I Think So Too: Assessments and Agreements

John Campbell-Larsen

Kyoto Women's University

Conversation is the primary use of language in society. Conversationalists routinely suffuse their talk with assessments of people, places, actions, and situations. The other participants respond to these assessments, most commonly by agreement (see Pomerantz, 1984). However, the manner in which assessments and agreements are done in English is far from straightforward. This paper describes 2 related aspects of assessing and agreeing with assessments that are relevant to language teaching in a Japanese context. First, the differing interactional practices of English and Japanese (namely repetition and upgrade) are described. Second, some semantic and usage aspects of assessing adjectives are investigated. The author concludes with some suggestions for practical classroom activities.

会話は社会における主な言語の用途である。話し上手な人は、通常、人、場所、行動や状況などについて意見（評価）を述べながら会話を進める。他の会話相手は、たいていその内容に賛同しながら、話者の意見（評価）に反応する（Pomerantz, 1984）。しかし英語における意見と賛同の仕方は、かなり複雑である。本論文では、日本の英語教育に関連する意見と賛同の二つの側面を検討する。まず日本語と英語間の相互作用的慣行（具体的には反復とアップグレード）の違いを述べ、次にいくつかの意見に使用する形容詞表現の使用法と意味の側面を調査する。最後に実用的な授業内のアクティビティを提案する。

Conversation is more than just an exchange of propositional statements. Speakers suffuse their talk with assessments of events, people, situations and so on. Pomerantz (1984) reported that response to assessments by agreement is the preferred sequential move in unfolding conversational interactions, allowing participants to cocreate convergence and move the interaction forward in a mutually recognizable manner. For Japanese learners of English there are a number of interactional and lexical aspects concerning assessment and agreement that may prove problematic. First, Japanese speakers often signal agreement by repetition of the assessing term and this practice may be carried over into the L2. Second, one canonical method of agreement in English is by upgrade of the original assessment using an upgrade adjective (sometimes referred to as strong or nongradable adjective, e.g. *cold* upgraded to *freezing*). In classroom surveys, I have found that many learners have deficient knowledge of these strong adjectives. Third, the exact meanings and usages of assessing adjectives are often subtler and more nuanced than at first seems to be the case. An awareness of some of these interactional, semantic, and usage issues can be of benefit to students (and their teachers) in helping them move to a more nuanced, interactive, and coconstructed style of speaking. In this paper I examine some of these issues and suggest that teachers incorporate the teaching of assessments and agreements into their oral communication classes.

Interactional Language

The move towards communicative language teaching has at its root the notion that the primary use of language by humans is not written, abstract, and academic, but spoken, everyday, and interactive in nature. That is to say, the main use of language that members of all societies engage in is conversation for communicating shared feelings (phatic) rather than transactional or propositional reasons. The field of conversation analysis has identified the ways in which interactants coconstruct meaning and work together to jointly manage the system of turn taking that lies at the heart of spoken interaction (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 2007). Given the essentially personal nature of conversation, it should come as no surprise to realize that speakers routinely suffuse their talk with assessments of other people and their actions, of places, of situations, of events and so on. In this paper, the term *assessment* is used to refer to statements that reflect an essentially subjective view of the world, people, situations, and so forth. Speakers proffer these assessments for a variety of reasons and at a variety of points in unfolding discourse. For example, Drew and Holt (1998) noted the use of fixed

and idiomatic expressions that function as summary assessments at the end of topic sequences. (See Excerpt 1; line numbers are from the original):

Excerpt 1

```
20  Mum:     Good gracious,
21           (0.3)
22  Lesley:  And he wz their buyer,
23           (.)
24  Mum:     Hm::::
25  Lesley:  .t
26  Mum:     Hm:.
27  Lesley:  So he had a good innings did[n't he.
28  Mum:                          [I should say so:
29           Yes
30           (0.2)
31  Mum:     Marvelous
32  Lesley:  .tk. hhhh Anyway we had a very good evening o:n
33           Saturda:y.
34           (.)
35  Mum:     Ye:s?
```

(Drew & Holt, 1998, pp. 495-496)

In this sequence the speaker finishes the telling of the death of an elderly acquaintance by assessing the person's long and successful life with the fixed expression *a good innings*. This allows the listener to converge with the speaker in the assessment, that is, an agreement that the man's life was long and successful. By such means (and also by the use of repetition and pausing) the participants jointly construct a sequence of talk that brings the current topic to a close and allows the proffering and uptake of a new topic.

