

## Pragmatic Use of *Aizuchi* in Japanese Discourse: A Comparison with English Backchannels<sup>1</sup>

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Listener's verbal or non-verbal signals are known as backchannel expressions. They are translated "*Aizuchi*" in Japanese, which are understood as the same as English backchannel expressions in general. It is however, Maynard (1989), Mizutani (1983), and LoCastro (1999) explained that *Aizuchi* and English backchannels have several differences in frequency, occurrences, and their meanings. In this study, we will focus on the basic structural level of Japanese *Aizuchi* and backchannels in American English.

The data for this paper are obtained from natural conversations between English and Japanese university students. There are two findings that will be explained and discussed. First, we found that Japanese *Aizuchi* has much more variety than English backchannel. Second, it is found that one of the basic types of Japanese *Aizuchi* "sou" has flexible forms, which are connected by sentence final particles (SFPs).

As regards thinking about the performance level of Japanese *Aizuchi*, we saw several pragmatic style-shifts to make listener's creative meanings in Japanese conversations. Such Japanese behaviors might be the result of emphasizing pragmatic and functional aspects than Americans in the use of listeners' utterances.

### 1. Introduction

When two or more people meet together, they make some kinds of communicative interactions. Backchannel is known as listener's verbal or non-verbal brief signals toward a speaker. It was termed by Yngve for the first time in 1970. Yngve (1970) asserted that the "main" channel is a term, which the person holding the floor sends messages, whereas the "back" channel is a term which "the person who has the turn receives short messages such as 'yes' and 'uh-huh' without relinquishing the turn (1970: 568)." This concept is also translated as "*Aizuchi*" in Japanese, which is understood the same as English backchannel signals. Although a large number of studies have been made on backchannels, little is known about how the forms of Japanese *Aizuchi* affect their functions. We would like to take a look at a very simple example as follows. When speaker X feels that he/she is cold, he/she might speak to the listener Y:

- (1) X: It's cold here.  
Y: Yeah.

It is natural to make this kind of utterance in everyday conversation. Y's utterance will be able to be said to any person such as, their friends, teachers, bosses, a stranger and so on in the case of English speakers. However, it will be difficult to translate this kind of listener's utterance into Japanese, because there are lots of possibilities to choose one particular form from several backchannel expressions. In this case, "Yeah" can be translated, "un", "ee", "hai", "soudane" and so on.

The purpose of this study is to examine the pragmatic use of Japanese *Aizuchi*<sup>1)</sup>, in comparison with backchannel expressions in American English to consider what the listener's expecting role or behavior is.

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Received, Sept 11, 2001

We will refer to the notion of indexicalities explained by Silverstein (1976) in the next section. It will give us very useful insight to consider these research questions, and then, we will examine this notion in this study.

## 2. Silverstein's indexical functions

As a measurement of comparing Japanese *Aizuchi* and backchannels, we will examine Silverstein's notion of indexicality (1976). Silverstein states that indexicality is "the property of sign vehicle signaling contextual 'existence' of an entity" (1976:26). According to the rules of language use, he classified this notion into two categories. One is indexical presupposition, which states "the relationship of mutually implied existence of sign vehicle token and certain aspects of the context of discourse" (1976:33). In short, presupposing language use does not manipulate the interlocutors. The other category is indexical creativity, which is explained by Silverstein as follows:

Social indexes such as deference vocabularies and constructions ... are examples of maximally creative or performative devices, which, by their very use, make the social parameters of speaker and hearer explicit. Adherence to the norms specified by rules of use reinforces the perceived social relations of speaker and hearer; violations constitute a powerful rebuff or insult, or go into the creation of irony and humor. (1976: 34)

This notion would be able to be understood by the example of T/V pronominal distinctions. For instance, there are two expressions to say second person pronouns in French; "tu" stands for "you (informal)", and "vous" stands for "you (honorific use)". In short, creative language use is manipulated by the interlocutors.

The concept of these two indexical functions, presupposing and creative language use, will be considered as a broad interpretation of listener's behavior, and this notion might exist in Japanese *Aizuchi*.

## 3. Procedure

### 3.1 Data

The data used for this study consist of face-to-face natural conversations between speakers. Both Japanese and American-English data were collected in Japan by a micro-tape recorder.

The number of informants was twelve Japanese speakers (six males and six females) and twelve American-English speakers (six males and six females). They were gathered and grouped in dyadic. The topics of the conversation were given and the conversation was recorded.

The Japanese informants ranged in age from 21 to 24, and the American informants from 20 to 26. All of them were university students. The aim in selecting the informants was to abolish the variation of the age and informants' individual communicative skills. 60 minutes of the recorded conversational data were transcribed later.

### 3.2 Definition

As we mentioned earlier, there are scholars who compared English and Japanese backchannels. The general methodologies and procedures of backchannel behavior are dependent on the previous studies in White (1989) and Maynard (1987). That means we regard as backchannels the listener's repetition of a

speaker's utterances, a listener's brief sentence completions interrupting the speaker and finishing his/her statements, and a listener's vocalized laughter instead of stating any further messages. Maynard (1987) also classified a listener's brief utterances and brief statements such as "aa", "un", "sou" (yeah, uh-huh), "hontou" (really), "naruhodo" (I, see) and so on. We refer to these classifications in this study.

