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How the length and pitch of aizuti 'back channel utterances' and the nature of the speech activity determine preference structure in Japanese

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1. Introduction

Although Pomerantz (1984) has claimed that delays within turns are components of disagreement in English, I demonstrate that Japanese supporting participants may use prolonged or delayed aizuti 'back channel utterances' to indicate agreement as well as disagreement with the main participant. Based on a comparison of the pitch and length of 98 aizuti in 10 Japanese conversations using CSpeech, I show that it is not the prolonging or delayed aspect of these aizuti but rather the intonation contour that influences alignments of agreement and disagreement. In the Japanese conversations that I analyzed for this study, prolonged aizuti indicated that a supporting participant viewed what the main participant had just said as "highly noteworthy." I considered aizuti that were more than 300 ms long to be prolonged aizuti.¹ Prolonged aizuti with falling intonation without an initial rise (∨) were used to create alignment in disagreement. Prolonged aizuti with an initial rise followed by gradually falling intonation (∩) were used to create alignment in agreement with the main participant. Finally prolonged aizuti with a sudden initial rise followed by sharply falling intonation (∧) were used to indicate surprise together with an alignment in agreement with the main participant.

2. Previous studies on aizuti

Previous researchers have focused on the function and the frequency of aizuti. While most previous studies (Mizutani 1984; Maynard 1987, 1989; Yamada 1992; Sugitoo 1992) have claimed that aizuti are supportive, Matsuda (1988) and Imaishi (1992) have also pointed out some of the less positive functions of aizuti.

Mizutani (1984) has described conversations with frequent aizuti as oriented toward good human relations. She emphasizes that aizuti are necessary to build Japanese conversation which she refers to as kyoowa "a conversation co-created by the speaker and listener." Maynard (1987, 1989) demonstrated that Japanese use aizuti more frequently than Americans use back channel utterances. Based on an analysis of casual friendly conversations which do not include conflict or arguments, she proposed six supportive functions of aizuti; 1) continuer, 2) display of understanding of content, 3) support toward the speaker's judgement, 4) agreement, 5) strong emotional response and 6) minor addition, correction, or request for information (Maynard 1989: 171). Sugitoo (1992) notes that participants use aizuti to make the conversation lively and encourage the speaker to keep talking. Based on an analysis of the timing of aizuti, she claims that the participants often overlap utterances with aizuti to co-construct utterances with the speaker. Yamada (1992:131) has also claimed that in Japanese conversation, so-called listening participants actually perform primary active roles as "supporters" of the "leaders," that is, the speaking participants in the conversation, by using aizuti to show this supportive attitude. Finally, in an analysis of the use of aizuti by one speaker in conversations with different interlocutors, Spees (1995) points out that although aizuti may be used with similar frequency, frequency alone can not account for differences in conversational style. She demonstrates that the same speaker may use aizuti in different ways depending on the communicative style of the interlocutor.

Matsuda (1988) and Imaishi (1992) are unique in their analyses of the non-supportive functions and pitch contour of aizuti. Matsuda (1988:63) suggests that aizuti such as Huun 'uh huh' and Soo desu ka nee 'I wonder if that is so' can function to convey the listener's denial or doubt when pronounced with falling intonation. She further notes that Un 'uh huh,' pronounced with strong falling intonation can convey the listener's sympathy toward the speaker.

Imaishi (1992) has demonstrated that aizuti intonation can convey the listener's attitude towards the topic and that aizuti with different pitch patterns are used at different points of the conversation. She claims that the aizuti Nn (∧) 'Uh huh' pronounced with an initial rise followed by sudden falling intonation indicates the speaker's interest in the topic more than Nn (→) 'Uh huh' pronounced with flat pitch. In her data, Nn (∧) pronounced with an initial rise followed by sudden falling pitch was used at the beginning of the main topic, while Nn (→) with flat pitch was used when the conversation died down 10 minutes into the discussion of the main topic.

Although Mizutani (1984) and Maynard (1987 and 1989) have called for the need to analyze the pitch contour of aizuti in different genres, most previous studies have focused on the frequency and supportive function of aizuti in Japanese conversations. In my analysis, I build on Matsuda (1988) and Imaishi's (1992) analyses of the non-supportive functions and pitch contour of aizuti and show how the length and pitch of aizuti are used to negotiate alignments in different speech activities.

