



Title	Asymmetrical conversation between a Japanese native speaker and a foreigner
Author(s)	Naka, Makiko; Yasuda, Hiromi
Citation	千葉大学教育学部研究紀要. I, 教育科学編, 43, 1-6
Issue Date	1995-02-28
Doc URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2115/44729">http://hdl.handle.net/2115/44729</a>
Type	article
File Information	CDKK43_1-6.pdf



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# ASYMMETRICAL CONVERSATION BETWEEN A JAPANESE NATIVE SPEAKER AND A FOREIGNER

Makiko NAKA & Hiromi YASUDA

## ABSTRACT

The present article studied asymmetrical conversation between two adults who had a gap in linguistic ability, i. e., a native speaker and a foreigner. Japanese and foreign undergraduates had conversations either in Japanese or in English: In the Japanese conversation, Japanese subjects had advantage while in the English conversation, foreign subjects had advantage. The inter- as well as intra-subject change of conversation strategies between two languages was assessed. The results showed that in the Japanese conversation, Japanese subjects made more questions and let the partner make more yes-no answers, while in the English conversation, the foreign subjects took longer turns, paraphrasing what the partner said. Among ten strategies, *Explanation* was the only strategy that was used by advantaged subjects in both Japanese and English conversations.

Keywords: *asymmetrical conversation, conversation strategy, native and foreign language, explanation, adult subjects.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is well known that a mother takes longer turns than a child by extending, elaborating, clarifying, and correcting what the child says [1, 2]. If such an asymmetry is caused mainly by conversation strategies taken by a mother to maintain a conversation with a child who has insufficient linguistic ability, then one may expect the similar effect between adults as well who have a gap in linguistic ability, e. g., a native speaker and a foreigner. In fact, Warren and Bohannon [3], for example, reported that when undergraduate subjects (English native speakers) assumed their partner to be a foreigner who did not speak fluently, they changed the conversation strategy using more simple expression, repetition, paraphrases, and questions than when they assumed the partner to be a fluent English speaker. Although the observation was done only for the part of native speakers, and thus no asymmetry was mentioned, it suggests the existence of asymmetrical conversation between adults, which is associated with the change of conversation strategies. It is worthwhile to study such an asymmetry, because it may elucidate the sheer strategies that are to manage a gap in linguistic ability but not a gap in basic cognitive ability, general knowledge, nor social skills, which might affect the asymmetry between a mother and child.

In this article, we study the conversation between two adults, a Japanese native speaker and a foreigner. The conversation will be either in Japanese or in English: When speaking in Japanese, Japanese subjects have advantage while when speaking in English, foreign subjects have advantage. In the assessment of asymmetry, we consider the conversations in both languages to get rid of individual difference, which may obscure the asymmetry. That is, for instance, if a comparatively quiet Japanese talks with a rather talkative foreigner in Japanese, the relative increase in the amount of speech generated by the Japanese might be obscured by the absolute dominance of the foreigner. Assuming that a conversation in the unfamiliar language shows the baseline of the use of a strategy, by subtracting it from the use of the strategy in the familiar language, we believe we are able to assess the relative inter-subject difference more pertinently.

## METHOD

*Subjects.* Two female Japanese undergraduates (J1 and J2) and three foreign undergraduates (F1: a male Mexican, F2: a female Malaysian, and F3: a male New Guinea) participated in this study. Japanese subjects studied English for six years but seldom speak. Foreign subjects had been in Japan for a year and three to six months. They started to learn Japanese after they came to Japan. English is virtually the mother tongue for F1 and F2, and is the mother tongue for F3.

*Procedures.* Six pairs were made: J1-F1, J1-F2, J1-F3, J2-F1, J2-F2, and J2-F3. Each pair had a conversation on two topics, one in Japanese [How to live economically in Japan] and the other in English [The reason why Japanese are not good at speaking English]. The order of language to speak as well as the partner to talk with was counterbalanced across the pairs. At least a three-day interval was placed before a subject had a conversation with a different partner in order to minimize the effect of previous conversation on the next. Each conversation lasted about five minutes. Conversations were tape-recorded.

