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Project Title: Japanese Interjections: A comparative study of the so-called "filler" tokens in Japanese talk

Abstract:

a) Academic Significance/ Novelty of Research

The aim of this project is to explore the interactional work of Japanese interjections, and in particular those that are often called "fillers", in Japanese talk-in interaction. Interjections are linguistic objects that are not syntactically integrated in a sentence and that do not contribute to an utterance's propositional meaning. Somewhat similar to English 'mmm' or "well", the Japanese vocal markers "*anoo*", "*sonoo*", "*nanka*", and "*maa*" have been often described to be such "fillers" and these vocal tokens have been considered merely to have the function of "buying time" or otherwise filling up some empty space in talk, as the term suggests.

Such interjections, however, are often reported as being extremely difficult items for non-native speakers to acquire in their efforts to learn Japanese – which is not surprising, as in the language classroom, these tokens are not specifically taught, given that they fall outside the scope of "grammar." Japanese conversation without such tokens will sound quite unnatural – to the frustration of both language learners and the native speakers with whom they interact - and this fact has been well noted in the field of Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language (TJFL). Somewhat paradoxically, however, it has also been well established that even the very youngest Japanese children begin mastering the use of these items quite early, at around the 2 year old mark – which confirms that those tokens are fundamentally important *pragmatic* devices to employ for successful fluency in Japanese talk.

What, then, is being missed here in our understanding of these vocal markers and in explaining what real-life pragmatic practices underlie them, such that non-native JFL classroom learners have such difficulty in mastering them, while even natively Japanese speaking children as young as 3 years old are able to use them successfully? The discovery of these practices has implications for our understanding of Japanese culture, as well as Japanese language use – as well as for the necessary interdependence of culture and language practices that is studied under the aegis of "ethnomethodology", more generally. This research, then, will consist in an in-depth and fine-grained study of the cultural pragmatics of native Japanese speakers' practices involving so-called "fillers" in the creation and negotiation of their everyday conversational practices.

The approach that I will be taking to the analysis of such vocal tokens will be diametrically different than that of these previous studies. Rather than trying to do an "analysis" based on made-up examples of such token use, or positing theoretical "mental spaces" as explaining the ubiquitous appearance of these vocal tokens in the real-time back-and-forth of everyday spoken interaction, I intend instead to investigate such tokens by examining the impartial, empirical collection of naturally occurring conversational data, and to discover how the real-life speakers and hearers in such conversations deploy, respond, and orient to these tokens in the real-time back-and-forth interaction of naturally occurring talk. The recorded data which I will use contains conversations where people are conducting the mundane business of everyday life, such as parents talking to their children, friends or family chatting over dinner, etc. Focusing on the actual deployment of such tokens as they are found in their naturally occurring environments is an ideal way to investigate how the current conversational context may help determine a given vocal token's use – and also how the very use of such tokens may, in turn, either renew or change the current conversational context.

This project will thus constitute the first attempt to provide a truly comprehensive understanding of such vocal tokens and the pragmatic practices underlying them using the empirically-based Conversation Analytic methodology to systematically compare each of them as they are found in the dataset of real-life talk, and to collect these findings into a book, a special issue of a journal, and several journal articles.

Building upon my own two decades-long work in examining the fine-grained details of Japanese linguistic particle use in interaction (e.g., Morita 2005), and drawing upon the robust methodological and analytic tools of Conversation Analysis, this project proposes to continue pursuing that investigation by extending it to the examination of a number of other such tokens in order to discover and understand their functional significance in the moment-to-moment pragmatics of everyday Japanese talk. The result will be a book length manuscript identifying and explaining what unique kinds of fine-grained interactional issues Japanese speakers and listeners are enacting and negotiating by the use of these tokens that will hopefully prove useful to both linguists, Japanese language learners and teachers alike. Secondary deliverables, should funds be available, include an international gathering of scholars examining such issues to take place in NUS, and an edited volume of the papers resulting from such a conference.

b) Hypothesis/Research Questions to be Addressed

The summary above lays out the background of the problem under investigation. Accordingly, some of the research questions of this project are the following:

- 1) What is the role and function of these so-called "fillers" in Japanese talk?
- 2) Are all of these so-called "fillers" really being used to do the same thing - "buying time" during the course of producing an utterance - or are the various different so-called "fillers" ("eeto", "anoo", "sonoo", "nanka", "unn" and "maa") serving slightly different purposes and achieving different ends?
- 3) How do Japanese speakers differentially use these tokens? In what kind of interactional environment does each token occur and what is being accomplished by it? How can we establish this with recourse to empirical data?
- 4) What is being missed in our understanding of these vocal markers that could explain why adult JFL learners have such difficulty in mastering the successful use of these vocal tokens, when native speaking Japanese children start mastering them at around 2 years of age?
- 5) More generally: The equivalent of such "filler" tokens are found in almost all of the world's languages. What kind of interactional issues are constantly existing in human interaction that manifest in "delayed production" of a stretch of talk, i.e., what is the immediate interactional agenda that are being dealt with in such situation, even at the sacrifice of the ongoing talk's progressivity, and how such issues are dealt with cross-linguistically?

c) Methodology/Approach and Feasibility of study

In this project, I will be working closely with Professor Tomoyo Takagi of the University of Tsukuba. Professor Takagi and I have worked together previously on one of the tokens under investigation, "eeto" and have published our preliminary findings (Takagi & Morita 2015; Morita & Takagi to appear). The methodology of the study will be firmly grounded in the well-recognized Conversation Analytic (CA) approach for both the collection and the analysis of naturally occurring talk. The data

used for this study come from a variety of sources, and in addition to my existing dataset of empirically collected video and audio-recorded conversational data, I will also have access to the large databases of my collaborators and research colleagues. From these sources I will compile all of the available relevant data and perform the analyses using traditional CA methods protocol. Having used this methodology and approach successfully before in the examination of a number of other linguistic phenomena (e.g., Morita 2005, 2008, 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2017).