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Relation between Gaze, Head Nodding and *aizuti* 'Back Channel' at a
Japanese Company Meeting
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Relation between gaze, head nodding and *aizuti* 'back channel' at a Japanese company meeting

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1.   Introduction

Building on research on gaze (Kendon 1990, C. Goodwin 1981, M.Goodwin to appear), Japanese *aizuti* 'back channel utterances' and head nodding (Maynard 1986, 1987, 1989; Sugito 1987, 1989), and participant roles (Szatrowski 1993, 1997, 2000), I will investigate the relation between gaze, head nodding and *aizuti* at a Japanese company meeting.[1] The data for this study come from a 2-hour orientation meeting for a new female employee at a Japanese company. In particular, I will focus on the interrelation between gaze, head nodding and *aizuti* in sections where this female employee is the addressed recipient of information presented at the meeting.

2.   Prior Research

Although American native English speaking students of Japanese look at their native Japanese speakers in silence, giving them their full attention, they are often viewed as inattentive and overbearing by native Japanese speakers, and in some cases may even give Japanese native speakers the impression that they do not understand. Similarly, many an English speaker invited to give an academic lecture in Japan is surprised to look out at his/her Japanese audience and find that nobody is looking in his/her direction. He/she is equally surprised to be asked many intelligent questions after the lecture is over, despite this apparent lack of attention. Japanese businessmen faced with the silent and rapt attentive gaze of their English interlocutors, may nod their heads almost twice as much as they would in normal Japanese conversations. This wins them the reputation of being what Yamada (1997) refers to as "insincere agreers" because they often disagree, after they have been nodding and saying "Yes" frequently while listening to the American English speaker's talk.

These anecdotes are examples of what Gumperz (1977, 1982) refers to as cross-talk (cross-cultural misunderstanding), which is often caused by the misinterpretation of metamessages which are triggered by contextualization cues, e.g., prosody, posture/kinesic behaviors, formulaic speech and routines, etc. When speaking Japanese, native English speakers can appear inattentive, overbearing or unable to understand Japanese because they fail to punctuate their native Japanese speakers' utterances with head nods and *aizuti* (e.g., *Hai* 'Yes', *Un* 'Uh huh', etc.), and also because they gaze directly at the speaker. Despite the fact that the use of *aizuti* and head nods by both speakers and listeners is crucial for the maintenance of successful interaction in Japanese conversation, *aizuti* and head nods have been given little attention in Japanese textbooks. Several studies have shown that Japanese speakers nod and give *aizuti* at a much higher frequency and with a wider variety of functions than English speakers do.

Research on gaze in English interaction by Kendon (1990), C. Goodwin (1981), M. Goodwin (to appear) suggests that speakers require the gaze of their hearers and hold their hearers accountable if they do not return their gaze when they look at them. These studies show that participants use gaze to acquire and relinquish the floor, and hearers can use gaze to create alignments in the conversation. Research on gaze in Japanese has been limited. Kunihiro (1977) and Nishihara (1995) have claimed that Japanese participants make less eye contact than Americans, because direct gaze at a person of higher social status is considered to be impolite. Y. Ikeda & T. Ikeda (1996) found that Japanese speakers divert their gaze at the beginning of *zisituteki hatuwa* 'substantial utterances' (Sugito 1987), and tend to look at their interloculator more at the end of these utterances than at the beginning. They also found that gaze is directed at the interloculator at both the beginning and end of *aizuti* a high percentage of the time (80%).

Speakers and listeners in Japanese and English may have different expectations about when to look at their interloculators in different contexts. English speakers may expect their listener to look at them at the beginning of their utterances while Japanese speakers may expect their listeners to be in good timing at the end of their utterances with *aizuti* and head nods.