3. Data and Analysis

In this study, I analyze how supporting participants vary their aizuti length and pitch contour in order to create alignments in agreement and disagreement with the main participant in different speech activities. By speech activities, I mean what the participants are trying to achieve in the conversation or what Heritage and Sorjonen (1994: 4) define as "the work that is achieved across a sequence or series of sequences as a unit or course of action - meaning by this a relatively sustained topically coherent and/or goal-coherent course of action," e.g., persuasion, invitation, or casual talk without a specific goal.

Szatrowski (1991, 1993) has demonstrated that Japanese invitation conversations are made up of units called wadan that are co-constructed by the inviter and invitee who alternate in their use of utterance functions from two groups as shown below. I follow Szatrowski's distinction between "information presenting participants" which I refer to as "main participants" and "supporting participants," respectively.

INFORMATION PRESENTING PARTICIPANT

Attention Requests
 Discourse Markers
 Information Presentation
 Agreement Requests
 Invitations
 Relation-building Expressions
 <Attention Displays> (j, k)
 (Szatrowski 1995)

SUPPORTING PARTICIPANT

Information Requests
 Confirmation Requests
 Comments
 <Attention Displays> (a-i)
 Relation-building Expressions

In my analysis, I focus on the aizuti Un used by supporting participant when it is followed by an utterance by the main participant or another aizuti by the supporting participant. Using CSpeech, I analyzed the pitch and length of 98 aizuti in a total of 10 conversations (8 telephone conversations and 2 face-to-face conversations). In the present study, I will focus on the aizuti used by one speaker, Reiko, who participated in Conversations 1 through 3 because Reiko's aizuti were representative of what I found in the other conversations. Conversations 1 and 2 were telephone conversations between two Japanese language teaching assistants and involved nemawasi, a behind the scene's activity of persuasion in preparation for a teaching assistant meeting scheduled for the following day. The term nemawasi literally means "digging around the roots of a tree prior to transplanting." This technique "maneuvering behind the scenes" is widely used among Japanese politicians and business people to obtain consensus in advance to avoid future confrontation in public (Kodansha International 1994: 309-310). The main participants in these conversations tried to persuade Reiko to agree with their proposal so that they could be assured that Reiko would collaborate in persuading other teaching assistants to agree with them at the subsequent meeting. Conversation 3 was a casual face-to-face breakfast table conversation between a mother, father, and Reiko (the daughter) with no specific goal.

Results of my analysis show that 1) compared to short aizuti, prolonged aizuti indicate that a supporting participant views what the main participant has just said as "highly noteworthy" and 2) the length and pitch contour of these aizuti together with the nature of the speech activity in which they are used determine the alignment implied by the supporting participant as shown in the Figures 1 to 3.

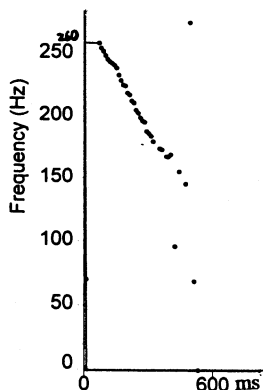


Figure 1: disagreement
Conversation 1:
persuasion (conflict)
[-initial rise, +fall]
47R: U::N (401 ms)

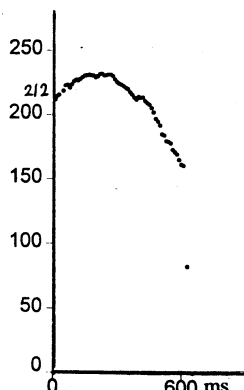


Figure 2: agreement
Conversation 2:
persuasion (non-conflict)
[+initial rise, +fall (gradual)]
9R: U:::N (596 ms)

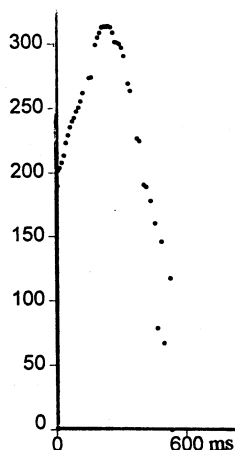


Figure 3: surprise and agreement
Conversation 3:
casual talk (non-conflict)
[+initial rise (abrupt), +fall (abrupt)]
9D: HU:::N (529 ms)

Conversation 1 was a conversation involving conflict where the main participant was trying to persuade the supporting participant, who did not agree with her, to see her point of view. In this conversation, the supporting participant used pro-

longed aizuti with the pitch curve given in Figure 1. This falling intonation with no initial rise indicated that what the main participant was insisting on was troublesome, thus showing that the supporting participant was aligned in disagreement with the main participant. In contrast, in Conversation 2, which did not involve conflict, the supporting participant used prolonged aizuti with the pitch curve given in Figure 2. This initial rise followed by gradually falling intonation indicated the supporting participant's sympathetic alignment in agreement with the main participant. Finally, in conversation 3, which did not involve conflict, the supporting participant used prolonged aizuti with the pitch contour in Figure 3. This sharp initial rise followed by abruptly falling intonation indicated the supporting participant's surprise as well as alignment in agreement with the main participant.

