Social Interaction and Question Responses in Japanese

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1. Introduction

In the standard assumption about answers to yes/no questions, the speaker (the answerer) first states the polarity of his/her answer by using a 'yes' or 'no' word and then continues to provide additional information, if needed. However, in naturally occurred conversation in Japanese, this is not the case. In actual conversation, nearly half of answers for yes/no questions do not contain either a 'yes' or 'no' word. Moreover, there is no instance of a 'no' word occupies an entire turn by itself, which indicates that a 'no' word in Japanese does not project Turn Construction Unit (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson 1974) so that further talk must follow after that. This study analyzes and introduces various ways to answer yes/no questions in Japanese. It investigates how the Japanese speakers manage to answer yes/no questions in naturally occurred conversation. It argues that in Japanese social interaction, negating yes/no question, especially ending ones turn with just a 'no' word, is a dispreferred action. It also argues that to avoid this dispreferred action, Japanese speakers use various techniques when s/he has to negate a yes/no question.

The data for this study are videotaped and audio-recorded conversations which took place in informal settings. All speakers in these conversations are adult native speakers of Japanese. The conversations are partially transcribed, and only those transcribed segments are used in this study. In the transcribed data, a total of 42 yes/no questions are found, and the analysis is based on these 42 yes/no questions identified in the data.

The organization of taking turns is fundamental in conversation. Particularly, the forms of questions are important techniques used to construct turns in conversation. One of the functions of question forms in conversation is that of turn-allocation techniques by which the speaker (the questioner) selects the next speaker by asking the person a question (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson 1974). This fundamental function of questions and their responses have attracted scholars in various languages, including Finnish (Sorjonen 2001), French (Hansen 2001), English (Raymond 2003, Pomerantz 1984a, 1984b, 1988, Heritage and Raymond 2005, Geluykens 1988, Ford 2001, and Davidson 1984), and also Japanese (Angles et al. 2000, Hayashi 2010, Kitagawa 1980, and Okusu 1989). I hope that the analysis of this paper sheds

light on question response systems in Japanese conversation.

2. Brief sketch of questions and their responses

Japanese has an SOV order in its unmarked declarative sentence. To form a yes/no question it does not require any movement of elements. Instead, the addition of the question particle *ka* and/or rising intonation at the end of the sentence makes it a yes/no question as in (1).

(1-a)   watashi-wa gengogaku-o   benkyoo   shiteimasu.
           I-TPC   linguistics-ACC   study   do
           'I study linguistics.'

(1-b)   anata-wa   gengogaku-o   benyoo   hiteimasu-ka?
           you-TPC   linguistics-ACC   study   do-Q
           'Do you study linguistics?'

As can be seen, word order remains the same, and the difference is the question particle *ka* at the end of (1-b). The question particle *ka* is not always required. Since, along with a question particle, there is a significant rise in intonation at the end of the sentence, even without a question particle, one can form a yes/no question simply with rising intonation at the end of the sentence. In naturally occurring conversation, the norm for yes/no question is without the question particle *ka*. Among 42 yes/no questions found in the data, only two questions use the question particle. All other questions are formed by phonetically, or by means of other pragmatic markers. In traditional Japanese grammar, *hai* is recognized as 'yes' and *iie* as 'no' (Kuno 1973). The answers to Japanese yes/no questions follow what is called agree/disagree system (Sorjonen 2001). That is, the polarity of an answer is determined by the speaker's choice either to agree with the statement of the yes/no question or not (Martine 1962). If the speaker agrees with the polarity of the question, *hai* 'yes' is used, but if the speaker does not agree, *iie* 'no' is used instead, as in (2).

(2)   A: gengogaku-o   benkyoo   shinaindesu-ka?
              Linguistics-ACC   study   doing not-Q
              'Don't you study linguistics?'

         B: iie   benkyoo   shimasu.
              no   study   do
              'No, I study. = 'Yes, I study.'

3. Yes/no questions in conversation

This section summarizes the ways in which yes/no questions are actually answered in the data.

3.1. Positive answers

Positive answers are those responses in which the speaker agrees with the statement of the yes/no question.

(3)   1. W: sore omoshirokatta. ippai yomu no attene.
       that interesting.PST a lot read thing exist
       'That (magazine) was interesting. There was a lot to read.'

