A New Look at Japanese Conversational Styles: (In-)Direct Speech and Turn Management

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1. Introduction*

Japanese communication style is typically described as highly harmonious, cooperative, and empathetic. These characteristics are said to be particularly evident in frequent uses of indirect expressions and supportive turn-management devices, such as backchannels (or *aizuchi*) and other reactive tokens (Mizutani 1988; Matsuda 1988; Iwasaki 1997; Maynard 1997). This characterization concurs with the cultural ideology which emphasizes relational interdependence rather than individualism (Doi 1971; Lebra 1976; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Wierzbicka 1991). However, empirical support for this view seems to be inadequate due to the narrow sampling of conversational situations.

This study reexamines the use of "cooperative" interactional styles in Japanese conversations. The data consist of six audio-taped dyadic conversations carried out in two different social contexts--three between family members, all involving mother-daughter relations, and three between female close friends. The speakers recorded a conversation, sitting face to face; they chose the topics of conversations as they wished. The participants in each conversation are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Participants in the six audio-taped conversations

Conversation A: mother (47 years old) and her daughter (17 years old)
Conversation B: mother (52 years old) and her daughter (22 years old)
Conversation C: mother (56 years old) and her daughter (23 years old)

Conversation D: two female close friends (Both are 23 years old; one of them is the same person as the daughter in conversation C.)
Conversation E: two female close friends (Both are 22 years old, one of them is the same person as the daughter in conversation B.)
Conversation F: two female close friends (Both are 17 years old; one of them is the same person as the daughter in conversation A.)

The participants in conversations B1 and B2 speak standard Japanese. The other participants speak regional dialects. The lengths of the conversations vary from 20 minutes to one hour. All conversations were transcribed, using the transcription conventions shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Transcription conventions

{ }	overlapping talk	?	rising intonation
.	falling/utterance-final intonation	,	continuing intonation
(0.0)	length of pause/silence in tenths of a second	(.)	micro-pause
( )	non-linguistic activity or change in pitch/volume		

We examined the "cooperativeness" of the participants' interactional styles in these six conversations by analyzing the following features: (1) expressions of conflicts, (2) backchannels, (3) types of response remarks, in particular, minimal responses, and (4) silences and pauses.

2. Expressions of Conflicts

It is commonly said that due to the cultural concern for harmony and mutual dependence, Japanese tend not to assert themselves in conflict situations; that is, they avoid confrontation and the use of direct expressions of conflict (Kindaichi 1975; Lebra 1976; Watanabe 1993). Jones (1990) points out that expressions of conflict are not uncommon in Japanese conversations, but at the same time she reports that the expressions of conflict in the conversations she examined were all accompanied by some mitigating devices. However, in our data, in particular, in the family conversations, conflicts were often directly expressed with no mitigating devices.

We have analyzed all the expressions in our data that involved some kind of conflict, such as disagreement, defiance, and criticism. For each conflict-related expression, we examined whether it was accompanied by any of the conflict-mitigating devices listed in Table 3 below (For a variety of linguistic devices for mitigating direct conflicts in Japanese, English, and other languages, see Pomerantz 1984; Schegloff et al. 1977; Brown et al. 1978; Levinson 1983; Lerner 1987; Mizutani et al. 1987).

Table 3: Conflict-mitigating devices

1. prefaces before opposition, such as acknowledgment and self-disparagement
2. follow-ups after opposition, such as explanation and apology
3. delayed start with fillers, hesitational pause, and vowel lengthening
4. topic shift
5. style switch
6. clause-final qualifiers, such as *kedo* 'but' and *kamo* 'maybe'
7. laughter

An expression of conflict was considered direct, if it did not include any of the devices listed in Table 3; it was considered indirect, if it included one or more of these devices. Table 4 shows the number of direct and indirect expressions in the first 15-minute segment of each conversation:

Table 4: Number of direct and indirect expressions of conflicts in a 15-minute segment of each conversation

Conversation	direct	indirect
A	10	6
B	28	10
C	40	1
D	1	6
E	0	1
F	0	2

As can be seen, compared to the participants in the conversations between friends, those in the family conversations not only expressed conflicts more frequently, but they expressed them directly. Direct expressions of conflicts are illustrated in (1) and (2):