In another context, assessments are woven into the unfolding structure of a narrative, to signal to the listener(s) what the expected stance is that they should take towards the narrative, its characters, and situations. In Excerpt 2, a student classroom conversation collected by the author, the speaker is telling a story of a late night train journey in which

a drunken passenger vomited and then exited the train without making any attempt to clean up or apologize. In the orientation phase of the story (see Labov & Waletsky, 1967), the drunken passenger is introduced.

Excerpt 2

```
01  E:       and (0.2) well (0.2) the station
02           (.) leave the station
03           when a: a girl sit down my
04           nearby seat
05           and a little bit fat girl huhhu
06           and she was so:: eh:: drinker en
07           (.) ah::
08           I was worried abouteh::: drinker
09           (.) drinker people
10           >on the train<
11           and she (2.2) ent well she throw
12           up (0.9) >on the train<
```

The way in which the passenger is introduced is clearly negative. The drunkenness of the passenger is not itself a negative assessment. The story could have unfolded as a tale of sympathy and concern for the well being of the girl, and the drunkenness could have been viewed as a source of pity. However, the story unfolds in a different way and the drunken girl is viewed as an antagonist. In the orientation phase of the narrative, in which the characters and setting of the story is established for the listener, reference is made to the girl's weight, with the negative assessment that she is "a little fat," although this has no bearing on the logic or comprehensibility of the narrative. The storyteller is here preparing the listener to take a negative and critical stance towards the girl. (Although it should be noted that the assessment is hedged and followed with a short laugh token, perhaps with awareness of the sociocultural inappropriateness of referring negatively to women's body shape.) The assessment is therefore going beyond a simple propositional statement and can be seen as fulfilling an interactive purpose, namely, preparing the listener to take a critical stance towards the drunken women and thus align with the storyteller's view of the events of the narrative.

Summary assessments as topic closers and assessments interwoven within narratives are just two ways in which speakers deploy assessing language during talk-in-interaction. There are others. Even from this brief introduction, it should be clear that learners can profit from a focus on giving and responding to assessments during instruction in the target language.

Assessing and Agreeing in English and Japanese

It should come as no surprise that assessments are a common feature of talk-in-interaction in natural languages. However, the precise ways in which assessing and responding to assessments are done vary from language to language. One of the most notable ways in which assessing is done is the use of repetition and variation in offering and agreeing with assessments. Anyone familiar with everyday interactions in Japanese will recognize the adjacency pair of (a) *offer an assessment*, and (b) *agree with the assessment* by means of repetition of the assessing term. Common greetings are structured in the following way:

A: Samui desune? [(It's) cold, (today) isn't it?]

B: Samui desu. [It's cold.]

The repetition of the assessing term is normative in Japanese discourse. (See Hayano, 2007, for a discussion of repetition and agreement in Japanese.) Consider Excerpt 3, taken from a YouTube video of a Japanese TV cooking show in which two guests and an interviewer are sampling a noodle dish in a restaurant.

Excerpt 3

```
01  S1:     Itadakimasu:              [Let's eat]
02  S1:     Atsu.                     [Hot]
03  S2:     He he. Atsu atsu na:::     [He he. Hot hot, isn't it?]
04  S1:     Hmmmm. Oishii::::=)        [Hmmmm, delicious]
05  S3:     =Oishii desu ka?          [Is it delicious?]
06  S1:     Hontoni oishii            [Really delicious]
```

(Atom 2850, 2010)

In Excerpt 3 we can see multiple instances of repetition. Speaker 1's assessment of the food as hot (*atsui*, shortened to *atsu*) in line 02 is taken up with the exact same adjective by speaker 2 in line 03. Not only does speaker 2 repeat speaker 1's assessment, but she also repeats the assessing term within her own agreeing turn. Speaker 1 then goes on to assess the taste of the food, using the canonical Japanese word *oishii*. (See below for a further discussion of this word and its English equivalents.) The interviewer (S3) asks speaker 1 to confirm her assessment by repeating the word within a question. Speaker 1 confirms by repeating the original assessing word, adding an intensifier *hontoni*, that is, *very* or *really*. Even in this small fragment we can see a rich pattern of self- and other-repetition as the participants do the interactional business of assessing, agreeing, and confirming their assessments, coconstructing alignment and allowing the interaction to proceed smoothly.