Previous research on head nodding in Japanese has focused primarily on its frequency and functions as shown in Table 1 which is taken from Maynard (1989). In a study of casual conversation between 20 pairs each of Japanese and English speakers, Maynard (1989) found that the total number of head movements was almost 3 times as high for Japanese participants (1,372) as for American (452). She also found that both Japanese listeners (36%) and American English listeners (41%) used most of their head movements as 1. continuers, i.e., to indicate that it was okay for the speaker to continue. However, the situation was different for the uses of head nods by speakers, categories 3 through 8. While Japanese speakers used head movements to indicate 3a. clause boundaries and 3b. the end of turns (33%), and 6. agreement (8%), English speakers tended to use

head movements for 7. emphasis (16%). This suggests that Japanese speakers used more head nods to orient towards the ends of utterances while English speakers use head nods throughout their utterances, perhaps together with stress for emphasis.

(1) Table 1. Frequency of head movement in 3-minute segments of conversation between 20 Japanese and 20 American pairs.[2]

Categories of Head Movements		Japanese		American	
1	Continuer	490	(35.71)	186	(41.15)
2	Transition Filler	68	(4.96)	18	(3.98)
3a	Clause Boundary	293	(21.36)	32	(7.08)
3b	Turn-end Claim	165	(12.03)	5	(1.11)
4a	Repeated 3a	13	(0.95)	2	(0.44)
4b	Repeated 3b	13	(0.95)	0	(0)
5a	Transition Claimer	60	(4.37)	15	(3.32)
5b	Transition Filler	42	(3.06)	10	(2.21)
6	Affirmation/Agreement	105	(7.65)	24	(5.31)
7	Emphasis	24	(1.75)	71	(15.71)
8	Pre-turn Claim	41	(2.99)	16	(3.54)
9	Rhythm-creating	40	(2.92)	29	(6.42)
10a	Speaker (with *Uun* 'No')	17	(1.24)	35	(7.74)
10b	Listener (with *Uun* 'No')	1	(0.07)	9	(1.99)
TOTAL		1372		452	

(Maynard 1989:211; title and headings have been modified slightly, underline mine)

Previous research on *aizuti*, in Japanese has also focused primarily on their frequency and functions. Maynard (1989:207) found that Japanese speakers used twice as many *aizuti* as Americans used back channel utterances, and in both languages (Japanese 81%, English 87%) these forms were used at what she refers to as "pause-bounded phrasal unit boundaries."

In addition to studies of frequency, many studies have analyzed the functions of head nodding and *aizuti*; at least 25 functions have been proposed for back channel utterances in Japanese, and many functions have been proposed for head nods as shown in Table 1. What is lacking in these previous studies of frequency and function, however, is consideration of how gaze, head nodding and *aizuti* are interrelated, and how their use relates to the conversational goals and roles of the participants. In this study I focus on their interrelation in segments of a company meeting where senior company members are teaching a junior employee about her duties, i.e., in segments where she is the primary addressed recipient.

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[2] Percentages are given in parentheses in all the tables in this paper.

3. Analysis
3.1 Data
The data for this study come from a Japanese company meeting, which was videotaped with 2 cameras. The purpose of the meeting was to orient a new female employee, C, that is, to give her an overview of the company and to teach her what her duties would be. The 4 participants at the meeting, A, B, C, D sat in that order around a table as shown in Frame 0 in the Appendix. The people orienting C were A, B, and D. A is the man on the far left, B is the slightly older man sitting next to A, and D, the woman on the far right, is senior to C but not as experienced as A and B. Overall A performed the role of chair of the meeting by introducing topics to be talked about, B acted as the primary information presenter by giving information about the topics that A introduced, and D acted as a supporting participant, by supporting and commenting on the topics that were being presented, and being a co-recipient with C. A, B, and C belonged to the same division of the company and B was from an outside division. The fact that B was out-group, slightly senior and male, plus that B was the primary information presenter, suggest that B was highest in status followed by A, D and C.