#### 4. Analysis

##### 4.1 Basic forms and expressions

In this section, we will compare some of the similarities and differences between English backchannels and Japanese *Aizuchi*. First, we counted the frequency of English backchannels, and obtained 142 backchannel expressions. We realized that the tendency to prefer certain backchannel forms between speaker and listener relationships were represented in the following expressions: We found that the expression of "Yeah" was 64 times (45.1%), "uh-huh" was 22 times (11.3%), and "right" was 13 times (9.2%). Next, we counted the frequency of Japanese *Aizuchi*, and obtained 481 utterances. We also found that the tendency to prefer certain types of Japanese *Aizuchi* was represented as follows: There are 283 times of "un" (58.8%), 40 times of "aa" (8.3%), and 18 times of "sou" (3.7%). These backchannels and Japanese *Aizuchi* expressions will take into considerations as basic listener's utterance forms. However, when we try to translate Japanese *Aizuchi* into English backchannels, we realize varieties of Japanese *Aizuchi* as in Table 1. This table shows English basic backchannel forms and their possible translations into Japanese.

Table 1:

Basic Backchannel Forms and Japanese *Aizuchi* Expressions

English	Japanese
"Yeah"	"un" "aa" "ou" "ee" "hai" etc.
"right"	"sou" "sou+ne (SFP)" "sou+dane (SFP)" etc.
"uh-huh"	"un un" "ee ee" etc.

As Table 1 indicates, there are not one to one correspondence between English and Japanese. There are lots of derivatives of "un" and "aa" in Japanese *Aizuchi*, and moreover, there are many "sou" derivatives connecting with sentence final particles (SFPs). We will try to describe such differences in the next section.

##### 4.2 Presupposing functions in Japanese backchannel expressions

In this section, we will consider various forms of Japanese *Aizuchi* from the viewpoint of Silverstein's theory of indexicality. Silverstein (1976) states that some of the language use is presupposed by certain cultures. This concept can also be applied to Japanese listener's behavior. The Japanese listener who wishes to say some kind of utterances during the conversation has to choose certain forms according to his/her own situations such as age, gender, status or power of interlocutors, and the formality of conversational settings. Therefore, basically, the forms of Japanese *Aizuchi* are not interchangeable during a conversation because the choice of Japanese *Aizuchi* is presupposed in advance.

We can take a look back to the following conversation, which is translated into Japanese.

- (1') X: Samui desu ne.  
'It's cold here.'  
Y: ee.  
'Yeah.'

In (1'), we can imagine that listener Y might be a female. We can also imagine that speaker X has higher status or is in higher position than listener Y, then, he/she selected a formal utterance. It might be also interpreted that speaker X is a stranger or unfamiliar person to listener Y, and then he/she can choose a formal form of Japanese *Aizuchi*. Needless to say, the form of using listener's utterance is presupposed by their situations in any cases.

The following Table 2 shows the basic patterns of the usage in Japanese *Aizuchi* and English backchannel translations.

Table 2:  
Examples of English Backchannels and Japanese *Aizuchi* in General use

English	Japanese				
	Formal	Informal	Masculine	Feminine	Gender neutral
"Yeah"	"hai" "ee"	"un" "aa"	"aa" "ou"	"ee"	"un"
"right"	"sou" + sentence final particles (SFP) <sup>iv</sup>				
	"sou desune"	"sou" "sou dane" "sou dayo"	"sou dana"	"sou ne" "sou yo"	"sou" "sou dane" "sou dayo"
"uh-huh"	"ee ee"	"un un" "aa aa"	"aa aa"	"ee ee"	"un un"

In Table 2, there are some classifications of Japanese *Aizuchi*. Some forms of *Aizuchi* can play different roles in two or more situations, so they are duplicated in other boxes. There are rooms for interpretation of the classifications in Japanese *Aizuchi*. It is because this table is based on the native intuition of some Japanese speakers.<sup>v</sup> There might be a little difference among individuals, but these types of structure are always affected to Japanese people as presupposing and cultural background knowledge.

Let us consider the previous example (1') again. At this time, we would like to replace Y's utterance "ee" with "un" in the following example (1"). When speaker X is a boss of listener Y in the working place, what happens to these interlocutors?

- (1") X: Samui desu ne.  
'It's cold here.'  
Y: un.  
'Yeah.'

We will be able to imagine that speaker X feels uncomfortable because listener Y's utterance shows too much familiarity with his/her choice of "un" form, which is used as the informal Japanese *Aizuchi*. In another possible interpretation, listener Y might realize that he/she had a mistake of choosing a wrong form, then he/she might say, "I'm sorry to be too rude" to avoid confrontation of the miscommunication between interlocutors. The rules of using appropriate forms are invisible but they really exist in certain cultures. The notions of these varieties of forms are very important to the Japanese people because different patterns of words or utterances convey particular roles and meanings.