By contrast, in English participants often (but not always) eschew repetition during agreements with assessments. McCarthy (1998) provided a transcript of authentic conversation in which interactants are getting dressed for a family wedding (see Excerpt 4). In a short sequence speakers offer their evaluations of a suit. (Speaker numbers are from the original.)

Excerpt 4

```
S2:  Very nice.
S3:  It's beautiful
S2:  Lovely lovely.
S1:  Does it look nice?
S2:  Yeah it goes very well with those trousers.
```

(McCarthy, 1998, p. 113)

McCarthy commented, "It is important to note that exact repetition is not always pragmatically appropriate; the following concocted exchange would be considered by most people as odd:

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S1: Hi! Freezing cold today.
S2: (with exact same intonation) Hi! Freezing cold today!"
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(McCarthy, 1998, p. 113)

McCarthy went on to explain that speaker 2 would most likely respond with something like, "Yes it is freezing." The upgrade of the original assessing adjective with a stronger adjective is one canonical way in which English speakers show agreement with assessments (Pomerantz, 1984). The following extract of authentic speech (Excerpt 5) illustrates the practice. In this fragment, taken from YouTube, a celebrity chef who has been invited into a struggling restaurant has cooked for the owners and is offering them the food he has prepared.

Excerpt 5

```
01  S1:     Irene, I want you to taste that first I want you
02          to taste it as well (.) so it's a fresh vibrant
03          tomato sauce
04  S2:     It's very good=
05  S3:     =It's awesome
```

(Thewackdoctors, 2013)

The positive assessment of the food by speaker 2 in line 04 is taken up by speaker 3 in line 05, but the speaker does not repeat the assessing term *very good* but rather upgrades to it *awesome*. The same phenomenon can be observed in lines 27-31 in Excerpt 1.

The avoidance of repetition and the use of upgrade adjectives to show agreement is a very common practice in English, but in classroom surveys, I found that knowledge of the upgrade adjective counterparts to common English language adjectives is very sparse, even in learners with higher levels of proficiency. Table 1 shows the results of the surveys. In each case the learners were presented with a list of 29 general class (that is not upgrade) adjectives and asked which ones they knew. Once they had reported their results they were presented with a matching list of the equivalent upgrade adjectives and asked which ones they already knew. Although certain common upgrade adjective counterparts were known, such as *huge* as an upgrade of *big* and *tiny* as an upgrade of *small* it was clear from the results that there existed a gap in the students knowledge of many upgrade counterparts of general class adjective, for example *funny* and *hilarious* or *loud* and *deafening*. (See Appendix A for the survey items.)

Table 1. Survey Results: Knowledge of General and Upgrade Adjectives

	Class of students					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Adjectives known	(*n* = 21)	(*n* = 28)	(*n* = 14)	(*n* = 21)	(*n* = 31)	(*n* = 19)
General (average out of 29)	28	26	29	22	26	28
Upgrade (average out of 44)	11	12	16	10	10	11

From this data, it is clear that the upgrade adjective counterparts of many general class adjectives are unknown to students; this represents a systematic gap in students' knowledge. This gap is rarely addressed in student textbooks and other teaching materials, in my experience.

Although the general class adjectives are presented alongside their upgrade counterparts in Appendix A, care had to be taken in explaining to learners some of the nuances of the meanings and their noncorrespondence with lexis in Japanese. First, the gradient of adjective colocations had to be explained to learners. General class adjectives can collocate with intensifiers such as *very* or *really*. Upgrade adjectives generally collocate with the intensifier *absolutely*. Thus the gradient of intensification runs as follows: cold < very cold < freezing < absolutely freezing.