3.2 Statistical Tendencies
I distinguished between 3 types of gaze in my transcription of the conversational segments, 1) direct gaze at the speaker's head/chest area, 2) indirect gaze at a point in front or near the participants which allowed peripheral vision of the speaker's head, and 3) diverted gaze which allowed very limited or no peripheral vision of the speaker, e.g., looking down, or at a piece of paper. In the statistical analysis, I combined indirect gaze and diverted gaze and refer to them as non-direct gaze when there were not enough examples in my data to analyze differences between these gaze types.

Tables 2 and 3 show how the addressed recipient, C, the new employee, responded to the other participants' (A, B, D) presentation of information during the meeting. Each table is made up of 4 smaller tables, a table for speaker A, speaker B, and speaker D, and a total table for speakers A, B, and D combined. Table 2 shows how C responded to each speaker's direct gaze + head nod, direct gaze only, non-direct gaze + head nod, and non-direct gaze only (i.e., non-direct gaze without a head nod). Addressed recipient C's responses, which are given across the top of each table, included *aizuti* + head nod(s), head nod(s) alone, and neither of these behaviors. Table 3 shows how C responded to each speaker's direct gaze, indirect gaze and diverted gaze. Addressed recipient C's responses included direct gaze and non-direct gaze.

I observed three patterns in the interrelation between the speaker's use of gaze and head nods and the addressed recipient's use of *aizuti* and head nods as shown in Table 2, and two patterns in the interrelation between speaker's gaze and addressed recipient's gaze as shown in Table 3. For the statistical analysis I used log linear contingency table analysis to evaluate the interdependencies of

addressed recipient's gaze and *aizuti* and head nods on the speaker's gaze and head nods.

(2) Table 2. Effect of Speaker's Gaze and Head Nods on Addressed Recipient's *Aizuti* and Head Nods

	Speaker A				Speaker B			
Addressed Recipient	Sections I and II (p<0.012) A (53 utt) → C (26 *aizuti*)				Sections III and IV (p<0.001) B (143 utt) → C (58 *aizuti*)			
	Addressed Recipient (C)				Addressed Recipient (C)			
Speaker	*aizuti+* head nod	head nod	neither	total	*aizuti+* head nod	head nod	neither	total
Direct gaze + head nod	12 (50)	10 (42)	2 (8)	24 (100)	27 (71)	8 (21)	3 (8)	38 (100)
Direct gaze only	8 (38)	9 (43)	4 (19)	21 (100)	4 (17)	6 (25)	14 (58)	24 (100)
Non-direct gaze + head nod	5 (71)	2 (29)	0 (0)	7 (100)	18 (28)	33 (51)	14 (21)	65 (100)
Non-direct gaze only	1 (6)	10 (63)	5 (31)	16 (100)	9 (14)	32 (50)	23 (36)	64 (100)
Total	26	31	11	68	58	79	54	191

	Speaker D				Total (Speakers A, B, and D)			
Addressed Recipient	Section V (p<0.001) D (52 utt) → C (25 *aizuti*)				Sections I - V (p<0.001) A+B+D (248 utt) → C (109 *aizuti*)			
	Addressed Recipient (C)				Addressed Recipient (C)			
Speaker	*aizuti+* head nod	head nod	neither	total	*aizuti+* head nod	head nod	neither	total
Direct gaze + head nod	12 (71)	5 (29)	0 (0)	17 (100)	51 (65)	23 (29)	5 (6)	79
Direct gaze only	11 (50)	8 (36)	3 (14)	22 (100)	23 (34)	23 (34)	21 (32)	67
Non-direct gaze + head nod	1 (25)	2 (50)	1 (25)	4 (100)	24 (32)	37 (49)	15 (19)	76
Non-direct gaze only	1 (4)	10 (44)	12 (52)	23 (100)	11 (11)	52 (50)	40 (39)	103
Total	25	25	16	66	109	135	81	325

In Table 2, the Effect of Speaker's Gaze and Head Nods on the Addressed Recipient's *Aizuti* and Head Nods, I did not include the addressed recipient's gaze because the addressed recipient's gaze was affected by the speaker's gaze (Table 3), but not by both the speaker's gaze and head nods. First, Table 2 shows that the

    1) Addressed recipient was most likely to respond with an *aizuti* plus a head nod(s) when the speaker gazed directly at her and nodded.

