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Question-Answer Sequences in English and Japanese Conversations:

A perspective of conversational style differences

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Abstract

This study analyzes question-answer sequences in English and Japanese conversations to investigate how questions facilitate conversations in each language, and to determine pragmatic differences between English and Japanese. The topic of question-answer sequences is not new, but it is important to reanalyze them from the perspective of intercultural communication, because question-answer sequences in natural conversation are not free of cultural influences. This paper focuses on question-answer sequences based on conversational data collected in the United States, Australia, Britain, and Japan (The conversational data were collected by the JACET Politeness Research Group; they are funded by the Japanese Government (No. 22520595).). Through this research, we aim to determine if there are any differences in the use of question-answer sequences within the three "inner circle English varieties before comparing the results with the Japanese data.

Question-answer sequences constitute adjacency pairs, each of which has a distinctive form and interpersonal function. This study analyzes them from three perspectives: "eliciting information," "continuing conversation," and "politeness." A reference to syntactic forms is essential in analyzing structure as well as in understanding whether these forms are used chiefly for eliciting information or for more interpersonal functions such as politeness.

The findings showed that English native speakers use question forms to elicit and clarify information, but Japanese speakers use question forms for confirming, seeking agreement, and asking for help in identifying appropriate words in the sequences. This difference may be due to the differences in politeness face work in each cultural background.

1 Introduction

This paper analyzes question-answer sequences in English and Japanese conversations from the perspective of intercultural communication skills. In addition, we attempt to apply the findings to English education in Japan. This research is supported and funded by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of the Japanese Government [Research fund code (c) 22520595].

Our two previous studies inspired us to conduct this research. A finding from one of our previous studies (Shigemitsu, 2013) showed that English native speakers pose many questions, whereas their Japanese counterparts do not ask questions in intercultural English conversations. Shigemitsu (2013) examined conversations between an American man and a Japanese man. The Japanese participants had relatively high English skills either in terms of English proficiency with a high TOEIC or TOEFL score or were graduates of a top-ranked university in Japan. Moreover, they had not visited English-speaking countries, and did not meet native English speakers in daily life. While the American was the same person, the Japanese participant in each group was different. During the 30 min of conversation for the first meeting, the American asked questions 36 times in Group 22, 107 times in Group 23, and 43 times in Group 24, whereas the Japanese asked questions twice, 5 times, and once, respectively, although according to the data, the Japanese participants were highly proficient in English (Table 1).

Asking questions	Group 22	Group 23	Group 24
American	36	107	43
Japanese	2	5	1

Table 1. The number of questions. (Shigemitsu, 2013)

Another finding is from a different study by Shigemitsu (2005). In that study, a Japanese participant stated that he did not ask questions because doing so was impolite. For the Japanese participant, asking a question implied disagreement with and criticism of the target participant. In contrast, an American participant stated that the Japanese participants were impolite because they did not show any interest in the American participants.

Therefore, we hypothesize that English speakers prefer using questions to elicit information, and to show interest in other participants, whereas Japanese speakers do not ask questions, because they consider doing so impolite.

2 Aspects of questions

The question–answer sequence that concerns this paper is of the information-requesting and information-giving type.

We assume that a question has the following three aspects:

(a) Aspect of eliciting information: A prototype of the question role is to elicit information from other people.

(b) Aspect of continuing conversation: By asking a question, we can continue a conversation, because they are adjacency pairs. A question generally requires another person to respond. Therefore, a question functions for continuing a conversation.

(c) Aspect of face work: A question also has an important role in politeness. The action of asking is controlled by a person's sociocultural background. As a Japanese participant said in a follow-up interview in the Shigemitsu(2005), questions may invade the question recipient's territory of knowledge, which could be private. In that regard, it might be considered impolite. We can also show interest in the recipient by asking questions. The recipient may be happy to be asked a question. In this case, not asking a question may be considered impolite. Following Brown and Levinson's term, a question can threat negative face of the question recipient. At the same time, it can satisfy positive face of the question recipient.

When asking a question, one of these aspects could be emphasized, or a combination of both or three of them could be possible. Therefore, for this paper, we devised the following research questions:

RQ1: How do English and Japanese conversation styles differ in question–answer sequences?

RQ2: Do the differences lie in one of these aspects when posing a question?

RQ3: How do the differences interfere in intercultural communication between English and Japanese native speakers when speaking in English?

