Research Forum

Conversational Turn-taking Behaviors of Japanese and Americans in Small Groups

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This study examined conversational turn-taking behaviors between Japanese and American participants in small groups. Because of cultural differences, it was hypothesized that Americans would employ self-select turn-taking procedures proportionately more often than Japanese and that Japanese would employ other-select turn-taking procedures proportionately more often than Americans. These expectations were tested in eight groups; two comprised all Japanese participants, two comprised all American participants and four comprised an equal number of Japanese and American participants. Each group contained four members. Results supported the expectations outlined above in the culturally uniform groups. However, in the culturally diverse groups, Japanese and Americans did not differ in the proportions of self and other select turn-taking behaviors. In these groups, though, the Americans took significantly more turns than did the Japanese.

本研究は、小人数グループにおける日本人とアメリカ人の会話の順交替 (turn-taking) を分析した研究である。文化的相違を根拠にし、「アメリカ人は日本人と比較しより頻繁に自己決定に基づいた順交替を行い、日本人はより頻繁に他者決定に基づいた順交替を行う」との仮説を立て、検証を行った。被験者は各4名からなる次の8グループである。日本人のみからなる2グループ、アメリカ人のみからなる2グループ、日本人とアメリカ人各2名からなる4グループ。結果、日本人またはアメリカ人のみからなるグループの比較で仮説は検証されたが、混合グループにおいては、自己決定：他者決定の比率は日本人とアメリカ人との間に差が認められなかった。ただし混合グループにおいては、アメリカ人がより多くの発話行為を行った。

Intercultural exchanges are becoming more and more common as a world economy emerges, and this globalization has brought with it an increasing presence of international students on campuses in many North American universities (Zikopoulos, 1990). However, many

instructors, having had limited exposure to students from different cultural backgrounds, lack the cultural knowledge necessary to understand their foreign students' communication patterns and, in turn, have little idea of how to respond to the needs of these students.

Because theories of intercultural communication involve a myriad of concepts, investigation into such communication processes might run the gamut from broad macroscopic studies (Kim, 1991), to microscopic studies that examine one aspect of one of these concepts. Zimmerman (1995), at a macroscopic level of analysis, reported that the intercultural communication competence of international students at one university was related to their being satisfied with their interaction skills but that "talking with American students was the single most important factor in perceptions of communication competence and adjusting to American life" (p. 321). This finding suggests that the nature of interaction between American and international students is of critical importance for foreign students' perceived communication competence and successful cultural adaptation.

Given the relationship between enculturation and verbal communication (Samovar & Porter, 1991), differences in conversational patterns may inhibit effective communication and lead to misunderstandings. Kitao (1993), examined Japanese students in an ESL classroom setting to determine sources of communication problems they faced. She reported that hindrances to "sociolinguistic competence" included "transfer of sociocultural patterns from Japanese to English" (p. 148). This study exemplified an approach midway between the macroscopic and microscropic.

Believing that microscopic examination of one aspect of verbal communication should further serve to demonstrate the significance of cultural differences and their effect on the communication process, we examined turn-taking behaviors between Japanese and American students because turn-taking is a fundamental aspect of face to face encounters (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1978). If people engaged in conversation cannot coordinate their turn-taking, they will be unable to communicate effectively. At the same time, we felt turn-taking might be influenced by cultural expectations in predictable ways, but that such predictions would vary depending upon the cultural background of the students involved (Klopf, in press). That is, students from some cultures, such as Japan, might expect others to invite them to participate in a conversation while students from other cultures, such as Canada, might simply expect to take part without waiting for an "invitation." Prior research into the turn-taking process has shown that cultural influences affect turn-taking patterns in conversations. Shimura (1988) as noted by Johnson (1995) demonstrated that Japanese ESL learners take

fewer turns in conversation than other Asians. To further evaluate the relationship between culture and conversational styles, we examined turn-taking processes in Japanese, Americans, and mixed groups of Americans and Japanese.

Communicative patterns of Japanese and Americans suggests differences in conversational styles. For instance, Barnlund (1975) compared Japanese and American verbal and nonverbal self-disclosure and concluded: "The communicative consequences of cultural emphasis upon talkativeness and self-assertion among Americans may cultivate a highly self-oriented person, one who prizes and expresses every inner response no matter how trivial or fleeting." Of Japanese people he says, "The communicative consequences of cultural encouragement of reserve and caution among Japanese may produce an other-oriented person, who is highly sensitive and receptive to meanings in others" (p. 160). Such norms and rules influence how people form and process messages (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988) and will also affect conversational styles.

According to Okabe (1983), "The cultural assumptions of interdependence and harmony require that Japanese speakers limit themselves to implicit and even ambiguous use of words" (p. 36). Ishii and Bruneau (1994) note that "Japanese people are oriented to nonverbal intuitive communication while Americans want to emphasize individualism and self-assertion" (p. 249).