The total table under Table 2, shows that C responded with an *aizuti* + head nod, when the speaker gave her direct gaze + head nod 65% of the time.

    Second, Table 2 shows that the

    2) Addressed recipient rarely responded with an *aizuti* (plus a head nod(s)) when the speaker neither nodded nor gazed at her directly. At these

times the addressed recipient tended to punctuate the speaker's talk with head nods.

The total table under Table 2, shows that C only responded with an *aizuti* + head nod 11% of the time, when the speaker neither nodded nor gazed at her directly. At these times, the addressed recipient responded with head nods 50% of the time.

Third, Table 2 shows that the

3) Addressed recipient tended to nod when the speaker nodded.

Overall the addressed recipient returned the speaker's nod(s) 87% of the time.

These statistics indicate that when the addressed recipient received a head nod, she tended to give a head nod. When the addressed recipient received a head nod with direct gaze, she tended to give an *aizuti* + head nod back.

(3)Table 3. Effect of Speaker's Gaze on Addressed Recipient's Gaze

	Speaker A			Speaker B		
Addressed Recipient	Sections I and II (p<0.21) A (53 utt) → C (26 *aizuti*)			Sections III and IV (p<0.001) B (143 utt) → C (58 *aizuti*)		
	Addressed Recipient (C)			Addressed Recipient (C)		
Speaker	direct gaze	non-direct gaze	total	direct gaze	non-direct gaze	total
Direct gaze	37 (82)	8 (18)	45	42 (68)	20 (32)	62
Indirect gaze	8 (50)	8 (50)	16	14 (26)	39 (74)	53
Diverted gaze	5 (71)	2 (29)	7	32 (42)	44 (58)	76
Total	50	18	68	88	103	191

	Speaker D			Total (Speakers A, B, and D)		
Addressed Recipient	Section V (p<0.08) D (52 utt) → C (25 *aizuti*)			Sections I - V (p<0.001) A+B+D (248 utt) → C (109 *aizuti*)		
	Addressed Recipient (C)			Addressed Recipient (C)		
Speaker	direct gaze	non-direct gaze	total	direct gaze	non-direct gaze	total
Direct gaze	36 (92)	3 (8)	39	115 (79)	31 (21)	146
Indirect gaze	9 (75)	3 (25)	12	31 (38)	50 (62)	81
Diverted gaze	7 (47)	8 (53)	15	44 (45)	54 (55)	98
Total	52	14	66	190	135	325

Results for the Effect of Speaker's Gaze on the Addressed Recipient's Gaze are given in Table 3. The total table under Table 3 shows that

4) Overall, the addressed recipient met the speaker's direct gaze with direct gaze 79% of the time.

However, there was some variation depending on the speaker; the addressed recipient returned the speaker's gaze 92% of the time D looked at her, 82% of the time A looked at her, and 68% of the time B looked at her. Because the speaker's relative status in relation to C in increasing order was D, A, and C, this finding supports Kunihiro (1977) and Nishihara's (1995) claim that Japanese people tend to not look at people of higher status. C's relative proximity to each of the speakers may also have influenced the speaker's gaze because it may be easier for speakers to gaze at someone at a distance than at someone in one's immediate proximity. The fact that B gazed at C less when B was the speaker than A gazed

at C when A was the speaker may be related to the fact that B was sitting closer to C. Although C is equidistant between B and D, she may have felt less comfortable looking at D, the most senior member of the meeting, because he was sitting at such close proximity. Similarly, the fact that A, the second highest in status at the meeting, was sitting the furthest away from C may account for why C returned A's gaze 82% of the time. More data is necessary to be able to determine the influence of these factors.

Table 3 also shows that

> **5)** Overall, during the speaker's indirect or diverted gaze, the addressed recipient directed her gaze at the speaker slightly less than half of the time.