In Conversation 1, two Japanese teaching assistants are disagreeing about whether or not they should give their students a copy of the transcript for a listening comprehension assignment. While Nami (N) wants to give the students the transcript, Reiko (R) does not want to do so. Prior to 39N, Nami and Reiko have expressed their difference of opinion explicitly.²

(1) Conversation 1: Persuasion (conflict)

Nami (N)=a female Japanese TA, 40's, 2 years of teaching experience.

Reiko (R)=a female Japanese TA, 30's, 4 years of teaching experience.

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|------|---|----------|
| N's proposal | 39N: | Dakara tatoeba ano toransukuriputo o kopii-sita no o agete ne? | |
| | 40R: | UN. | (192 ms) |
| | 41N: | kotae wa moo agenai yoo ni sityatte, | |
| | 42N: | de zibun de // kotae figyuaauto-sinasai to. | |
| | 43R: | U:N. ↓ | (336 ms) |
| | 44R: | U//:::N. ↓ | (807 ms) |
| Account | 45N: | de: ano: u: dotti ni site mo, | |
| | 46N: | ano tesuto no ressun tesuto nanka no mondai wa mata sukosi tigau mono o dasu <u>desyoo</u>? | |
| | 47R: | U::N. ↓ | (401 ms) |
| Account | 48N: | Dakara oboete kuru tte koto mo dekinai <u>desyoo</u>. | |
| | 49R: | (.) U:::N. ↓ | (689 ms) |
| | 50N: | U//N. | (210 ms) |
| R's rejection of N's proposal | 51R: | Soo ne, nanka watasi, u:n ano: toransukuriputo ageru to iu no tyotto teekoo ga aru n da kedou::. | |
| N's proposal | 39N: | So, for example, (we'll) give them copies of the transcripts right? and | |
| | 40R: | UN. | (192 ms) |
| | 41N: | (we'll) make it so (that) we won't give them the answers anymore, and | |
| | 42N: | and, we'll // (tell them to) figure out the answers on their own. | |
| | 43R: | U:N. ↓ | (336 ms) |
| | 44R: | U//:::N. ↓ | (807 ms) |

they should give the student a make-up exam. Reiko responds to Tae's explanation with prolonged aizuti pronounced with an initial rise followed by gradually falling intonation (↘), suggesting her alignment in agreement with Tae. This interpretation is supported by Reiko's utterance in 16R Honto, hidoi ne! 'Really. That's awful, isn't it' which explicitly indicates her agreement with Tae.

(2) Conversation 2: Persuasion (non-conflict)

Tae (T)= a female Japanese TA, 30's, 8 years of teaching experience.

Reiko (R)=a female Japanese TA, 30's, 4 years of teaching experience.

- 1T: Nde ne:,
 2R: UN. (273 ms)
 3T: Nde kyoo nanka ne tesuto mo ku, ano
kotae mo kubatte ne tesuto mo kaesite
 kara ne kite ne:, {with laughter}
 4R: U:N. ↘ (369 ms)
 5T: zitu wa oziisan ga nakunatte osoosiki
 osoosiki de autoobutaun datta kara ne,
 // tesuto ukerarenakatta tte itte kita n da tte:?
 {with laughter}
 6R: HU::::::::::::::::::N? (2071 ms)
 7R: A ho:n//too:.
 8T: U:n de meekuappu doo siyoo
 ka na to omotte Tookyoo de tukatta
 yatu ne//:?
 9R: U:::N. ↘ (596 ms)
 10T: nita mondai da kedomo:,
 11R: UN. (299 ms)
 12R: Arimasu:?
 13T: tyotto tyotto dasite mite ne?:
 14R: U:::N. ↘ (507 ms)
 15T: u:n soide ii yoo dattara,
 maa sore de yatte mo ii ka na to omotte:!
 16R: Hontoo, hidoi ne! {laugh},
 17T: Tonikaku asita {laugh}, asita ne?
 18R: U:::N. ↘ (598 ms)
 19T: minna ni soodan-site:.,
 20R: U:::N. ↘ (427 ms)
 21T: un kimemasyoo ne tte itte ta n da kedo:.
- 1T: then,
 2R: UN. (273 ms)
 3T: then, today, (he) came after (she) handed out, uh,
handed out the answer sheet too and
returned the exam too, and {with laughter}
 4R: U:N. ↘ (369 ms)
 5T: (she) said it's that (he) came up saying that the
 fact is, his grandfather passed away and because
 (he was) out of town for the funeral
 //he couldn't take the (previous exam). {with laughter}
 {laugh}
 6R: HU::::::::::::::::::N? (2071 ms)

7R: Oh rea//ly.