In addition, Ishii and Bruneau (1994) cite significant differences between American and Japanese views of silence. They state, "The Western tradition is relatively negative in its attitude toward silence and ambiguity, especially in social and public relations" (p. 247). This somewhat negative orientation may lead to Americans feeling uncomfortable when there is silence in conversation. Japanese, on the other hand, highly regard silence. Ishii and Bruneau (1994) report, "It may be safely said that Japanese culture nurtures silence, reserve, and formality, whereas Western cultures place more value on speech, self-assertion, and informality" (p. 248). Furthermore, these differences are also clearly reflected in the education systems of the respective cultures. American students are encouraged and rewarded for being outgoing and expressive in the classroom. Japanese, on the other hand, come from an education system that discourages this type of behavior. Starting with junior high school, most Japanese classrooms do not have the interactive relationship between students and teachers that is the norm in North America. In most cases, the teachers instruct, and the students sit quietly and attempt to absorb the information. These orientations may very well lead to variations in turn-taking patterns.

Specifically, Americans may employ relatively more self-select turn-taking procedures in conversation, while the Japanese may employ relatively more other-select procedures. It would be expected that Japanese would use "other-select" turn-taking procedures more whether in all-Japanese groups or in mixed Japanese/American groups. On the other hand, Americans would be expected to employ more self-select turn-taking procedures in solely American groups or in mixed American/Japanese groups.

The Study

Method

Verbal interaction among participants in conversations obviously involves turn-taking behaviors. A current framework among conversation analysts for studying turn-taking behaviors was developed by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1978). In this normative system, turns consist of different types of "Turn Construction Units," which can be identified as: words, phrases, clauses, and sentences.

Participants use these units for building turns. "Turns can be projectedly [sic] one word long, or for example, they can be sentential in length" (Sacks, et al., 1978). A potential end to a turn is labeled as a "Transition Relevance Place" or TRP.

There are three ways to determine who the next speaker can properly be. The Speaker Selection Practices are:

1. Current Speaker Selects Next—at any time before the first TRP, the current speaker may select someone else to be the speaker by a question or other direction.
2. Listener Self-Selects—at the first TRP, if the current speaker hasn't selected another, any listener may self-select by beginning to speak.
3. Current Speaker Continues—at the first TRP, if neither of the above-mentioned selection processes has been used, the current speaker may take another turn.

These three practices follow the above listed priority order and continue to apply at the subsequent TRPs (Sacks, et al., 1978). Procedures two and three in the above list are "self-select" procedures, while item one is an "other-select" procedure. The verbal and non-verbal cues associated with these procedures were identified by Wiemann and Knapp (1975). For instance, turn yielding cues of note were "completions" (finishing a declarative statement with no attempt to continue), questions, and "buffers" (short words or phrases which are 'content free' like "um"

or "uh"). The procedures employed for coding "self and other" select behaviors are detailed in the data coding section of this report.

Subjects: Sixteen undergraduate students (eight Americans and eight Japanese) enrolled in a mid-sized western U.S. university all volunteered to participate in this study. The American sample consisted of four males and four females, as did the Japanese sample. All American participants were born and raised in the United States. The Japanese participants were born and raised in Japan but had been studying in the United States for various periods of time. All sessions were conducted using the English language.

Data Collection: Data were collected from eight small groups according to the following procedures. Two groups were comprised of all Japanese students, two groups were comprised of all American students, and four groups contained two Japanese and two American students. Each group was asked to have a ten minute conversation about a specific topic (e.g., what they would do if they won ten million dollars in a lottery.)

With the permission of the participants, all interactions were videotaped. The researcher turned on the videotape recorder, left, and returned in precisely ten minutes. Participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Data Coding: Two coders, one of the authors (an American) and a Japanese coder, analyzed the data tapes with regard to the "self-select" and "other-select" turn-taking behaviors of all participants. The researcher oriented the other coder to observe, identify, and record self-selecting and other-selecting behaviors of the participants. In order to minimize potential coding bias, this second coder was not aware of the hypotheses. Coding was accomplished by observing the videotaped data, identifying self- or other-selecting cues, and recording observations. The observations were operationalized according to the following criteria: a) identifying which speaker engaged in self- or other-select behavior, b) indicating whether the observed behavior was self- or other-select, and c) noting when the utterance occurred by recording the first word of the turn in which the behavior occurred. (This enabled the data to be unitized.) One-eighth of the data set was double coded in order to determine inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability achieved the .93 level (Holsti, 1973). For the double-coded data, the native rater's observations were used in the analyses.

Analyses: A series of *t* tests were used to test the hypotheses advanced in this investigation. The independent variable in these tests was nationality (Japanese or American); the dependent variable was turn-

taking behavior (either self-select or other-select). Raw data were converted to proportions prior to analysis (i.e., the numbers of self-selects and other-selects for each subject were divided by the total number of turns to form proportions).