     2. K: n   soodakke?
       well so.PST
       'Well, was it so?'

     3. W: n.
       'Yes.'

In conversation (3), W's answer to K's question is a positive one using a 'yes' word. Among 42 yes/no questions found in the data, 35 responses are this positive type. In Okutsu (1989) it is found that 'yes' words occur much more frequently than 'no' words in Japanese conversation. The present study also found that the use of 'yes' words is far more frequent than that of 'no' words.

3.1.1. 'Yes' occupies an entire turn

Among 35 positive responses found in the data, the most common is that the turn starts with a 'yes' word and nothing else following within the same turn as in (4).

(4)   1. Y: hyakkaten-wa   ee non shika oke-hen-yan
       Dep.store-TPC   good t hing only have-NEG-right
       'Department stores only sell expensive things, right?'

     2. S: n
       yes
       'Yes.'

In (4), Y produces a yes/no question in line 1, and S answers Y's question in line 2. Here, S's turn is occupied only by 'yes', and nothing else follows it.

3.1.2. 'Yes' and other segments follow in the same turn

There are also cases in which a 'yes' word is followed by other segments within the same turn.

(5)   1. Y: dare-ga   inchoo   ka   wakare-hen-yaro?
                   Who-NOM director   COMP know-NEG-right
                   'We can not figure out who the director is, am I right?'

           2. S: n   sannin yonin   oru kara
                   yes three   four people be because
                   'Yes, because there are three or four dentists there.'

In (5), Y produces a yes/no question in line 1, and S answers Y's question with 'yes'. Different from the previous case, S did not finish the answer with just saying 'yes'. She continues her turn by explaining why she thinks that the answer to the previous question was 'yes'. The information which follows a 'yes' word is usually further clarification as in (5).

3.1.3. Repetitions

The next case involves repetition of segments which are used in the original question. That is, the speaker (the answerer) recycles some segments, usually predicates, of the original yes/no question.

(6)   1. T: kiiteru?
                   listening
                   'Are you listening to me?'

           2. Y: kiiteru.
                   listening
                   'I am listening.'

In (6), T produced a yes/no question consisting of a single verb, with rising intonation. Y answered the question with repetition of the verb 'listening', which was used in the original question. The answer does not contain any 'yes' word, but only contains repetition of segments in the question. The next example is the similar case.

(7)   1.S: anta   moo   onaka   ippai?
                    you   already stomach   full
                    "Is your belly full yet?"

            2.T: onaka   ippai.
                    stomach   full
                    "It's full."

In (7) T answered the question by repeating segments in the original question.

3.1.4. 'Yes' word plus repetition

Next is a combination of the previous two types. This time, it involves a 'yes' word plus repetition of segments which were used in the original question.

(8)   1.T: gakkoo de yatta ra eenen yaro?
                    school at do   if good   Q
                    'It's good if I do it at school, right?'

            2.S: sooya gakkoo de yatta ra eenen.
                    yes   school at do   if good
                    'Yes, if you do it at school, that's good.'

In (8) S answers T's question first with 'yes' then it is followed by repetition of the previous question.

3.1.5. Positive answer without 'yes' or repetition

There are also cases in which some positive answers do not contain any 'yes' word or repetition of an element of the yes/no question.

(9)   1. T: aa   koohiimame igai   ni-wa   tsukawanaide yatte
                    ah   coffee beans except to-TPC   do not use   said
                    'Ah, it says don't use this except for coffee beans.'

            2. Y: honmakaina?
                    really
                    'Is that so?'

    3. T: koohiimame   senyoo desu.
            coffee beans   only   DPL
            'This is only for coffee beans.'

In conversation (9) Y produces a yes/no question in line 2, asking if what T has just said is the correct information. T answers the question in line 3, however note that his answer does not contain any 'yes' word or repetition of any segment of the previous yes/no question. Instead, T's response is a paraphrase of his previous utterance.

3.2. Negative answers

The negative answers are those answers that the speaker (answerer) disagrees with the polarity of the question. Various conversational-based studies in English conversation show that refusals and negations are usually considered dispreferred action (Pomerantz 1984a, Pomerantz 1984b, Kitzinger and Frith 1999, Davidson 1984, and Ford 2001). For example, Ford (2001) argues that lack of elaboration after a negation is problematic and further talk usually follows after negations. In Japanese conversation, negative answer is much less frequent than positive answers. Also, there is no instance in the data of a 'no' word occupying an entire turn. That is, when the answer is a negative one, the speaker answers with a 'no' word, adding some further explanation after it, or s/he does not use a 'no' word at all, but provide some other information. This indicates that ending one's turn with a 'no' word is also a dispreferred action in Japanese conversation. To avoid such dispreferred action, various techniques are used.