8T: Uh so, I am wondering how to give
(him) a make-up exam and, the one we used in
Tokyo (University)?

9R: U:::N. ↷ (596 ms)

(has) similar exam questions, but

11R: UN. (299 ms)

12R: Do you have (it)?

13T: (I'll try to look for it and,

14R: U:::N. ↷ (507 ms)

15T: Uh, if it seems OK, well, (I) guess if we use that,
I think it would be OK.

16R: Really, that's awful, isn't it !{laugh}

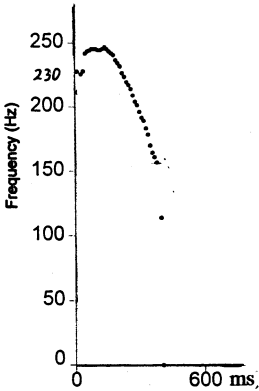
17T: Anyway tomorrow {laugh}, tomorrow?

18R: U:::N. ↷ (598 ms)

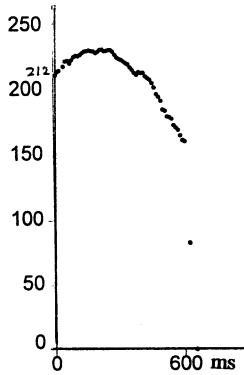
19T: "(we'll) all confer and,

20R: U:::N. ↷ (427 ms)

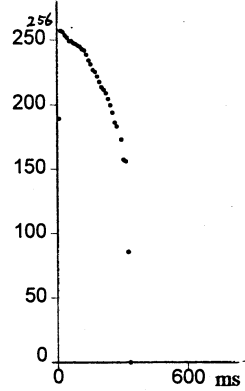
21T: uh let's decide", it's that (I) told (her that) but.



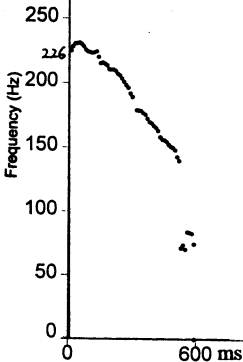
4R: U:N (369 ms)



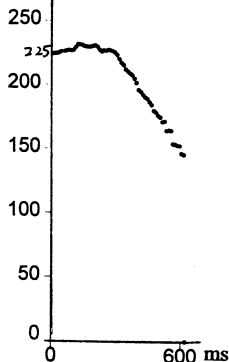
9R: U:::N (596 ms)



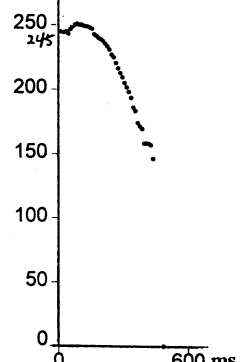
11R: U:N (299 ms)



14R: U:::N (507 ms)



18R: U:::N (598 ms)



20R: U:::N (427 ms)

In 1T, 3T, and 5T, Tae begins by explaining that Ms. Ito found out that Smith had not taken the test after she had already handed back the corrected exam to the other students. Tae describes the student's report to Ms. Ito, emphasizing his delay in reporting his situation with her laughter in 3T and 5T which indicates that it was an unexpected event for her. She also repeats similar syntactic structure in 3T saying kotae mo kubatte '(she) handed out the answer sheet too' and tesuto mo kaesite '(she) returned the exam too' to emphasize the student's delay in coming to Ms. Ito and imply that the student is troublesome. In 5T, Tae further shows her negative evaluation toward the student by lengthening the final vowel at the end of her utterance ending with tte:? '(she) said' pronounced with rising intonation.

During Tae's construction of the troublesome event, Reiko uses prolonged aizuti pronounced with an initial rise followed by gradually falling intonation (↘) in 4R, 9R, 14R, 18R, and 20R. This aizuti indicates Reiko's understanding and sympathetic alignment with Tae's story and foreshadows Reiko's agreement with Tae's proposal shortly after this conversational segment.