Example 1. <From conversation B; Daughter is asking her mother to buy her an expensive bag.>

1 Mother: *Shaneru no baggu ja nakereba donna baggu ga ii no?*
'If it's not a Chanel's bag, what kind of bag would you like?'
2 Daughter: *Ya da. Shaneru no ja nai to.*
'No. It has to be Chanel.'
3 Mother: *Tatoeba no hanashi.*
'I'm talking hypothetically.'
4 Daughter: *Nai.*
'(There's) none (that I like).'
5 Mother: *Demo, Shaneru takai n da yo.*
'But Chanel's (bags) are expensive.'
6 Daughter: [Raising her voice] *Takai kara kaitai n jan.*
'I want to buy it because it's expensive (don't you understand?)'

Example 2. <from conversation C>

1 Daughter: *Kaasan Amerika (.) no hondo ni kitara (.) koto nai yo ne. Nai yo ne. Hawa[i shika.*
'You haven't been to the mainland of America, have you? Only Hawaii, right?'

2 Mother: *[Aru wake nai desho sonna baka na koto yuutara tsumaran yo. Sonnaa,*
'Of course, not. Don't say such a stupid thing. It's nonsense. Such ... '

In (1), the daughter expresses her disagreement with her mother bluntly in lines 2, 4, and 6 without any hesitations; she did not use any mitigating devices listed in Table (3). In Example (2), the mother makes a meta-communicative comment, directly criticizing her daughter's question as stupid.

These results show that speakers can be quite direct and assertive. At the same time, they indicate that speakers do not choose direct expressions randomly. Rather, they are concerned about when such expressions may or may not be used. Frequent uses of direct expressions in family conversations may index the nature of relationship as being very intimate. But if they are used in other contexts, they may convey different meanings, such as rudeness and a change in the friendship. This indicates that the social import of direct expressions is not always the same; rather they are relative to specific social situations.

3. Backchannels

We now turn to the second feature, backchannels. Compared to speakers of languages like English, Japanese are said to use backchannels much more frequently to express interactional support and involvement in the conversation (Mizutani 1988; Maynard 1986, 1997; Matsuda 1988). This, then, is considered a manifestation of the Japanese cultural concern for harmony and co-operation

(Matsuda 1988).[1]

In our analysis, we examined the total number of backchannels in the first 15 minutes of each conversation. In reference to Maynard (1989) and Clancy et al. (1996), we identified reactive tokens with the following features as backchannels: (1) continuer, (2) display of understanding of content, (3) support toward the speaker's judgment, and (4) agreement. The results of our analysis are shown in Figure 1:

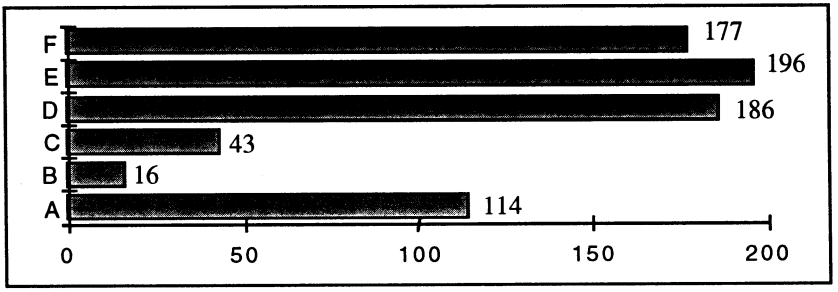

Figure 1. Total number of backchannels in a 15-minute segment of conversations A-F.

As can be seen, there is wide variability in the use of backchannels among the six conversations, ranging from 16 tokens to 196 tokens. This highest number (i.e. 13 per minute) is close to, but still below, the number of back-channels that are said to be normally used in Japanese conversations.[2] Such frequent uses of backchannels were seen in the conversations between friends, but not in the family conversations. The latter, particularly conversations B and C, show that the use of backchannels can be minimized. The absence of backchannels is illustrated in (3) and (4):

Example 3. <from conversation C>

1 Mother: *Isshoni sumu so jattara ima no hiree toko demo ee wa ne, hanbun dasasete.*
'If you guys are going to live together, the spacious apartment you have now will be fine, (you can) have her pay the half.'