3.2.1. 'No' plus something

One of the techniques used in negative response is to add further talk after saying a 'no' word as in (10).

(10)   1. S: onnaji yatsu ka?
              same   thing Q
              'Is this the same thing?'

      2. Y: iya yoo   nitetayo   konnan
              no very   similar   this
              'No, it looked similar to this.'

In (10) S asks the question confirming whether the two coffee mills are exactly the same. Y answers the question with 'no' followed by further talk.

3.2.2. Response without a 'no' word

Some negative responses do not contain any 'no' word as in (11).

(11)   1. T: sonna takaino   kore?
                    such   expensive this
                    'Is this that expensive?'

            2. Y: mada neechan   kore yasui
                    yet   old sister (referring to Y herself)   this cheap
                    'Yet for me, this is cheap.'

In (11) the response to T's question is negative one. Y does not agree that the coffee mill is expensive, but rather cheap. In Y's response, she does not use any 'no' word to express her disagreement, but instead she uses an adjective that has an opposite meaning, 'inexpensive'.

4. Frequency

The frequencies are based on 42 yes/no questions and their answers found in the data.

4.1. Distribution of positive and negative responses

Table 1 summarizes a distribution of positive and negative answers to yes/no question.

Types	# of tokens	Percentage
Positive answers	35	83%
Negative answers	7	17%
Total	42	100%

Table 1: *Distribution of positive and negative answers*

As the numbers indicate, the most common responses are positive response (83%), while only negative responses remain only 17%.

4.2. Distribution of positive responses

The analysis of the data has revealed that the speaker often gives a positive answer without using any 'yes' word. Of 35 positive answers, 15 lacks any 'yes' word. This phenomenon contradicts the assumption that yes/no questions generally evoke 'yes' words in positive responses. Table 2 shows the frequency of positive responses which contain a 'yes' word and of those which do not contain any 'yes' word.

	# of tokens	Percentage
'yes' word present	20	57%
'yes' word absent	15	43%
Total	35	100%

Table 2: *Presence and absence of a 'yes' word among positive responses*

As the figures indicate, although a positive answer with a 'yes' word is the norm (57%), nearly half of the time (43%), Japanese speakers do not use any 'yes' word in positive responses. The most common case of positive answer without a 'yes' word is the repetition of segments in the previous question, which is as common as answering with a solo 'yes' word. This is summarized in table 3.

	# of tokens	Percentage
'Yes' occupies an entire turn	12	34%
Repetition without 'yes'	12	34%
'Yes' plus something	6	17%
Without 'yes' or repetition	3	9%
'Yes' plus partial repetition	2	6%
Total	35	100%

Table 3: *Frequencies of positive response type*

4.3. Distribution of negative responses
Table 4 summarizes frequency of the negative responses found in the data.

	# of tokens	Percentage
'no' occupies an entire turn	0	0%
'no' plus something	4	57%
Negative answer without 'no'	3	43%
Total	7	100%

Table 4: *Distribution of responses among negative answers*

As shown there is no instance of a 'no' word occupying an entire turn, but every instance of a 'no' word is followed by further discourse. This phenomenon is noteworthy in comparison with positive responses in which a 'yes' occupying an entire turn is one of the most frequent

forms. This indicates that ending one's turn with just a 'no' word without further talk is dispreferred in Japanese conversation. Once the speaker says a 'no' word, s/he must continue talking.

5. Conclusion

In this study I summarizes the ways in which yes/no questions are answered in Japanese conversation. Based on the analysis of the data, the paper argued that answering yes/no question is not a simple social interactional task, but rather complicated and there are various techniques of answering yes/no questions in Japanese. The findings include that contrary to the standard assumption, nearly half of the responses to yes/no question contain neither a 'yes' nor a 'no' word. Instead, other means of answering, such as repetitions of segments in positive answers, or use of a lexicon of an opposite meaning in a negative response are used. Also, based on the fact that there no single instance of a 'no' word occupying an entire turn found in the data, the paper argued that ending one's turn with just 'no' is disprefered action in Japanese conversation and further talk must follows.

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