The Northridge earthquake conversations: The floor structure and the ‘loop’ sequence in Japanese conversation

Shoichi Iwasaki

University of California, East Asian Languages and Cultures, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA, 90095, USA

Abstract

The ‘loop’ sequence refers to successive exchanges of backchannel signals, and may be understood as a locally managed turn-taking pattern. If we consider conversation as a meaningful communication process, however, this is not a completely satisfactory analysis. In order to understand the function of the loop sequence, the present paper examines the phenomenon in a unit of conversation identified as ‘unit-floor’, and shows that the loop sequence is a pattern which provides participants with an opportunity to negotiate the next floor holder, who will subsequently control and develop the floor. A loop sequence appears when the current floor holder suggests a transfer of floor, or when the current floor supporter returns a floor which has been transferred to him inadvertently, or when participants jointly produce utterances in a rapid succession (open floor).

The current study further shows that the loop sequence is a behavioral manifestation and a contextualization cue of ‘mutual dependency’, and it is part of the ‘conceptual floor’ that participants invoke when entering into and sustaining a conversation.

The data analyzed for the purpose of this study are four dyads, each approximately 20 minutes long, in which participants recount their experiences of an earthquake. The Japanese data

* I would like to thank Reiko Hayashi, whose discussions of the floor in conversation provided me with valuable information about this concept. I learned much from her writings and through personal communication with her.

I had a chance to discuss part of my research presented here in the panel entitled 'Japanese Linguistic Ideology and Socially Situated Language Practice' at the 49th Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (Chicago, March 13–16, 1997). Suggestions and comments received from my fellow presenters, Yoshiko Matsumoto, Shigeko Okamoto, Yoskiko Takahashi, our discussant, Naomi McGloin, and people in the audience including Junko Mori, Polly Szatrowski and Haruko Cook improved the paper tremendously. My special appreciation goes to an anonymous reviewer and Makoto Hayashi who gave me invaluable comments and suggestions. The comments of Preeya Ingkaphirom Horie, Eri Yoshida, Tsuyoshi Ono, and Feng-hs: Liu have also influenced this paper. My only regret is that I may not have absorbed all the insights and suggestions offered to me. Any remaining shortcomings found in this present paper are entirely my responsibility.

* E-mail: iwasaki@humnet.ucla.edu.
is compared with comparable Thai and American English data in order to explain the cultural significance of the loop sequence.

1. Introduction

A particular turn-taking pattern identified here as the ‘loop’ sequence, or successive exchanges of backchannel expressions, appears abundantly in Japanese conversation. A typical loop sequence takes the following schematic shape:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPEAKER A</th>
<th>SPEAKER B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Some utterance)</td>
<td>ee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ee</td>
<td>ee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Some utterance)</td>
<td>(Some utterance)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1

Speaker B responds to Speaker A’s utterance with a backchannel signal, *ee*. To this signal, Speaker A in turn responds with his own backchannel signal (or back-back channel), *ee*, which initiates a transition of speakerhood to B. What I attempt to do in this paper is to first discuss functions of the ‘loop’ sequence by locating the contexts in which it appears in conversation and secondly to seek a culturally definable motivation for this special turn-taking behavior.

Since the publication of the seminal paper by Sacks et al. (1974), the turn-taking mechanism, a basis for the loop sequence, has been considered to be a locally managed system. This view explains many phenomena of coordination in conversation such as scarcity and brevity of speech overlaps and little or no transitional gaps between turns. In this methodological framework which is known as Conversation Analysis (or CA), instances of turn-taking are collected and presented as evidence for its structural systematicity. While the discovery and further examination of the structural (or mechanical) aspect of turn-taking has advanced our understanding of conversational structure tremendously, the structural explanation alone is not sufficient to fully explain the phenomenon of turn-taking (Maynard, 1989: 146–147; Hayashi, 1996: 29). This inadequacy becomes more acute when turn-taking phenomena are examined in a conversation in its entirety as a system. To pursue a fuller understanding of this phenomenon, I argue, it is necessary to employ a methodology that is able to adequately address the functional aspect of turn-taking. A concept that is necessary for such a functional analysis is the notion of floor which reflects the participants’ interactional ‘moves’ within the conversation (a fuller definition of floor will be given in Section 3). A functional analysis of turn-taking will broaden and deepen our understanding of this phenomenon beyond the limits of its structural property, and it further opens up possibilities for exploration of the cultural significance associated with this phenomenon in conversation.
2. The data

