

A Pragmatics Explanation for Japanese-English Turn-Taking Contrasts and the Need for Pedagogical Intervention: A Response to Davey Young's *TLT* Article

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In *TLT* Volume 42(3), Davey Young presents contrasting models of turn-taking in Japanese and English and argues that this cross-cultural difference is primarily due to linguistic differences across English and Japanese. While rightly noting that proficiency in turn-taking is crucial for overall interactional competence and should be a focus of pedagogical intervention, Young's rationale for the difference in his models neglects the important factor of pragmatics, particularly the notion of politeness. In this response to Young's original article, Japanese-English differences in turn-taking behaviours are considered from a pragmatic viewpoint and analysed as part of a larger discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2007) framework. The implications for teaching turn-taking are also discussed.

*TLT*42巻3号においてDavey Youngは日本語と英語の話者交替の対照モデルを提示し、この異文化間の相違は、主に英語と日本語の言語的相違によるものであると述べている。Youngが指摘している通り、確かに話者交替の能力は相互行為能力全体の中で極めて重要であり、教育的介入の中心的課題の1つとなるべきである。しかしながら、Youngのモデルにおける日本語と英語の話者交替の相違に関する理論は、語用論における重要な要素、特にポライトネスの概念が欠けている。このYoungの論説の補遺は、話者交替における日本語と英語の違いを語用論の見地から考察し、より広い談話管理 (Fairhurst, 2007) の枠組みで分析した。また、話者交替指導の点からの考察も加えた。

Davey Young's article on the contrast between turn-taking in Japanese and English in *TLT* 42 Number 3 (2018) is a timely reminder for teachers working in Japan on the importance of helping learners develop interactional competence (IC) in general and turn-taking skills in particular. Young notes that floor changes in Japanese typically feature more pauses between turns than English, a language in which new speakers (NSs) often overlap current speakers (CSs) at turn changes, and he assigns the cause of this phenomenon to a linguistic difference between the way that Japanese and English are grammatically structured. This is explained in terms

of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson's (1974) notion of transition relevant places (TRPs), or the points in the speech of CSs where NSs may assume the floor. Being able to anticipate, or 'project', TRPs is key to being able to manage turn changes effectively according to Young. The pragmatic force of an utterance—whether it is a request, an assertion, a suggestion and so on—is often identifiable at turn beginnings in English, Young's example being the request: "Would you like to see a movie this weekend?". Japanese speakers, on the other hand, must wait until the end of the utterance to recognize a similar request: "Shumatsu ni eiga wo mimasen ka?". Thus, English speakers overlap more because they *can*, he asserts. Because they are able to identify the nature of the utterance early, they have more time to prepare a suitable response.

According to Young's (2018) hypothesis, given instruction and practice in the projection of TRPs, Japanese learners should be able to develop English turn-taking techniques in a straightforward manner. However, while Young's article shines a welcome light on a neglected obstacle to the development of English speaking skills and identifies a valid linguistic causal factor, it neglects an important additional cause: pragmatics. There are pragmatic reasons why Japanese turn-taking differs from English and why there are pragmatic obstacles to learning English turn-taking. This response to Young's article aims to support the case for instructional intervention, but argues for a more expansive view of the problem by adding to the linguistic explanation for learner difficulties, one from a pragmatics perspective. Speaking is a wide-ranging category within which behaviours vary considerably. Due to the limitations of the scope of this paper, the case will therefore be constrained to group talk only and due to its significance to the needs of Japanese graduates, will focus mainly on talk in professional contexts.

The Case for Teaching Turn-Taking Skills

Young (2018) is right to argue that the development of turn-taking proficiency should be an educational priority in Japan as most observers recognize that Japanese learners of English lag other second language English learners when it comes to interactional competence (IC), as exemplified in Yoshida (2003). Indeed, a perceived lack of IC in professional contexts has been one of the driving forces behind foreign language educational reforms in recent years (Aspinall, 2006; MEXT, 2012). The limited body of research into intercultural interaction in the workplace involving Japanese participants supports this impression. In business meetings for example, a quantitative study of turns and turn durations in the meeting of an airline alliance revealed Japanese participants underperforming their western and Asian colleagues in both categories (Tanaka, 2003); a phenomenon also replicated in elicited data (Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2013). In a cross-cultural analysis of English meetings, Mergel and Williamson (2018) reported not only was there more pausing between turns among Japanese groups as compared to native-speaker ones, but there were also different dynamic patterns, with more reliance on a facilitator to allocate turns among Japanese groups and more autonomous turn-taking among native English speakers.