2 Daughter: *Iya, yappari ne, kaasan.*
'No, after all, mother"

3 (0.2)

4 Daughter: *chuu-beddo-ruumu?*
'Two bedroom?'

5 (0.2)

6 Daughter: *ga nai to yappa dame.*
'without it, it wouldn't work.'

7 (0.6)

8 Daughter: *Kaasan.*
'Mother.'

9 (1.0)

Example 4. <from conversation B>

1 Mother: *Dame da yon (na).*
'You shouldn't do that.'

2 Daughter: *De son toki ni, soo yuu huu ni wa, hanashiteta noni, Akira nan ka, saa tanomu n dattara tanon demo ii kedo isogashii kara na toka itte. De kekkyoku sa konaida sa denwa kakatte kita toki ni, atashi ga Itoo san ni tanomoo to omotte feragamo toka, sugoi sa, hoshikatt, mukoo de datte yasui tte kiita kara toka ittara, nande tanomeba yokatta noni ku-gatsu da yo itta no toka itte. Ku-gatsu ja zenzen mae jan toka itte.*
'At that time, we were talking like that, but Akira said, "if you want to ask him (to buy something), it's O.K. to ask, but he is busy". Then, after all, when he called me the other day, I told him "I wanted to ask you to get Feragamo for me, because I heard that it's cheap there". Then he said, "why didn't you ask me? I went there in September." So I said, "September was a long time ago".

3 Mother: *Jooshi ni wa tanomenai.*
'(You) can't ask your supervisor.'

In Example (3) the mother did not use backchannels where they could have been used (i.e. lines 3, 5, 7, and 10); instead, she remained silent. In Example (4) during the daughter's long utterance in line 2, the mother did not use any backchannels. (See also (9) in section 5.)

These infrequent uses of backchannels seen in our data cannot be treated as simple exceptions to Japanese communication styles, because their distribution is not random, and because they are functionally important. That is, they can index the speaker's feelings toward the addressee or the situation, such as intimacy, uninhibited atmosphere, or the lack of interest in the current topic. They may also be used to imply anger toward the addressee.

4. Minimal Responses

The third feature we analyzed was the types of responses to the other speakers' utterances, in particular, minimal responses. We distinguish minimal responses from backchannels. A minimal response is a brief response to the other's speech act that expects some kind of specific response--e.g. the answer to an information-seeking question, the acceptance or decline of an offer or request, etc.; it functions as the second unit in an "Adjacency Pair" (Sacks et al. 1974). From the viewpoint of the Gricean Maxims of conversation, minimal responses provide sufficient information and hence may be regarded as cooperative communicative behaviors. However, if they are used consecutively, they may convey that the speaker is uninterested or being uncooperative. In particular, if minimal responses are used persistently by only one of the participants, asymmetry in the cooperativeness between the participants becomes evident. Such asymmetry is illustrated in Example (5):

Example 5. <from conversation C>

1	Daughter:	*Aryaa, doko de hataraki-yocchatta n ka ne Kayo-chan.* 'I wonder where Kayo worked.'
2	(2.8)	
3	Mother:	*Shiran.* 'I don't know.'
4	(4.0)	
5	Daughter:	*Aa, ashita tanoshimi ya ne, kaasan.* 'Well, it'll be fun tomorrow. Don't you think so, mother?'
6	(0.5)	
7	Daughter:	*Ne.* 'Right?'
8	Daughter:	*Anmari?* 'Not that much?'
9	Mother:	*Han han.* 'Fifty-fifty. (Maybe, maybe not.)'
10	Daughter:	*Nan de? Chotto erai? (.) A, ki ga haren te ii yotta ne.* 'Why? Tiring? Oh, you said you were not in good spirits.'
11	Mother:	*Un.* 'Yeah.'
12	(0.6)	
13	Daughter:	*Ee wa ne, tama niyaa. Kaasan mo kii o, ki o (.) ano-,* 'It's OK. Once in a while, you also should . . .
14	Mother:	(Yawning)
15	Daughter:	*Nan chuu n ya ro ka.* 'What can I say?'
16	(0.8)	
17	Daughter:	*Tama ni wa are sen nya.* 'You should, sometimes . . . '
18	(0.8)	
19	Daughter:	*A, atashi ka-yoobi Mori-san chi ni tomaru ke.* 'Oh, I'll sleep over at Miss. Mori's place on Tuesday.'
20	(1.2)	
21	Mother:	*Doozo.* 'Go ahead.'