This suggests that the addressed recipient gazed at the speaker relatively frequently when he/she was not being looked at by the speaker. However, again I found that C gazed at B, the most senior member of the meeting, less than she gazed at A and D, whether B was looking at her or not.

Finally, I found that

> **6)** When the addressed recipient and the speaker's eyes met in a mutual direct gaze, they often held this eye contact until the addressed recipient gave an *aizuti* (plus a head nod(s)) or a head nod alone, and then one or the other, or both would break this mutual gaze.

3.3   An Example from the Data

In the excerpt in the Appendix, B, the older male from the outside division, is addressing C and describing one of the products that they sell at the company, a wafer film or membrane that they put on machines. B is trying to think of a word in Frames 1-4, 1B- *Mot, ano: kiti:n to maku ga sarete ru to,* 2B- *motto kiree na, sono,* 3B- *nan te iu no ka,* 4B- *ano: e:,* 'More, uhm when the film is put on right, a more pretty, that, what is it you call it, uhm uhm,'. In Frame 1 C nods twice while sharing indirect gaze with B, and this is an example of Pattern 2 [the addressed recipient punctuates speaker's talk with head nods while sharing indirect gaze].[3]

Next, in Frame 2 when B starts to say 2B- *motto kiree na, sono,* 'a more pretty, that', he draws a circle near the table with his right index finger, and when he says in Frames 3 and 4, 3B- *nan te iu no ka,* 4B- *ano: e:,* 'what is it you call it, uhm uhm,' he draws 3 concentric circles with his right index finger. Then in Frame 5, after B says, 4B- *ano:* 'Uhm', C gives a large nod. This nodding during indirect gaze is another example of Pattern 2 [the addressed recipient punctuates the speaker's talk with head nods while sharing indirect gaze]. Then when A gives B the word he is looking for in Frame 5, 6A- *Doosinen.* 'Concentric circles.' C and D

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[3] In the video frames I indicate small head nods with small hooks and large head nods with large hooks. Under the romanization of the transcript I also indicate small head nods with lower case letters, and large head nods with capital letters, using the letter of the participant who nodded.

direct their gaze briefly at A and then gaze right back at B when he repeats the word partially in 6B- *en.* 'circle'.[4]

Next, in Frames 8 and 9, B says, 7B- *To, doosinen tte iu no?* 'It's that it's called a concentric circle?', trying to get confirmation from C that C understands what he is getting at here. During this utterance B nods his head 3 times and gazes at C, and C responds with direct gaze, the *aizuti Hai* 'Yes' and 3 large head nods. This is an example of Pattern 1 [direct gaze + head nod(s) elicits an *aizuti* + head nod(s)]. D accompanies C's last two head nods with 2 small head nods.

Then in Frames 10 through 13, B reiterates what he has just said, 9B- *Ano kiree na* 10B- *ano moyoo ni* 11B- *ano,* 12B- *narimasu.* 'Uhm a pretty uhm pattern comes to be'. D's small head nod, and C's large head nod in Frames 10 and 11, respectively, are examples of Pattern 2 [the addressed recipient punctuates the speaker's talk with head nods while sharing indirect gaze]. Then in Frame 12, when B says 11B- *ano* 'uhm', he gives a large nod and gazes directly at C, followed by another large head nod in 12B- *narimasu.* 'comes to be.' before he changes to indirect gaze. Then C gives an *aizuti* in 13C- *Hai.* 'Yes.' together with a large and a small head nod. This is another example of Pattern 1 [direct gaze + head nod(s) elicits an *aizuti* + head nod(s)].[5]

4.   Conclusion

In conclusion, although previous studies have focused on the frequency and function of head nods and *aizuti* as independent behaviors, and indeed these analyses point to differences between English and Japanese, the present study shows that gaze, head nods and *aizuti* are interrelated. This interrelation is also very important for participation in Japanese conversation.