Upgrade adjectives do not generally collocate with *very*, and general class adjectives do not generally collocate with *absolutely*. It would be odd to say "Today is very freezing," or "Today is absolutely cold." However, some adjectives seem to collocate with both classes of intensifier. A corpus search in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (Davies, 2008; all corpus data in this paper are from this source) reveals zero instances of *very freezing* against one instance of *absolutely freezing*. A further search reveals 66 instances of *absolutely delicious* and 23 instances of *very delicious*, so it is not correct to assert that the *very / absolutely* distinction is absolute, but rather that it reflects a tendency. (I must note as native speaker of English, I intuitively consider *very freezing* to be an ill-formed collocation. However *very delicious* does not register in a similar way. It is difficult to say whether this reflects some deeper property of the two adjectives or whether prolonged exposure to the *very delicious* collocation in interactions with Japanese speakers of English has influenced notions of well formedness in my intuition.)

Lexis: Semantics and Usage

It might also be interesting to note here that the English language assessments in Excerpt 5 are made with general class positive adjectives, that is, adjectives not confined to the gustatory sense. Although English does have such gustatory adjectives, such as *delicious* and *tasty*, it is possible to use nongustatory adjectives in positive assessments of food and drink. In Japanese, positive assessments of food are overwhelmingly performed with the gustatory adjective *oishii* (the general class positive assessor *umai* is the other main alternative). Japanese and English seem to differ in the kind of adjectives used to describe certain situations. English, although having assessing adjectives confined to the gustatory sense, (e.g., *delicious* and *tasty*) also makes wide use of positive adjectives in assessing food. This was seen in Excerpt 5, in which the participants referred to the food with the adjectives *good* and *awesome*.

There is a similar noncorrespondence between English and Japanese assessments of negative sensory experience. For negative assessments of food, the English word *disgusting* is generally applicable, appropriate in describing all negative sensory reactions (olfactory, gustatory, tactile, visual, or general sensibility), whereas Japanese has a specific gustatory negative adjective, *mazui*. English has something of a lexical gap in that the word *disgusting* is shown in corpus studies to collocate more strongly with *absolutely* with 38 examples, versus 12 instances for *very*. That is, *disgusting* is more likely an upgrade adjective and there seems to be no corresponding general class adjective, as represented by the lacuna opposite the entry for *disgusting* in Appendix A.

Other negative Japanese assessing words are related to specific senses. *Mazui* refers to the gustatory sense, *kusai* refers to the olfactory sense, and *kimochi warui* (literally meaning *take a bad feeling*) refers to the tactile or visual senses or general sensibility. English does not have such a clear distinction for negative sensory assessments. The words *disgusting*, *horrible*, *vile* and so on can be applied to the olfactory gustatory, tactile, or visual senses. The words *stinky* and *smelly* are limited to the olfactory sense, but have a slightly childish ring to them and have a lower frequency in the corpus (disgusting = 2204, stinky = 462, smelly = 777).

Other items of noncorrespondence between the lexes of Japanese and English may also be relevant when considering the use of adjectives in making assessments. For example, the English word *far* is usually translated in Japanese dictionaries as 遠い *toi*. However, a simple one-to-one correspondence is not the case with these two words. Swan (1980) explained that the word *far* is most commonly used in English in questions *how far*, negatives *not far*, and sentences with *too* and *so*: *too far, so far*. For positive sentences, Swan explained that the most common way to express the idea of distance is

to use the three-word chunk *a long way*. A simple corpus search of the word *far* found that, of 101 examples of the word, 21 examples collocated with *so* and mostly had the abstract meaning of *up until now in a process*. Thirty examples were used in comparative structures (e.g., *far fewer*). Only one example of the word *far* unambiguously referred to physical distance (*a brick building not far from the student union*). One possible upgrade, the word *miles*, appears 17 times in the corpus referring to assessments of distance, often in the phrase *miles and miles*. Even from this simple study it can be seen that the physical distance meaning is not the common usage of the word *far* and the concept of distance as an assessment (or an agreement with an assessment) has a more nuanced treatment in the English language than would be suggested by the simple translation of the Japanese word *toi* to the English word *far*.

A further example of usage differences is the sharp differentiation made in Japanese between feeling that one needs to sleep, 眠い *nemui* [sleepy] and feeling one has exerted oneself physically or mentally 疲れた *tsukereta* [tired]. English can express both feelings with the word *tired*, but many Japanese learners use the word *sleepy* in their conversation. The word *sleepy* does exist in English as a way to express the need or desire for sleep, but this word has a much lower frequency than the word *tired* in corpus (3,193 versus 24,172) and many of the instances are of a more metaphorical sense such as *sleepy town* or *sleepy backwater*.