Here the mother gives minimal responses in lines 3, 9, 11, and 21. Note also that her minimal response in line 9 comes only after the daughter's repeated attempts to solicit her response. Moreover, the mother yawns in the middle of the daughter's talk (line 14). A similar example is given in (6):

Example 6. <from conversation B>

1	Mother:	*{Aa soi ja jikan-teki ni wa kankei nai n da.* 'Oh, the time doesn't matter, then.'
2	Daughter:	*N.* 'Yeah.'
3	Mother:	*Jibun no ugoki de. Mariko ga denwa sun no?* 'You have a flexible schedule. Are you supposed to call her,

		Mariko?'
4	Daughter:	*Un.*
		'Yeah.'
5	(0.3)	
6	Mother:	*Kaette kita yo tte?*
		'(You'll tell her) "I'm back now", right?'
7	Daughter:	*Soo.*
		'Right.'

As we can see, the daughter's responses in (6) are minimal. Because she does not offer elaborated and helpful responses, the mother keeps asking further questions.

Persistent uses of minimal responses in (5) and (6) seems to indicate the speakers' lack of interest in actively participating in the conversation. These examples illustrate the interactional style in which one is not so concerned about showing one's involvement in the conversation or empathy for the other.

5. Pauses and Silences

Pauses and silences contribute to discourse structuring by indicating topic shifts, '(complex) transition-relevance places' (Sacks et al. 1974; Clancy et al 1996), etc. They can also be used to convey social meanings such as the speaker's attitudes and feelings towards the relationships, topics, and conversational goals (Tannen et al. 1985). We examined the use of silences and pauses in the two kinds of conversations in our data. Figure 2 shows the total amount of pauses and silences in a 15-minute segment of each of the six conversations:

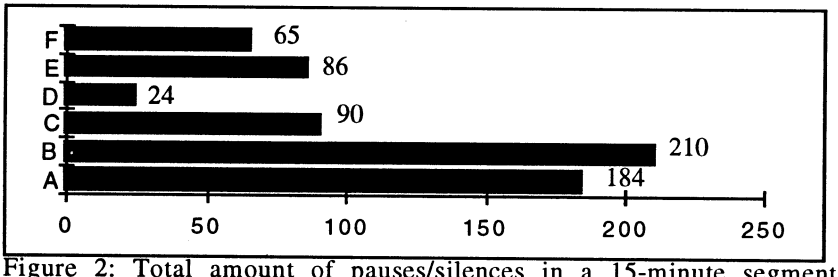

Figure 2: Total amount of pauses/silences in a 15-minute segment of conversations A-F (measured in seconds).

As we can see, the family conversations in general had a much greater amount of silences and pauses than the conversations between friends. In particular, conversations A and B contrasted sharply with conversation D, in which both speakers talked continuously at a fast pace.

There are also qualitative differences between pauses and silences in the family conversations and those in the conversations between friends. For example, in the family conversations, silence often occurred immediately after the first unit of an Ajacency Pair, such as an information-seeking question, an offer, and a request. This is illustrated in (7):