These differences in turn taking can impact both business goals and business relationships (Yamada, 1997). Students of business English communication training programs in Japan who use English in intercultural workplace interactions frequently report the need to participate more effectively in group talk with foreigners as a high priority. They often view their inability to do so as a handicap in their capacity to influence others. In a qualitative study of this in action in an authentic context, Tanaka (2008) described a decision-making meeting held between three French executives of Renault and three Japanese executives of Nissan. In a part of the meeting devoted to negotiating a disagreement between the two sides, only one of the Japanese participants took a significant number of turns while all three of the French participants spoke often and at length. A post-meeting interview conducted in Japanese revealed that a lack of confidence in turn-taking was a primary cause. The decision was made in Renault's favour.

Analysing Different Turn-Taking Behaviours

While Young's (2018) linguistic thesis remains valid, studies repeatedly show that turn-taking is both culture and situation dependent (Tannen, 2012). For example, Hazel and Ayres (1998) found that

Americans were more likely to self-allocate than Japanese in monocultural group talk. This conclusion was also supported by Mergel and Williamson (2018) in a business English context. On the other hand, Uchida (2006) reported how Japanese speakers interrupted more than English speakers when agreeing but less when disagreeing. The question then must be asked: what influences these differences and what intercultural conflicts might arise? There appear to be two causal factors underlying these differences: to whom we are speaking and about what we are speaking about.

In regard to the first, Japanese turn-taking appears to be particularly dependent on the comparative status between speakers and hearers. In an intercultural English meeting dominated by Japanese participants, Yamada (1997, p. 102) found turn frequency to exactly match hierarchy within the company. In her data, the section head took 48% of turns, while the subsequent ranks took 28%, 15%, 7%, and 3%. In regard to speech content, face threatening acts (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1987), especially disagreements, appear to produce culturally different turn-taking behaviours. In Uchida's (2006) comparison of Japanese and American talk show discussions, she found that agreement was signalled more quickly in Japanese but disagreement moves were more quickly and directly made in English.

In fact, disagreement moves appear to be a key area of pragmatic difference in turn-taking, at least in formal, professional interactions. Mergel and Williamson compared native-Japanese English speakers and native-English speakers discussing the same decision-making problems and found that pauses between turns were much shorter between native-English speakers when performing disagreement moves than between native-Japanese English speakers doing the same. There were also more overlaps: while linguistic ability may be a factor affecting this difference, it did not appear to be the only one. This can be seen in the following extract from their data in which a native English speaker (R) interrupts the Japanese speaker (J) for the explicit purpose of disagreeing with him:

Extract 1.

- 15:21 R: I'm sure, I'm sure that in a moment like this we need to think about what's best for the company. Because if there's no company in three months' time, ... clearly, um, it's irrelevant. [D- Um], So I think that [J- oh, ok] at this point um the-
- 15:35 J: -It's not, it's not irrelevant ... is it? It's not irrelevant to our ... personal situations.

This exchange contrasts with the way a Japanese group handled a similar type of disagreement (in Extract 2 below). After realizing that participants held opposing views, the meeting chair, T, made an excessively long pause indicated by a twin set of three dots (more than six seconds).

Extract 2.

04:06 T: each, each person opinion is different
(laughter) ...

A top-down theoretical analysis produces similar conclusions. The *discursive leadership* view of group interactions (Fairhurst, 2007) sees discourse in terms of how it is managed. This includes not only how turns are allocated, but also how discourse is framed (i.e., topics are managed) and how conflicts within the group are resolved (Aritz & Walker, 2014). According to the discursive leadership view, rather than being driven by any single individual, leadership is often of a collaborative quality emerging when, as Robinson (2001, p. 93) states, “ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized as capable of progressing talk or problems”. This view resembles that of Young’s description of IC as being ‘co-constructed by all participants in a discursive practice’. In other words, discursive leadership views the features of interaction such as turn-taking, as neither isolated from other relevant factors nor as entirely within the control of single interactors. Turn-taking is, therefore, dependant on what is being discussed and who is discussing it. These are pragmatic factors.

Furthermore, because what happens in interactions depends on the participants, it reflects the preferences of the individuals within particular discursive groups. This includes their personality-oriented discursive preferences but also inevitably, those preferences influenced by shared cultural values. Groups of Japanese interactors are therefore likely to create Japanese styles of interaction, including Japanese styles of turn-taking, regardless of the language they are using. This is what was found by Aritz and Walker (2014), who using elicited data derived from various American groups and Asian groups, identified three culturally aligned types of discursive leadership they named Cooperative, Collaborative and Directive. They found cultural bias among Asian test groups for their Cooperative Leadership model and a cultural bias among American groups for their Collaborative Leadership model. This finding was replicated in an intercultural study by DuBabcock and Tanaka (2013) and a cross-cultural comparative study by Mergel and Williamson (2018).