3 Data

We analyzed the mono-cultural data of English conversation, which were videotaped in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom in 2011. The conversations in Japan were recorded in 2009 and 2012. Each conversation was recorded during a 30-min first meeting between three male participants. After the conversation, a follow-up interview was separately conducted with each participant.

All participants met the following criteria:

1. None of the participants had met each other before. We assumed that the participants tried not to receive a negative evaluation from the other participants.

2. The participants were all men. We examined only men to eliminate gender variables, and because Japanese people who face problems in intercultural communication are generally male businesspeople.

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3. The participants were aged 22 and older. Most of them were PhD and MA students. We assumed the participants of this age group to be socially and culturally mature. Their performance may have been influenced by their sociocultural background.

Language	Location of Data Collection	Data code	Participant code
English	Oxford	UK27	B2, B4, B5
		UK29	B6, B8, B9
		UK30	B3, B8, B10
	Manchester	UK53	B15, B16, B17
	London	UK57	B21, B22, B23
	Texas	US31	U1, U2, U3
		US 33	U3, U4, U6
		US 36	U7, U8, U10
		US39	U8, U11, U12
		US40	U7, U9, U11
	Sydney	AU41	AU1, AU2, AU3
		AU42	AU3, AU4, AU5
		AU43	AU43, AU6, AU7
		AU47	AU5, AU12, AU13
		AU50	AU15, AU16, AU17
Japanese	Tokyo	JP17	J24, J25, J26
		JP68	J37, J42, J43
		JP71	J36, J37, J39
		JP72	J33, J38, J39
		JP73	J33, J35, J39

Table 2. Data for analysis.

As shown in Table 2, some participants overlapped in the conversational groups; however, they appeared at most in two groups. From the twenty sets of conversational data, we obtained 776 question forms from the English data (5 from the United Kingdom, 5 from the United States, and 5 from Australia) and 456 question forms from the five sets of Japanese data.

4 Procedure of data analysis

We established seven categories based on the collected question forms. The selection criteria were as follows:

1. A question is an utterance that requires some information or judgment of the proposition.

2. Utterances typically have syntactic and prosodic features.

3. Certain utterances that do not have syntactic and prosodic features were included when the utterance concerned a B event (Labov & Fanshell, 1977).

4. Certain utterances that do not have syntactic and prosodic features were included when the asker mentioned that he lacked some information.

5. The following question forms were excluded: directive use of questions, questions in quotations, questions as filler such as "What should I say?", greetings with question forms such as "How is it going?", phrases confirming a person's understanding such as "Do you know what I mean?", tag questions with falling intonations, and newsmarks without responses. The categorization follows Stivers and Enfield (2010), Hayashi (2010), and Adachi (1999). Each Japanese final particle has slightly different connotations; however, they are classified using the same categorization as in English. Examples from the English categorization are provided below, under each category from 1) to 7).

These are the categories of the question forms. The primary function of each question form is also explained.

1)   Polar questions

A polar question is a prototype of the questions. It is used to determine whether the proposition is true or false in the question form.

2)   Content Questions

A content question is the other prototype of questions, and is used to elicit information.

3)   Alternative Questions

This is used for selecting a candidate answer. However, half of these forms are "A or something" type of alternative questions. It is regarded as functionally hedging polar question.

4)   Tag questions

Tag questions are used to confirm or to obtain agreement.

5)   Questions for Turn distribution

The main purpose of this question is to give a turn to the other participant, as in "What about you?"

6)   Newsmarks

Newsmarks include "Really?" and "Is it?" They are used to clarify information when they function as a question.

7)   Disclaiming knowledge

Disclaiming knowledge informs the asker of a lack in knowledge. However, he or she does not insist on obtaining the answer from the other participants (e.g., "I'm not sure about that" or "I'm not familiar with that."). In Japanese, special final particles -ke and -kana disclaim knowledge of the asker. The asker does not make question forms, but shows that he or she is lacking knowledge. We could also call this a category-hedging question or a hinting question.

Tag questions and newsmarks that question recipients do not respond to were eliminated, because tag questions can be used to assert speakers' opinions. Newsmarks can clarify the content of the other participant's utterance as well as express curiosity or surprise. If the utterance does not have a syntactic feature, English and Japanese have different syntax, and Japanese has many varieties of final particles to make question forms. The Japanese questions were modified to fit into these categories.