Example 7. <from conversation A>

1	Mother:	*Huun. Hoka ni ano maikurohon ja nakute, ano, denchi kaini iku wake?* 'I see. Besides that, are you going to go buy a microphone, no, uh ... batteries?'
2	(1.2)	
3	Daughter:	*Denchi wa ee yan.* 'I don't need batteries.'
4	(1.0)	
5	Mother:	*Ja nani kai ni iku no?* 'What are you going to buy, then?'
6	(2.0)	
7	Daughter:	*Maiku.* 'A microphone.'
8	(2.0)	
9	Mother:	*Watashi no ja nakute, Keiko no maiku?* 'Not for me, but for you?'
10	(0.8)	
11	Daughter:	*Iya,* 'No.'
12	(1.0)	
13	Mother:	*Keiko no konsaato yoo ni maiku kau?* 'Are you buying a microphone for your concert?'
14	Daughter:	*Ett, Keiko ga kau no ka.* 'What? Do I have to buy it (myself)?'
15	Mother:	*Itt, chigau. Watashi no koto itteru no ne?* 'No, you are talking about me, aren't you?'
16	Daughter:	*Soo. {Soo, soo.* 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'
17	Mother:	*{Hun. Hun. Wakatta. Wakatta. Ja ashita no ano-Hiroshima-iki no koto oshiete yo.* 'I see. I see. Well, tell me about your visit to Hiroshima tomorrow.'
18		(2.0)
19	Mother:	*Ashita tomaru no wa Hukuyama?* 'Are you staying over night in Fukuyama tomorrow?'
20	Daughter:	*Soo.* 'Yeah.'
21	(2.2)	
22	Mother:	*Ashita no ban ya ro?* That's tomorrow night, right?'

In (7) the daughter gives delayed responses (lines 3, 7, and 11) to her mother's information-seeking questions. Moreover, she gives no response to the mother's question in line 17. The mother, therefore, asks another question in line 19.

Further, silence may also follow the second unit of an Adjacency Pair. For example, the daughter's responses in (7) are minimal and followed by silence (lines 4, 8, 12, and 21) rather than by elaboration of the answers. Example (8) also illustrates the same kind of silence after a minimal response:

Example 8. <from conversation B>

1 Mother: *Ashita tomodachi doo sun nan ka.*
'How are you going to see your friends tomorrow?'

2 Daughter: *Mukae ni kite kureru.*
'They are coming to pick me up.'
3 (6.0)
4 Mother: *Okashi sukoshi motteku?*
'Do you want to take some snacks with you?'
5 Daughter: *Iranai.*
'(No) I don't.'
6 (2.1)
7 Mother: *Ano-, kuruma nara sa,*
'Uh, if you're going by car,'
8 (0.2)
9 Mother: *mottette yo. Ano, mikan toka.*
'Take them. Uh, oranges and so on.'

Silences may also occur as absences of backchannels. This is illustrated in (9) and (3):

Example 9. <from conversation C>

1 Daughter: *Moo, kaasan kono mae ne-, (.) Kaasan.*
Listen, mother. The other day, mother.'
2 Mother: *Un.*
'Yeah.'
3 Daughter: *Reeboo ga nai hoccha Karen no kuruma? Moo ne, tochuu kara ne, atsuu natte kara ne, moo ne, otagai mukuchi naru n yo ne moo. Atsuute, Atsuute ne--.*
'Karen doesn't have an air conditioner in her car, as you know. So, after a while, it became so hot that we didn't (want to) talk. It was too hot, you know?'
4 (0.9)
5 Daughter: *Moo shinisoo yatta.*
'We felt like we were going to die.'
6 (1.0)
7 Daughter: *Kaasan.*
'Mother.'
8 (2.0)
9 Daughter: *(De)mo chikai mon chau, nan ka Kokura Higashi nante sugu jaa ne, ano, koosoku de?*
'But, it won't take much time for us to go to Kokura Higashi if we take the freeway.'
10 (0.2)
11 Daughter: *Nee kaasan.*
'Right, mother?'
12 Mother: *Aa-.* (Yawn)
'Well ... '

In lines 4 and 6 of (9) the mother could have produced backchannels, responding to the daughter's narrative; but she is silent. So the daughter calls for her attention explicitly in line 7, which still receives no response (line 8). The daughter then introduces another topic in line 9. The mother gives no response, and finally yawns in line 12, when the daughter calls for her attention again.