#### 4.3 Creative functions in Japanese backchannel expressions

Concerning the choice of Japanese *Aizuchi* forms, it seems that Japanese listener's behavior is always restricted by the listener's situations and it does not have any flexibilities. Needless to say, people know that the language use in the pragmatic level is not a simple structure, which we think. As Silverstein (1976) stated earlier, there are two dimensions of language use: indexing presupposing function and creative one. Therefore, it might be a room for creative or performative language use and their interpretations in Japanese *Aizuchi*. We will show you some of the style-shifts of Japanese *Aizuchi* in the following examples. Transcription (a) is a story about the hair in two female's conversation.

- (a) A: watashi, jibunde, ha, chiga...u kedo, chotto yatte mita. Maegami wo.  
'I, I tried to cut the front side of my hair.'
- B: shaggy wo?  
'You did a shaggy hair?'
- A: un. Shaggy yatta no nii,  
'Yeah. I tried to do that, but...'
- B: un.  
'Yeah.'
- A: tadano okappa ni nacchatta yoo  
'It will be a bob hair cut.'
- B: (laughter). Demo iijan. Maegami...chanto odekoga aru kara saa,  
Maegami dekirun dayoo souiu fuu ni.  
'(laughter). But your front hair looks good. The shape of your forehead is so good, so, you can make that kind of hair styles.'
- A: sou kashira.  
'Really?'
- B: sou yo.  
'Yeah'

In transcription (a), there is a relationship between two female speakers whose social factors are friends and same age in the casual situation, so presupposing the listener's short messages will be registered mostly plain and informal forms such as "un" in their conversations. Although they are friends, the listener's utterance forms switched from informal forms to very feminine one at the end of this example. Did they make any mistake to choose a wrong utterance? The answer is no, because they manipulated their creative meaning of Japanese *Aizuchi* on their own intentions. The additional meanings will be

evoked in this situation by very feminine style, which mitigates the interlocutor's apparent objections that she does not agree with her friend's opinion. The same phenomena will happen in Japanese male conversations. For instance, when a male listener was using *Aizuchi* male prefers such as "ou" and "aa" in the conversation, he suddenly changed them to the gender neutral *Aizuchi*. The mitigation also occurred to avoid showing his direct disagreement to the speaker.

## 5. Discussion

We have seen in the above that Japanese *Aizuchi* and English backchannels have several similarities and differences in the use of the language code itself and their behaviors. Such similarities and differences might show different perspectives of listener's cultural expectations in Japanese and English speaking cultures.

When a conversation occurs, people are conveying their propositional contents to each other at first hand. In the case of English culture (speaking culture) has to show that the speaker is holding his/her floor and the listener is conveying his/her comments, agreements and so on. It means that speaker's utterance plays strong roles in English conversation. It is because we have not seen any style-shifts of listener's backchannel signals toward the speaker.

On the other hand, in the case of Japanese culture (listening culture), interlocutors have to show the propositional content of utterances, then, they also have to show their ongoing human relationships or positions in the conversation. It means that listener's signals play strong roles in Japanese conversation. By using *Aizuchi*, the Japanese people convey their human relationships such as mitigating their psychological distance or creating harmonies in their conversation. Therefore, there are lots of varieties in Japanese *Aizuchi* expressions.

As Silverstein (1976) indicated earlier, there are two dimensions of language use: indexing presupposing function and creative one. It might be seen that these indexical functions are apparently found in the use of Japanese listener's signals. Such Japanese behaviors might be the result of emphasizing pragmatic and functional aspects than English speakers in the use of listeners' utterances. This phenomenon is prominent for Japanese language, although we will not say that there is no way to show listeners' psychological distance in English. It might be pointed out that English speakers have other ways to mitigate their psychological distance; showing or changing their intonation, stress, pitch and so on as listener's behavior. However, the evidence suggests that different perspectives of listener's cultural expectations might exist in the two cultures.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper attempted to compare Japanese and English conversational interactions. We looked at the relationship between basic forms and their extensions of backchannel behavior. Then, we also looked at the style-shifts of Japanese *Aizuchi* forms.

As a result, we found similarities and differences in using backchannels between Japanese and American informants. We found that the Japanese listeners more apparently change their *Aizuchi* forms to show such feelings. Therefore, listeners are expected to show both their properties and to mitigate or emphasize their psychological distance in Japanese culture.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> This is the revised version of the paper read at the 5<sup>th</sup> conference of Japanese Association of the Sociolinguistic Sciences held in Tokyo, March 2000.
- <sup>ii</sup> We do not deal with nonverbal Japanese *Aizuchi* and backchannels in that we can represent practical difficulties: namely, it is difficult to judge head nods, gaze, smiles and so on.
- <sup>iii</sup> We included an utterance such as "Oh, yeah" in the expression "Yeah".
- <sup>iv</sup> There are many possibilities to say "sou"+SFP utterances, so we refer to the representatives on this table.
- <sup>v</sup> The data was collected with the almost same status so we had to find the formal forms of Japanese *Aizuchi* from other situations such as the working situations.

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