5 Findings on Questions

In the previous studies, the researchers anticipated that Japanese participants do not ask questions in their language. The number of questions was counted and is shown in Figure1.

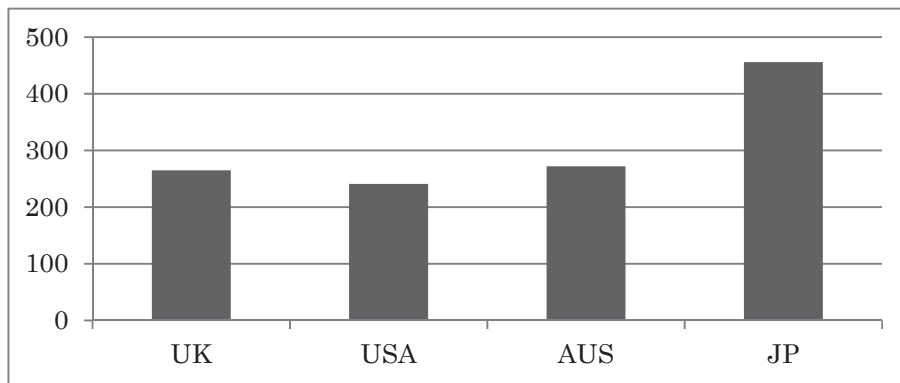ACADEMIC REPORTS Fac. Eng. Tokyo Polytech. Univ. Vol. 36 No.2 (2013)

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Figure 1.The number of questions in each country group.

Figure 1 is a bar graph that shows the total number of questions in each country group. The United Kingdom has 262; the United States, 241; Australia, 272; and Japan, 456. Contrary to our expectation that was assumed from the intercultural data, the Japanese group data contain more frequent questions than the English groups.
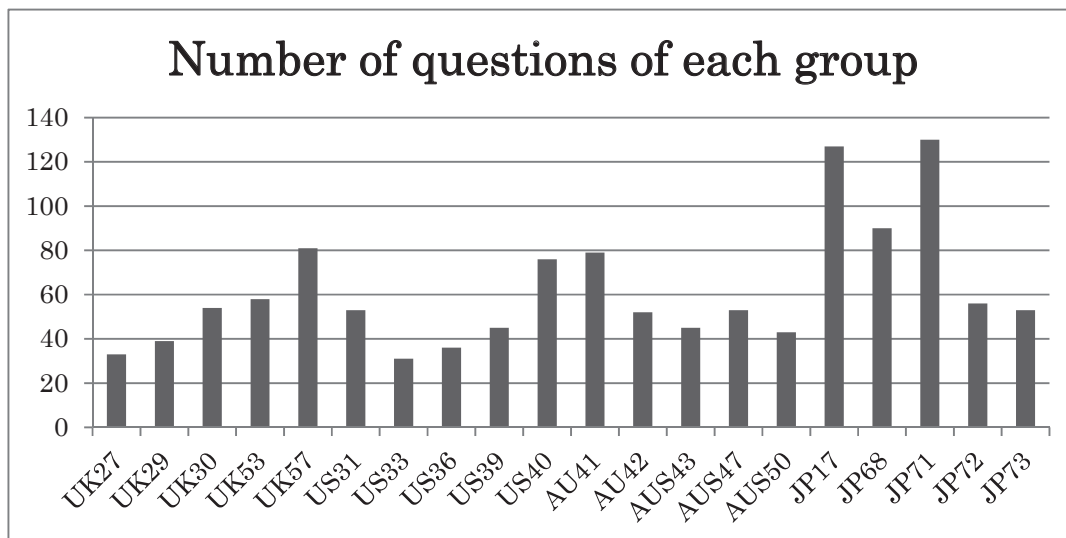

Figure 2. The number of questions in each conversation group.

Figure 2 shows that the number of questions varied depending on the group, with the Japanese groups displaying greater variety. JP17 and JP71 have more question forms; however, J17 and JP71 are found out that their data have more 'Disclaiming knowledge type' which will be shown in Figure 4 later.

