discussion skills in the language classroom.

Bio Data

David Heywood has lived and worked in Japan since 1992 and currently works in the School of Policy Studies at Kwansei Gakuin University in Sanda.

References

Chick, J. K. (1996). Intercultural communication. In S. McKay & N. Hornberger (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language teaching* (pp. 329-350). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Garcez, P. de M. (1993). Point-making styles in cross-cultural business negotiation: A microethnographic study. *English for Specific Purposes, 12*, 103-120.

Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Murata, K. (1994). Intrusive or co-operative? A cross-cultural study of interruption. *Journal of Pragmatics 21*, 385-400.

Okazaki S. (1993). Stating opinions in Japanese: Listener-dependent strategies. *Georgetown University roundtable on languages and linguistics* (1993) (pp. 69-95). Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.

Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schegloff, E. A. (1982). Discourse as an interactional achievement: Some uses of "uh huh" and other things that come between sentences. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk* (pp. 71-93). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Watanabe, S. (1993). Cultural differences in framing: American and Japanese group discussions. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Framing in discourse* (pp. 176-209). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Yamada, H. (1990). Topic management and turn distribution in business meetings: American versus Japanese strategies. *Text 10*, 271-295.

Appendix

Transcription Conventions—Adapted from Richards (2003)

.	Falling intonation
,	Continuing contour
?	Questioning intonation
!	Exclamatory utterance
(2.0)	Pause of 2 seconds
(...)	Pause of about 1 second
(..)	Pause of about 0.5 seconds
(.)	Micropause
[ ]	Overlap
[[	Speakers start at same time
=	Latched utterances
:	Sound stretching
(xxx)	Unable to transcribe
(send)	Unsure transcription
–	abrupt cut-off
(x)	hitch or stutter
CAPS	Louder than surrounding talk
{door opens}	commentary