## RESULTS

The tapes were transcribed. The number of turns and verbs in each conversation was counted. Then, each turn was categorized into ten categories according to its function. Table 1 shows the definition and examples for each category. Table 2 shows the mean numbers of turns in each category, total turns, and verbs. The sum of turns in each category may exceed the number of total turns because a turn could have two or more functions and thus could be categorized into two or more categories.

Table 1 The category of turns

Category	Definition	Examples*
Answer+	Extended answers	(J: Can you save money?) F: Yes. Sometimes I can, the other time, I cannot. I spend all money I have.
Answer-	Yes-no answers	(J: In Japan?) F: Yes.
Extension	Extension of a speaker's or partner's idea	(F: The train. Yes.) J: In particular, Japanese Railway. Subways are OK, though.
Explanation	Explanation	(F: Ah, what is KOMAKAI-MONO? Will you explain?) J: The stationery, like a notebook, an eraser, and pencils.
Paraphrase	Paraphrase	(F: It's expensive to ride a train, train.) J: Yeah, transportation fee is expensive.
Question+	Questions	J: How much allowance do you have?
Question-	Clarification of what a partner says	(J: How much allowance do you have?) F: Eh?
Repetition	Repetition of what a partner says	(F: I don't go in such a shop.) J: You don't go.
Response	Response without a content	(J: I spend as much as I have.) F: Is that so.
Starting	Starting of a new topic	J: Now, I should talk about myself, too, shouldn't I?

\* Examples are the turns translated from Japanese conversation. Parentheses present a preceding turn.

Table 2 Means of turns in each category, total turns, and verbs (per conversation)

	Japanese		English	
	Japanese	Foreigners	Japanese	Foreigners
Answer+	0.7	5	0	1.8
Answer-	1.7	5.3	3	1.5
Extension	7.3	7	3.7	4.3
Explanation	1.5	0	0	0.7
Paraphrase	0.5	0.2	0	1
Question+	10	1.7	2.5	0.5
Question-	1.7	2.5	1.5	3.3
Response	7.7	6	3.8	2.2
Repetition	0.5	0.3	1	0.7
Starting	1.7	1	1.2	1.2
Total turns	30	29	15	15
Verbs	47	35	20	55

The following analyses are based on the number of turns in each category divided by the number of total turns. For example, *Answer+* score for a person was obtained by dividing the number of *Answer+* by the number of total turns of his/her part in the conversation.

Let Jj, Fj, Je, and Fe denote the mean scores for Japanese subjects in the Japanese conversation, foreign subjects in the Japanese conversation, Japanese subjects in the English conversation, and foreign subjects in the English conversation, respectively. The inter-subject difference between two languages, i. e., the absolute value for (Jj-Fj)-(Je-Fe) was significantly greater than zero for *Answer-*, *Explanation*, *Paraphrase*,

*Question+*, and the number of verbs [ $t(5) = 2.23, p < .05$ ;  $t(5) = 2.51, p < .05$ ;  $t(5) = 1.95, p < .05$ ;  $t(5) = 1.69, p < .10$ ;  $t(5) = 3.11, p < .01$ ].

Fig. 1 through Fig. 10 show the mean scores for each category produced by Japanese and foreign subjects in the Japanese and English conversation. Fig. 4 (*Explanation*) shows the asymmetry in both languages, while Fig. 2 (*Answer-*), Fig. 5 (*Paraphrase*), and Fig. 6 (*Question+*) show the asymmetry in either Japanese or English conversation. In the Japanese conversation, Japanese produced more explanation [ $t(5) = 2.51, p < .05$ ] and questions [ $t(5) = 4.71, p < .01$ ] than foreigners, and foreigners produced more yes-no answers [ $t(5) = -2.67, p < .05$ ] than Japanese. On the other hand, in the English conversation, foreigners tended to produce more explanation [ $t(5) = 1.47, p < .10$ ] and paraphrases [ $t(5) = 1.47, p < .10$ ] than Japanese.

Fig. 11 presents the number of verbs per turn produced by Japanese and foreign subjects in the Japanese and English conversation, which also shows the asymmetry. In the English conversation, foreigners produced longer turns, i. e., turns that contained more verbs, than Japanese [ $t(5) = 1.98, p < .05$ ].