UK

Newsmarks 11%
Turn Distribution 2%
Alternative Q 2%
Tag Q 19%
Content Q 24%
Polar Q 42%

USA

Turn Distribution 3%
Tag Q 5%
Newsmarks 6%
Alternative Q 5%
Content Q 33%
Polar Q 48%

AUS

Turn Distribution 2%
Newsmarks 9%
Tag Q 4%
Alternative Q 7%
Content Q 34%
Polar Q 44%

JP

Disclaiming knowledge 19%
Newsmarks 7%
Tag Q 20%
Alternative Q 1%
Turn Distribution 0%
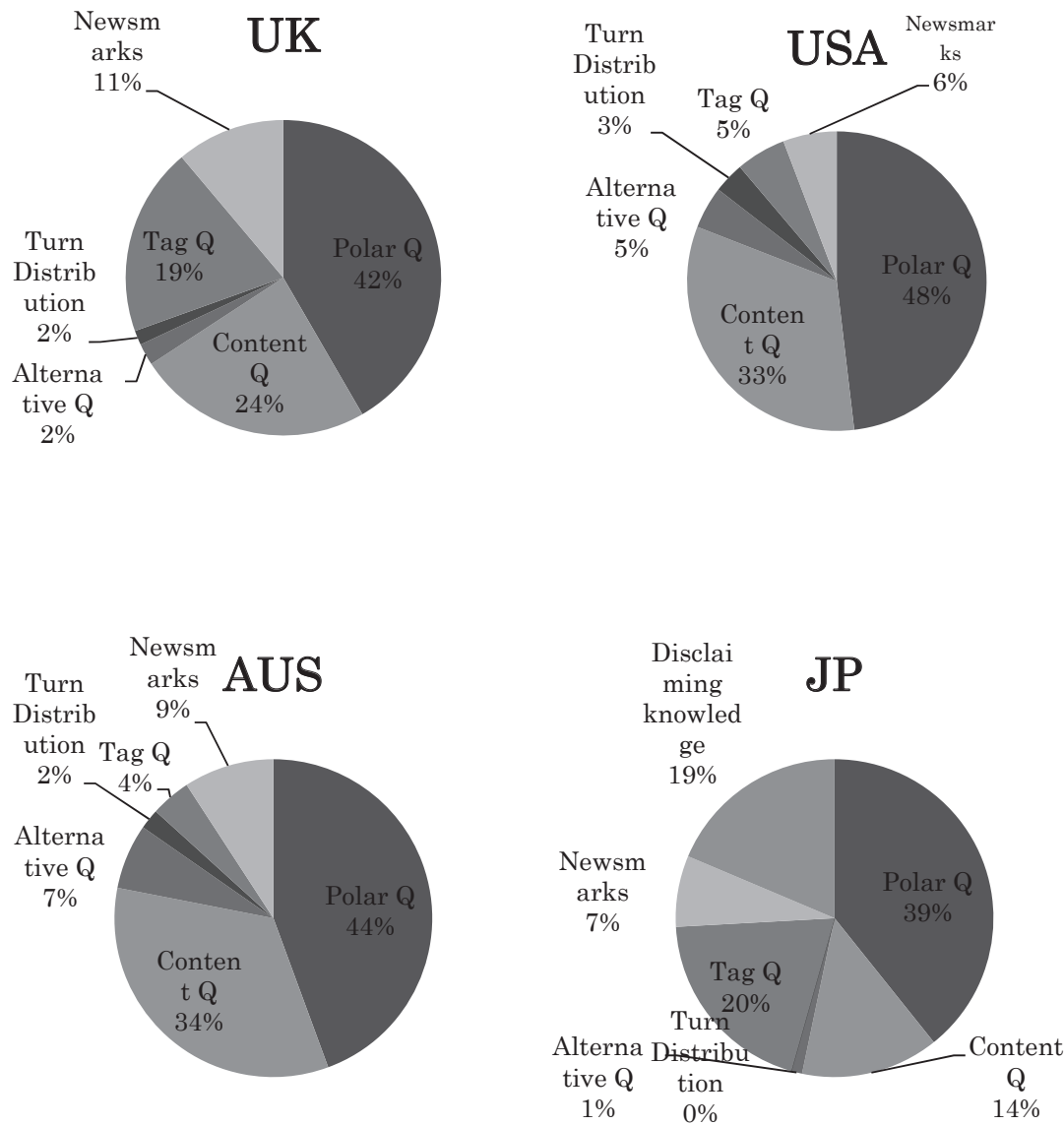Content Q 14%
Polar Q 39%

Figure 3. Ratio of question categories in each country group.