Finally, in Conversation 3, a non-conflict conversation, Reiko uses long aizuti with a sudden initial rise followed by sharply falling intonation after the main participant presents some news. This aizuti indicates what Maynard refers to as "strong emotional response" (Maynard 1989: 170-171) as well as an alignment in agreement with the main participant.

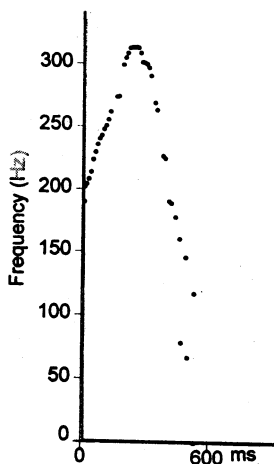
In Conversation 3, Reiko's father and mother are telling their daughter about how their dog will not eat bread unless it has butter on it while they are eating breakfast.

(3) Conversation 3: Casual talk (non-conflict)

Mother (M)=60's, Father (F)=60's, Daughter (D)=30's

- 1F: Bataa tuitoru de tabe//ru.
 2M: Un,
 Bataa tuitoru de taberu no.
 3M: Bataa tuite nakattara kuti tubutte
 // zettai kuti akanai.
 4F: Gii to koo yatte.
 (.)
 5M: Hoide mo sita ni hottoite yaru to ne,
 6D: UN. (192 ms)
 7M: ki ga muku to taberu si itinti de mo
 hottaru baai ga aru.
 (.)
 8M: Dakara natu? ari no su
 ga taihen.
 9D: HU:::N. ↘ (529 ms)
 10M: Kono mae mita desyoo.
 11D: UN. (162 ms)
 12M: De aritooru tyuu {laugh} kusuri katte kite
 maite yatta.
 13D: Aritooru? {laugh}
 1F: It's that the dog eats (it) with butter // on it.
 2M: UN.
 it's that the dog eats (it) with butter on (it).

- 3M: If there is no butter on (it), he clamps (his) mouth shut
and // absolutely will not open (his) mouth.
- 4F: (He) clamps (his) mouth shut like this.
(.)
- 5M: But if I put the bread down,
- 6D: UN. (192 ms)
- 7M: there are times he eats it and
times when he leaves it even a day.
(.)
- 8M: So in summer? the ant nests
are terrible.
- 9D: HU:::N. \wedge (529 ms)
- 10M: You saw (them) last time, right?
- 11D: UN. (162 ms)
- 12M: Then I bought the insecticide called aritooru
'ants pass through' {laugh} and scattered it.
- 13D: Aritooru 'ants pass through'. {laugh}



9D: HU:::N (529 ms)

In 5M and 7M the mother explains that when they put the bread out for the dog sometimes he eats it and sometimes he leaves it. After the mother draws the conclusion that the ant nests are terrible in the summer in 8M, emphasizing the word taihen 'terrible,' Reiko responds with a long aizuti with initial rise followed by sharply falling intonation (\wedge). This suggests her surprise and agreement with her mother's assessment of the terribleness of the ant nests.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, based on an analysis of the use of aizuti in several speech activities, I found that the supporting participant's alignment with the main participant was not exclusively manifested by delays created by prolonged aizuti, but rather was related to the intonation contour of the aizuti. I demonstrated that in

persuasion contexts, prolonged aizuti pronounced with falling intonation without an initial rise (∨) indicated the supporting participant's alignment in disagreement. Prolonged aizuti pronounced with an initial rise followed by gradually falling intonation (∩) suggested the supporting participant's alignment in agreement with the main participant. Finally, in casual family conversation where no decision was at stake, prolonged aizuti with a sudden initial rise followed by abruptly falling intonation (∧) was used to indicate surprise as well as an alignment in agreement with the main participant. This research points to the importance of considering pitch, length and the nature of the speech activity in the analysis of aizuti.

NOTES

*I would like to thank Professor Polly Szatrowski for her valuable suggestions and constant encouragement and students in the 1996 Japanese Syntax and Semantics class at the University of Minnesota for their comments.

1. I define prolonged aizuti as aizuti more than 300 ms long because the aizuti in other sections of this conversation, where there was clear agreement, were all less than 300.
2. I have indicated the length of Reiko's aizuti on the right in milliseconds.
3. According to Hasunuma (1992) desyoo functions to get the listener to realize that they share information with the speaker. Szatrowski (1994) has demonstrated that desyoo is used to provide a basis, in particular in situations of potential conflict such as refusing a suggestion or invitation.

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