In sum, asymmetrical conversation was observed for adults who had a gap in linguistic ability: In the Japanese conversation, Japanese subjects made more questions and let the partner make more yes-no answers, while in the English conversation, foreign subjects took longer turns, making paraphrases of what the partner said. Explanation was the only strategy that was used by advantaged subjects in both Japanese and English conversations.

## DISCUSSION

In the conversation between a mother and child, the length of turn is the most evident feature of asymmetry. Also, the user of strategies is fixed: It is always the part of mother who produces more extension, explanation, paraphrases, and questions. It was not the case, however, for adults who had a gap in linguistic ability but not in the cognitive ability nor in general knowledge. In the conversation observed here, Japanese and foreign subjects seemed to have their own conversation styles that were common across languages: In a familiar language, the strategies to fill in the gap seemed to derive from their own conversation styles. And the styles were preserved even in the unfamiliar language.

Explanation may be the only strategy, which is not included in the usual conversation strategies but is called for if needed. Sometimes a disadvantaged person asks for it (e. g., J: "Do you SETSUYAKU?" F:

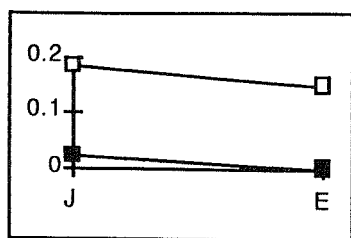


Fig. 1 Answer+

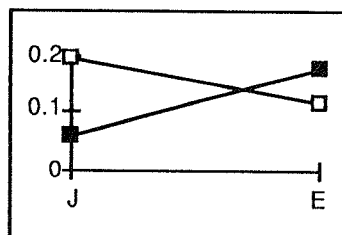


Fig. 2 Answer-

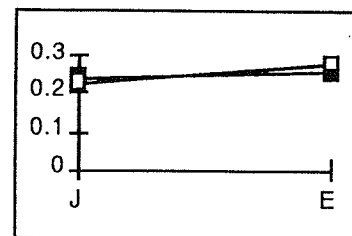


Fig. 3 Extension

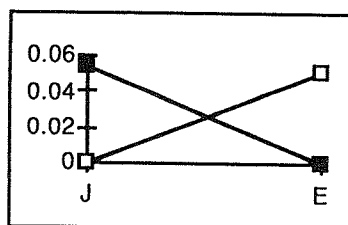


Fig. 4 Explanation

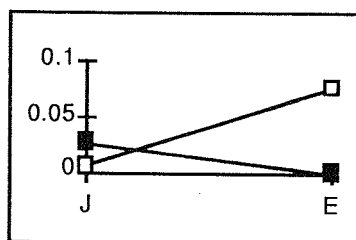


Fig. 5 Paraphrase

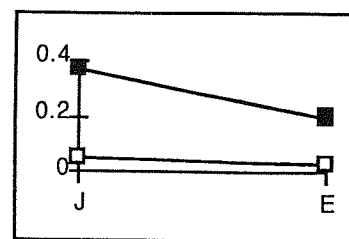


Fig. 6 Question+

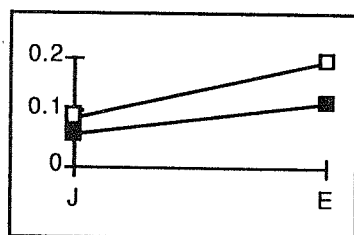


Fig. 7 Question-

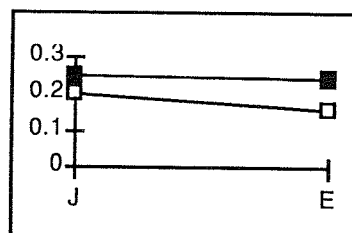


Fig. 8 Response

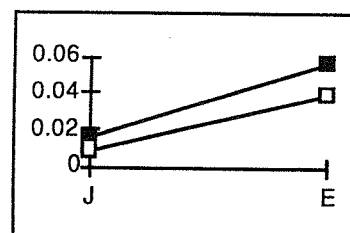


Fig. 9 Repetition

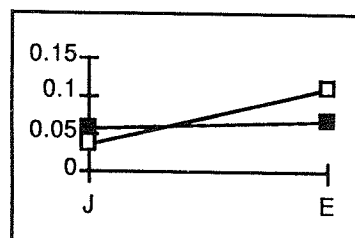


Fig. 10 Starting

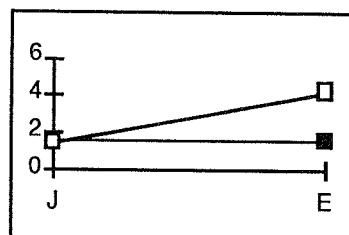


Fig. 11 Number of Verbs

■ Japanese  
 □ Foreigners  
 J Japanese conversation  
 E English conversation

"What is SETSUYAKU?" J: "SETSUYAKU means you don't spend money but save.") but the other time, an advantaged person spontaneously produces it (e. g., J: "When do you feel BUKKA is high? Err, by the way, do you know what BUKKA is?"). It can be a simple translation (e. g., F: "Budget in English, I don't know how to say in Japanese." J: "YOSAN, YASAN, I think."), but sometimes it is more elaborated showing examples, (e. g., F: "What is KOMAKAI-MONO? Will you explain?" J: "Stationery, like a notebook, an eraser, and pencils.") and can even be a sub-topic of conversation (e. g., twelve turns to explain what KISERU is). How good one is at talking with a person with insufficient linguistic ability may be related to how much vocabulary one has to explain things.

The results are not conclusive yet, however, because the sample was small in number, and the languages used were confounded with topics. English-speaking foreigners were not necessarily the native English speakers. Improved study is necessary to draw the conclusion as well as to elucidate more details of asymmetrical conversation between adults.