The pie graphs (Figure 3) show the category of questions that was used in each country group. The dark part on the right represents polar questions, and the gray parts on the left and on the bottom indicate the content questions. These two question forms are the question prototypes for eliciting information. The U.S. and Australian data exhibit a similar pattern. We found that the U.K. data are slightly different from the other two inner circle English data.

In the Japanese data, polar and content questions occur less frequently. Japanese people used the tag-question type and disclaiming-knowledge type more compared with the speakers in the other inner circle English data. Therefore, Japanese people seem to use more question forms; however, nearly half of them were not used to eliciting information and determining whether a proposition was true or false in question form. A tag question is used to confirm or obtain agreement

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from another person. Regarding the tag questions, the asker can try to share knowledge of his or her own situation, values, background information, stories, and so on with another person. One-fifth of the questions represent the disclaiming-knowledge-type question. This shows that Japanese people did not pose a question to target question recipients when they had a question in mind. Even if a question was neglected, it did not matter because of the nature of this form.
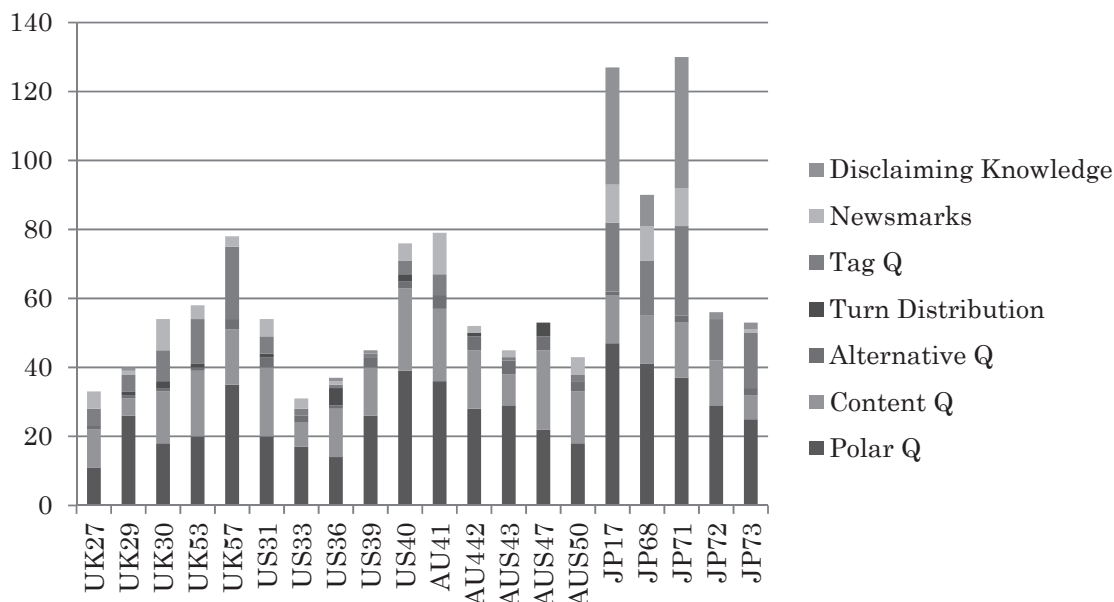

Figure 4 Categories of question used in each group

Figure 4 shows the types of questions that were used in each group. JP17 and JP71 are worth noting because they use polar questions and content questions more than the other Japanese groups. They also used the disclaiming-knowledge-type questions more than did the other Japanese groups. We could infer that they pose more disclaiming-knowledge-type questions when they require more information. By using more of both question prototypes for eliciting information, the participants needed to balance their attitudes of being curious and being polite when they used question forms. Face work was more emphasized in Japanese conversation compared to displaying curiosity and eliciting information. The participants apprehended the limit number of asking questions. Therefore, Japanese people place more emphasis on face work than on providing and receiving information. However, the question data did not determine the reason Japanese people use more question forms in their own language.

6 Findings on Answers

The answer does not have a rigorous form of its own, unlike the question form. However, the recipient's utterance is controlled by the asker's question type. The answer patterns focus on the location of direct answers, and whether they have additional information. Because they lack a specific pattern, we analyzed the answers through qualitative analysis.