These examples illustrate some of the lexical issues involved in giving assessments in different languages, in this case between Japanese and English. (For a more detailed discussion of some of the issues surrounding cross-cultural descriptions of feelings see Wierzbicka (1999).)

In the Classroom

From the foregoing descriptions of assessing vocabulary and the interactional practices associated with assessing and agreeing, it should be clear that there are several areas that can be addressed in the language classroom. First, the interactional aspect of assessing and agreeing should be raised with students. That is, the contrast between Japanese style assessments and agreement can be made by the teacher. Videos from YouTube, such as those cited earlier, demonstrate the contrasting practices in a clear and straightforward manner. I have also made use of videos taken of in-class student conversations to highlight the interactional practices that many students engage in. Videos showing learners engaging in L1 style utterances during assessments and agreements such as *aizuchi* [nonlexical backchannel style Japanese utterances], simple repetition of the assessing term, or resorting to a limited set of assessing and agreeing terms can make

clear to the students the limitations of their extant language.

In addition, overt teaching of the upgrade adjectives can help students to move on to a more varied means of expression and allow them to engage in the practice of agreement by upgrade or assessment by overstatement. Clearly, the list of adjectives provided in Appendix A is rather extensive and not suitable for a single lesson. Appendix B shows a sample worksheet. In this case, the learners can select the upgrade adjectives that they think will be useful to them in their own spoken interactions, rather than having the teacher assign them a list of vocabulary to be learned. In this way, learners exercise a degree of autonomy over their learning. The students also have the opportunity to use the target language in two separate interactional ways: to provide assessments of the subject at hand, either whilst it is ongoing or as a summary of an anecdote, and also to use the upgrade adjectives to show agreement and understanding of the talk of others.

It goes without saying that teachers must have an awareness of the interactional import of assessments and agreements and sensitivity towards the semantic aspects of assessing and agreeing language as outlined in the lexis section above. Once such awareness is in place or foregrounded, instructors can incorporate the awareness into their own classes and using classroom methodology that is appropriate to their own teaching context. It is hoped that this paper will contribute towards such awareness.

Bio Data

John Campbell-Larsen has taught English in Japan since 1995 and is currently an associate professor at Kyoto Women's University. He is interested in conversation analysis and teaching the spoken form of English. <joncamlar@hotmail.com>

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Appendix A
Upgrade Adjectives

1. Cold---------------------- Freezing
2. Hot ---------------------- Boiling
3. Good--------------------- Great, Fantastic, Wonderful, Marvelous
4. Bad---------------------- Terrible, Dreadful, Dire, Rubbish.
5. Interesting-------------- Fascinating
6. Surprising---------------- Astonishing
7. Nice---------------------- Delicious
8. (_____)----------------- Disgusting, Gross, Horrible
9. Funny-------------------- Hilarious
10. Beautiful---------------- Gorgeous
11. Ugly--------------------- Hideous
12. Scary-------------------- Terrifying
13. Far---------------------- Miles

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14.	Big-----------------------	Huge, Massive, Gigantic
15.	Small--------------------	Tiny. Microscopic
16.	Boring-------------------	Tedious
17.	Loud---------------------	Deafening
18.	Tired--------------------	Exhausted
19.	Sad----------------------	Heartbroken
20.	Happy-------------------	Overjoyed, Delighted
21.	Embarrassed-------------	Mortified
22.	Dirty---------------------	Filthy
23.	Crowded-----------------	Packed
24.	A long time--------------	Ages
25.	Bright--------------------	Blinding
26.	Wet----------------------	Soaked, Drenched
27.	Hungry------------------	Starving
28.	Angry--------------------	Furious
29.	Quiet--------------------	Silent
30.	Difficult-----------------	Impossible

Appendix B
Upgrade of Adjectives

Daily adjectives:

Really / Very + Adjective

Really hot. Very Tired

Strong adjectives:

Absolutely + Adjective:

Absolutely boiling. Absolutely exhausted.

Write down six limit adjectives that you think you will use.

General Adjective	Upgrade Adjective

1. Make a statement to your partner using a daily adjective. He / she will upgrade.
2. Tell your partner your experience of being absolutely "_____."