Using an analytical framework with turn-taking, discourse framing and conflict resolution along one axis and roles, rights and responsibilities and politeness conventions along the other, Mergel and Williamson (2018) analysed the behaviours of groups of native-Japanese speakers of English and groups of native speakers of English role-playing the same decision-making scenarios. The differences aligned closely with Aritz and Walker’s (2014) Collaborative and Cooperative Leadership models respectively (see Table 1). In other words, the different quality of turn-taking across the two groups was situated within a different overall style of interaction.

Table 1. *Two Discursive Leadership Types for Decision-Making Meetings*

Cooperative Leadership (Japanese)		
	Roles: Rights & Responsibilities	Politeness Conventions
Turn-taking	Turns allocated by chair in an egalitarian order	Significant pauses between turns, few interruptions
Discourse framing	Discourse framed and directed by chair	Discourse framing seen as institutional right of chair
Conflict resolution	Conflict mediated by chair, tacit pressure to conform to majority view	Disagreements significantly hedged, strategic alliance-building moves rare or absent
Collaborative Leadership (English native speakers)		
	Roles: Rights & Responsibilities	Politeness Conventions
Turn-taking	Turns allocated by individual initiative	Overlapping and interrupting common
Discourse framing	Discourse framed by chair but not exclusive right	Discourse framing seen as shared responsibility
Conflict resolution	Conflict mediated by chair, sometimes others - compromises proposed, arguments made and alliances formed	Disagreements usually hedged but direct disagreement tolerated

A Pragmatics Obstacle for Japanese Learners of English

The differences observed by Mergel and Williamson (2018) across the two discursive leadership styles are significant and reflect, in many cases, deeply held subconscious cultural beliefs—what Hall (1983) called “primary-level culture”—about discourse roles and politeness. If we take this into account, it may well be that the contrast in the extent and duration of pauses at turn exchanges between native English speakers and Japanese speakers of English is due as much to these beliefs about what is appropriate social behaviour as to an inability to project TRPs. If this is the case, teachers hoping to encourage their Japanese students to conform to the norms of English turn-taking are seeking changes in both linguistic proficiency and sociopragmatic behaviour. While the former involves learning new linguistic knowledge, the latter involves adapting to a new set of social values (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983). It may even seem to some learners as if they are being asked by the teacher to behave impolitely. It is not surprising, therefore, if resistance to instruction is the result and this may offer a possible explanation for why Young’s (2018, p. 11) learners “remained oriented to a Japanese style of floor management” despite his instruction.

If pragmatics is preventing Japanese learners from developing English IC in addition to and apart from any linguistic differences, then instruction must address it. This means that learners should be made aware of: 1) turn-taking differences between typical L1 and L2 practices; 2) pragmatic reasons for those differences; and 3) the potential consequences of not adapting their behaviours. At the same time, teachers should be aware of and sympathetic to the psychological difficulties of changing from one style of interaction to another. Instruction should focus on strategies and avoid prescription which may be viewed as overly ethnocentric and leave the choice and extent of accommodation up to the learner. Showing videos, of authentic English group talk with many overlaps (any extract from a TV discussion show these days will likely suffice) may help learners see just how proficient speakers manage the complex dynamic while (usually) maintaining rapport. Communication tasks such as games offer ways for learners to try out strategies in non-face-threatening contexts. The author gives an example of this approach in an interrupting game published in issue 39(2) of *The Language Teacher* that has proved effective and fun in many teaching contexts (Williamson, 2015). In other words, pragmatics instruction requires sensitivity to pragmatics factors and the culturally-shared values that often

underly them. Where pragmatics is an obstacle to what teachers are trying to teach, underestimating its influence or worse, ignoring it completely, is unlikely to lead to successful learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Young’s (2018) article brought some welcome attention to the difficulties Japanese learners of English have in adapting to the turn-taking dynamics of English. Being better able to participate in and influence group talk in English is a key demand from employers and should, therefore, hold a high priority among teachers preparing students for the workplace. However, the difficulties learners experience are at least as much pragmatic in origin as they are linguistic. The evidence suggests that English speakers and Japanese speakers conform to different norms of turn-taking influenced by the relationship between speakers and listeners and the face-sensitivity of the content of the speech. Because these differences are pragmatic in nature, developing English turn-taking skills may sometimes involve behaving in ways that conflict with underlying culturally-oriented values about interactional behaviour. This adaptation can be difficult from a psychological perspective. Teachers must understand what is at stake. Failure to do so may put at risk the pedagogical outcomes they are striving for.

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