Results

The first analysis involved testing whether Americans in their in-groups would self-select proportionately more often than Japanese conversing in their in-groups. A significant effect for nationality on self-selecting behaviors (t 14 = 6.66, $p < .05$, $r2 = .32$) was found. The mean proportions of self-select were .84 for the American participants ($SD = .24$) and .60 for the Japanese ($SD = .24$) As expected, the Americans used self-select turn-taking behavior proportionately more often. A significant main effect was also found for nationality on proportional other-selecting behaviors (t 14 = 6.66, $p < .05$, $r2 = .32$). The Americans used other-select behaviors ($M = .16$, $SD = .1$) proportionately less than the Japanese ($M = .40$, $SD = .24$).

The second analysis examined whether the American participants would employ relatively more self-select procedures in mixed groups than the Japanese with the reverse pattern being in evidence for the other-select procedures. This pattern did not emerge (t 14 = .69). The Americans self-selected 77% of the time in the mixed groups while the Japanese self-selected 76% of the time in these groups. The most significant aspect of these groups was the turn dominance by the Americans. Of the 256 turns recorded in these groups, Americans took 213 (83%).

Discussion

As anticipated, this study found that Japanese and Americans use different turn-taking mechanisms. Specifically, Americans self-select proportionately more than Japanese while the Japanese use more other-select procedures than do Americans in culturally uniform groups. It appears that cultural background contributes to these patterns. As noted earlier, mainstream American culture reinforces the importance of individualism and freedom of expression, while Japanese communication norms are designed to maintain harmony and avoid conflict. These differences could account for Japanese tendencies to other-select proportionately more often than Americans in conversations. The pattern may not hold true for other international students (e.g. Germans). Research into the turn-taking mechanisms in operation with regard to students from a variety of countries and cultures would seem warranted (as would research into other conversational skills).

The results obtained in culturally diverse groups did not conform to expectations. Here, Japanese and Americans did not differ from one another in their self- and other-select tendencies. The most striking finding in the culturally diverse groups is that Americans took the vast majority of the turns (83%). Perhaps the Japanese tendency to prefer "other" selection procedures kept them from participating more freely in these conversations. The dynamic appears to be straightforward: Americans expect others to take a turn when an opportunity appears and have an aversion to silence. Japanese, on the other hand, tend to expect to be invited to participate in the conversation and see silence as perfectly acceptable. Americans rush to fill the "gap" more often than not with self-selecting behaviors. Thus, Americans dominated exchanges in these small groups.

There are, of course, a number of limitations to this investigation that require acknowledgment. First, this study was videotaped in a controlled environment which may have affected subjects' behavior. Although videotaping may distort behavior, Wiemann (1981) found that behaviors usually out of conscious awareness are not affected by observation procedures. Since these subjects were not aware that turn-taking was being examined, the presence of a video camera may not have significantly affected the results.

Another limitation is fluency in the oral use of the English language. Although the Japanese subjects, enrolled as undergraduates at an American university, should have had a good command of English, the fact that they weren't native speakers may have limited their participation. That is, their turn-taking behaviors might have been significantly different had they engaged in conversational Japanese.

It would be interesting to discover how the results would vary if conversations across all groups were carried out in Japanese rather than English. Conducting a similar study using American subjects who had acquired conversational fluency in Japanese would be useful for determining the effects of linguistic fluency on turn-taking patterns. The cultural adaptations of Japanese participants studying in the U.S. may well have affected the generalizability of these data. Japanese living in America for any length of time may be socialized into adopting American patterns of communication. If this is the case, then Japanese participants in the United States may not accurately reflect the greater population in Japan.

Another potentially informative study would therefore be to measure how cultural adaptation may affect turn-taking differences between Japanese and Americans. An instrument designed to determine the degree of cultural adaptation of subjects would be useful for further understanding the effect of culture on turn-taking behaviors. If subjects indi-

cating high degrees of cultural adaptation to an out-culture displayed turn-taking behaviors similar to members of that culture, then the assertion that culture affects turn-taking would be strengthened.

Yet another limitation is the small sample size. Since the way we take and yield conversational turns is generally outside our awareness, a small sample ought to reflect turn-taking procedures from the larger group, hence the data patterns in evidence here should hold in a larger sample. Nonetheless, the generalizability of these findings should be verified using a larger number of participants from diverse backgrounds from both cultures.

Assuming the present data patterns obtained here are an accurate reflection of turn-taking behavior, these data have direct implications for participation-oriented classrooms involving Japanese students. Japanese students are likely to be silent unless they are invited to participate. In small group assignments, they are likely to let others participate, though from their perspective they are contributing to the facilitation of discussion by remaining silent. Teachers and students should be aware of these tendencies, not necessarily to change them but to understand and appreciate their significance.

It is difficult to say whether this pattern extends to other international students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such behavior is not uncommon among Asian students. Certainly research ought to examine conversational practices of various international students. A database of this nature will enable us to more readily serve the needs of this segment of the student population. It will also provide us a foundation to construct and test theories of intercultural communication.

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