Thus silences in these examples occurred as delayed responses, as lack of elaborations, and as absences of backchannels. They show asymmetry in the participants' contribution to the conversation. Through the use of such silences the speakers seem to convey that they are not so interested in actively participating in developing the current topic or the conversation itself. Such uses of silences were frequent in the family conversations but not in the conversations between friends. By this, we do not mean to say that silences and pauses always occur more frequently in family conversations than in other kinds of conversations. They may occur in the latter as well. But the point is that the meanings of silences and pauses can differ depending on the nature of social contexts.[3]

6. Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates wide variability in speech styles, ranging from highly "cooperative" styles to less "cooperative" styles. While the two kinds of relations in the data (i.e. friends and family) both concern intimacy, their conversational styles were often quite different from each other. Generally speaking, compared to the conversations between friends, those between family members were much less "cooperative," characterized by direct expressions of conflict, fewer backchannels, frequent occurrences of silences and pauses, sequences of minimal responses, etc. The contrast between the two kinds of conversations that we have seen here suggests that speakers use different strategies or norms for different kinds of situations. Thus, as our examples from the family conversations show, less "cooperative" styles do not necessarily mean rudeness or a change in the relationship, since the norms are different from those used in other social contexts. Rather, they can convey that the relationship is very intimate so that the speakers can be spontaneous and express themselves more freely and directly. Note, however, if their styles become unusually uncooperative, they will convey different meanings, such as anger and a breakdown in the relationship.

Although more conversations in diverse social contexts need to be examined, the results of this study suggest that it is not accurate to characterize Japanese communication styles as highly "cooperative" and "empathetic" across all contexts. Rather, they indicate that the use and interpretation of speech styles are relative to specific social situations, and that less "cooperative" styles are not mere exceptions to Japanese conversational styles, but rather have important social functions. That is, they can index and also define the communicative context, including the nature of relationships (power, degrees of intimacy, etc.) and the speakers' attitudes toward topics and conversational goals. We argue that variations in the use of highly "cooperative" styles are best regarded as speakers' strategies for effectuating what they consider to be situationally most appropriate. The broad cultural ideology of harmony may influence the speakers' strategies, but it is not uniformly applied to all contexts. An adequate account of Japanese communication styles must address the question of under what circumstances the "dominant" norms are or are not observed. As pointed out recently (Miller 1989; Okamoto 1995, 1997), many previous studies of sociolinguistic phenomena in

Japanese, such as honorifics and "gendered" speech styles, have tended to focus on stereotypical usage based on the broad cultural and linguistic ideology, while paying little attention to "deviant" uses. In the present paper, we have examined yet another sociolingusitic phenomenon from this critical perspective.

Finally, this study also demonstrates how different ways of manipulating and coordinating a variety of linguistic features contribute to creating different interactional styles. Many conversational analyses tend to examine interactional devices such as backchannels, turn-taking, and silence/pauses individually, focusing on their local form-function units. But in order to fully understand diverse speech styles as interactional strategies, one must also investigate the meanings that emerge from the ways a set of linguistic devices are managed globally throughout conversations.

Notes

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[1]Comparing the use of Reactive Tokens (including backchannels) in English, Japanese, and Mandarin conversations, Clancy et al. (1996) found an interesting difference between English and Japanese conversations. That is, in contrast to Americans, Japanese speakers were much more likely to "give their Reactive Tokens while the primary speaker is 'in progress' rather than waiting for a completion point" (380). They suggest that "Reactive Tokens which occur frequently and are distributed throughout another speaker's turns and clauses rather than at possible completion points may constitute an especially appropriate means of providing and receiving interactional support" in Japanese conversation (ibid.:381).

[2]Mizutani (1988), for example, reports that in her study the average number of backchannels (*aizuchi*) was 15-20 per minute.

[3]Paralinguistic features such as laughter, pace of talk, tone and quality of voice are also important resources for creating different interactional styles. Although a detailed analysis needs to be done, our data indicate that compared to highly "cooperative" styles, less "cooperative' styles are characterized by fewer instances of laughter, slower pace of talk, and lower tone of voice. They also included fewer syntactic co-constructions and overlaps.

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