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## APPENDIX

### *Translation of Japanese Conversation (excerpt):*

- J: How much allowance do you have a month? (Question+)
- F: Un, to, 130,000 yen. (Answer+)
- J: 130,000 yen. It's good enough, isn't it? (Paraphrase, Question+)
- F: Yes. (Answer-)
- J: Yeah. (Response)
- F: But when I want to buy a big thing, I can't buy it at once. (Answer+)
- J: Are you going to live here all your life? (Question+)
- F: Nnn, I will go back my country after I graduate. (Answer+)
- J: Then you may not need to buy big things. (Extension)
- F: But like a hi-fi ... (Extension)
- J: You want to buy ... (Question-)
- F: yes. (Answer-)
- J: Hm. To buy big things, to buy big things, they are expensive, but you want to buy them. How do you manage to buy? (Extension, Question+)
- F: I save money. (Answer+)
- J: Do you have a part-time job? (Question+)
- F: No, I don't. (Answer-)
- J: Then I guess you spend all money you have. Don't you? (Question+)
- F: Yes. I spend much money for recreation. (Answer+)

### *English conversation (excerpt):*

- F: I think the problem is, I think Japanese students are very good in writing and reading English. (Starting)
- J: Really? (Question-)
- F: Very good. I mean, they can read English books and they can write very well. But an only problem is speaking it. The problem is probably associated ... after go out of the school, it is always Japanese everyday. So I think it's the biggest problem. The Japanese students overseas like America, English speaking countries, they converse in English very good, you know. So I think the only problem is the Japanese students speak more English out of school. You think so? (Extension, Question+)
- J: I think so. Umm. I, I feel harder when I, when I speak English than when I write in English. Um. That is because, because of the education. When I was in junior high school or high school, um, homework was only to *diction* the words, *diction* the words, or read the text. Um, teacher did not give me homework of speaking. (Answer-, Starting)

F: So, so that is probably the main reason. My Japanese students are not very, they can't speak English very well. (Starting)

J: So. (Response)

F: But I when, I was the same in Japanese. Students go overseas you know, like America, Australia, England, language is improved very well. (Extension)

J: You meant? (Question-)

F: Um. Japanese, some Japanese most of the Japanese in Japan, they are very poor in English, you know. But if they go for studying overseas, like America, Australia, something like it, say, after one year, they can speak English very very well. So I think Japanese students should speak more English between themselves, so something, I think Japanese students always speak *English* everyday. That's why they don't speak English well, isn't it? (Answer+, Question-)

J: Yes. That's it. (Answer-, Response)

#### NOTE

The study was presented at Intentional Symposium on Spoken Dialogue held in November, 1993, at Waseda University, Tokyo. It was in part supported by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research on Priority Areas(1)No. 05206103, Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.