Even though the new employee had very little to contribute linguistically (she said very few substantial utterances during the 2-hour meeting), she contributed a great number of *aizuti* and head nods. By showing that she knew when to chime in, rather than what she knew, C displayed the appropriate attitude of a person being initiated into a Japanese company.

Miscommunications between Japanese and English speakers are caused by Japanese native speakers who over-punctuate English conversations with head nods and responses and often make a bad impression because they appear to agree, although they later disagree. Miscommunications are also caused by English native speakers, who by not nodding enough and gazing too intently at native Japanese speakers in Japanese conversations, do not convey the message that they are listening and being attentive. It is not only an understanding of the frequency of use but also the interrelation of the use of gaze, head nodding and *aizuti* that is necessary to prevent these misunderstandings. The present analysis

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[4] It is interesting that the main information presenting participant B does not look at A when he gives him the word, but keeps looking at his hand which is perched in the air (Szatrowski 2000).
[5] I counted this as an example of Pattern 1 although B changes to indirect gaze immediately before C gives her *aizuti* in 13C, because the rhythm in this section of the conversation suggested that C was responding to B's direct gaze rather than his change to indirect gaze.

is meant as a first step towards investigating the interrelation of these behaviors in one conversation. Investigation of the interrelation of these behaviors with the content and prosody of the utterances and various factors such as gender, status, proximity, number of participants, etc. awaits future study.

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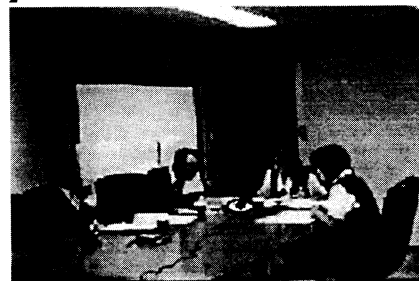190 Klaeber Court
Minneapolis. MN 55455

Appendix

0

1

1B   *Mot. ano: kiti:n to maku ga sarete ru to.*
       c   c
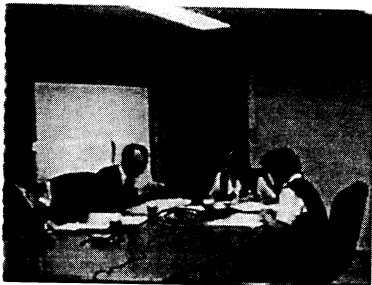More. uhm when the film is put on right.

2

2B   *motto kiree na. sono.*
     a more pretty. that.

3
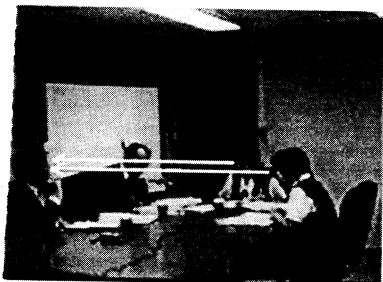

3B *nan te iu no ka,*
    what is it you call it.

4

4B *ano: e:,*
      C
    uhm uhm.

5
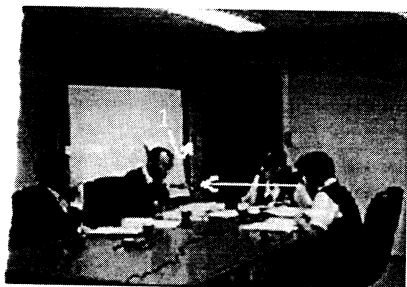

5A *Doosin//en.*
    Concentric circles.

6

6B *en.*
    circle

7

7B *To.* [quotative particle]
    B

8

7B *doosinen tte iu no?*
    B   B
    It's that it's called a concentric circle?

9

8C *Hai.*
   C CC
      d d
Yes.

10

9B *Ano kiree na*
         d
Uhm a pretty

11

10B *ano moyoo ni*
    C
uhm pattern

12

11B *ano,*
   B
uhm.

13

12B *narimasu.*
   B
comes to be.

14

13C *Hai.*
   C c
Yes.