The reason Japanese people use more question forms may have to do with the nature of the answer form. In English, polar questions are always followed by a "yes" or "no" response, after which additional information is provided. The Japanese participants generally answered "yes," although they also tried to say "no." When the Japanese participants wanted

to say "no," they started to provide an explanation, although most of them offered only marginal information. Therefore, no additional information is the default in Japanese conversations. Regarding the content questions, in English, a question was followed by immediate, direct answers, after which additional information was provided. In contrast, the Japanese conversations showed few direct answers, and explanations were provided infrequently.

We also found that English has a common response pattern, which is as follows:

(1) [A Model pattern of questions and answers in Inner Circle English]
   1.   A: [Polar or Content Question]
   2.   B: [Direct answer]
   3.   A: [Acknowledgement, such as 'uh huh']
   4.   B: [Additional information]

Pattern (1) occurred frequently throughout the data. Pattern (2) represents the question-answer model.

(2) [Australian data]
   1. Au16:   What do you like to read?
   2. Au15:   Trash sci-fi.
   3. Au16:   Mm.
   4. Au15:   I don't read—well, because I did so much academic reading professionally when I read for
   5.   relaxation, I read crap. I read something I could turn my brain off, so trash sci-fi, although admittedly,
   6.   I would have to say [Unclear] Diskweller, Douglas Adams, all of the satirical Sci-Fi, satirical fantasy.
   7. Au16:   Yeh.
   8. Au15:   = That's really kind of my thing.

We found that a common response pattern was absent from the Japanese data. However, a lack of direct answers such as in (3) and (4) occurred frequently. The excerpts from the following Japanese data were translated into English. In Line 1 of (3), J39 asks in alternative form: "Is your mobile phone running on Android or something?" This alternative question is considered a hedge question for the polar question, "Is your mobile phone running on Android?"

(3) [Japanese data]
   1. J39:   Is your mobile phone running on Android or something?
   2. J33:   I, just, my brother…
   3. J39:   Yes.
   4. J33:   bought an iPhone. He sounds like intending to say 'You can use it.'"
   5. J39:   @@
   6. J33:   He gave it to me. I got it, yes. I've just started to use it, and…

In (4), the question "Don't you have an opportunity to be exposed to the field of English literature?" does not have a direct "yes" or "no" answer, even after the following excerpt:

(4) [Japanese data]
   1. J39:   I have always believed that they study in the field of literature in the English department.
   2. J35:   Yes.
   3. J39:   = Don't you=
   4. J33:   = Yes.
   5. J39:   = touch the field of English literature?
   6. J33:   Well, in the English department at our university, we study English literature, and

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7.   American literature, and English itself. For example, grammar. =
8. J39:   = Yes. =
9. J33"   = or communication as well. The research area is divided into three areas.
10. J39:   Well, Ulysses? English literature?

Based on (3) and (4), the Japanese rarely respond directly to questions. The recipients in both data discussed a marginal story related to a question. They seemed to build a common ground by sharing a background story, and they established a rapport. Therefore, we can assume that the Japanese conversation occurred through collaborative guesswork. Guesswork generates questions; therefore, Japanese people use more question forms in Japanese conversations. In conclusion, different amounts of information are provided depending on the question, and the structure of the response varies between English and Japanese. English is information oriented, but Japanese is face-work oriented. In English, information is transmitted from one person to another. However, in Japanese conversations, information is constructed using small amounts of information, which is strongly associated with the high-context concept.

7 Conclusion

This paper focused on question-answer sequences based on conversational data collected from the United States, Australia, Britain, and Japan. Question forms extracted from the data were then classified into seven categories. In English conversations, participants are inclined to use polar questions and content questions. In contrast, Japanese people tend to use tag questions and disclaiming-knowledge-type questions. Regarding the answers, an expected amount of answers and expected answer structures vary between English and Japanese conversations. Therefore, in English conversations, eliciting and providing information through question-answer sequences is important. In contrast, Japanese people stress face work, even with question-answer sequences in a socially ordinary conversation. However, according to the intercultural data in English, as shown in the previous studies, English and Japanese speakers have different perspectives on question-answer sequences, and they occasionally create discomfort in conversations. This may be due to the various question patterns and the amount of information provided in response to a question. English native speakers provide sufficient information; therefore, Japanese speakers may not have to ask a question. In English education, learners and teachers should know the different patterns of question-answer sequences. A more qualitative analysis will be required in the future to support the findings of this study.

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