The data for the present study come from my ‘Northridge Earthquake Conversation Project’. In this study I analyzed four dyads in which Japanese native speakers talked about their experiences in the Northridge earthquake which hit Los Angeles on January 17, 1994. The conversations were recorded approximately one and a half months after the quake. A Japanese native research assistant invited Japanese students (two at a time) to an office on UCLA campus. After she introduced the participants and asked them to talk about their earthquake experiences for about 20 minutes, she left the room. The conversation was recorded on audio and video tapes. The two participants in each dyad were unacquainted individuals, who met for the purpose of the conversation. The participant profiles in each dyad are as follows. JEQ stands for ‘Japanese Earthquake’ Data. Names are all pseudonyms:

JEQ#1 Akai (Female graduate) vs. Tanaka (Male graduate)
JEQ#2 Hashimoto (Male graduate) vs. Asada (Female undergraduate)
JEQ#3 Yasumi (Female undergraduate) vs. Sayuri (Female undergraduate)
JEQ#4 Akira (Male graduate) vs. Takashi (Male graduate)

3. Floor in conversation

Since the concept of floor is crucial in the present study, a clear definition of the concept must be given at the outset. Two related but different definitions of the concept of floor are in current use. First, Hayashi describes floor as “a dynamic cognitive entity that links the interactants together socially and psychologically” (1996: 32). Floor as a cognitive entity, or a cognitive network, evolves around the participants in conversation and constitutes as part of their immediate interactional context (or “an ad hoc culture”, ibid.). In other words, when the participants recognize a social encounter they establish a mutual mental space where they can interact. I define this aspect of floor as ‘conceptual floor’. Conceptual floor assists and influences the participants’ behavioral orientation in interaction and the process of information transmission. For
example, a person may index different attitudes through choices of vocabulary or morpho-syntactic forms according to his assessment of the social context of the conversation. Or a person may employ different strategies in his attempt to understand, or be understood by, his interlocutor(s). The social and psychological aspect of conceptual floor points to its strong cultural orientation and suggests the possibility that the members of different cultures construct their conceptual floors differently.

Second, floor is defined as a unit in conversation. Although the term ‘floor’ in this sense, or ‘unit-floor’ as I call it, and ‘turn-at-talk’ are often confused, they must be clearly separated. I reserve the term ‘turn-at-talk’ as the structural notion as first used by Sacks et al. (1974); and the term ‘unit-floor’ as the semantic-functional notion in the communication process. Conversational business which very often takes more than a single turn exchange must be examined through the notion of unit-floor. Turn-taking activities known as ‘story prefaces’, e.g., ‘You wanna hear a story?’ (Sacks, 1974) and ‘preliminaries to preliminaries’, e.g., ‘Can I ask you a question?’ (Scheffgoff, 1980), affect the local turn-taking behaviors for the sake of more global conversational activity and they clearly show the conversationalists’ awareness of a larger unit such as floor. Even without such explicit announcements, turn-taking can be systematically regulated, resulting in non-speaker-change at a ‘transition relevance place’ (cf. Ford and Thompson, 1996). Szatrowski (1993) argues that the ‘invitation-acceptance/refusal’ sequence takes more than a single turn exchange and proposes a larger analytic unit she terms wadan (speech paragraph), which is similar to what we conceive of as ‘unit-floor’ in this paper. Also Maynard (1989: 146–147) discusses the importance of the perspective of global context in addition to the local perspective in the analysis of turn-taking. The concept of unit-floor gives a more precise meaning to the notion of global context.

Participants in a unit-floor will be engaged in a “speech activity” (Gumperz, 1982: 166), or “what’s-going-on” in interaction (Edelsky, 1993: 209). When speech activity involves the development of a topic as in the case of the present earthquake conversation, a unit of floor is identical to a unit of discourse topic (see Erickson, 1982). A floor unit specifies the roles of participants and is therefore dynamic in nature, whereas a topic unit is static and the participants’ roles are not considered. It goes without saying that the notion of unit-floor is a more relevant unit than a topical unit when such interactional phenomena as turn-taking and loop sequence are examined.

When one participant is found to be developing and controlling a topic in a given floor, this person is the floor holder. A floor in which one floor holder can be identified is a “single person floor” (Hayashi, 1996: 70–71). Other participants in a single person floor conversation are floor supporters, who attend to the floor holder’s talk with various degrees of verbal feedback.3 In a lecture, for example, the lecturer

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3 There are several variations of single person floor. One is a floor in which more than one person become joint floor holders while talking to one or more listeners. This is observed when more than one person (e.g., husband and wife) talk to others about the events experienced together (e.g., their honeymoon trip to Hawaii). Another interesting case is an interview, in which the role of floor holder is split between an interviewee who develops a floor and an interviewer who controls the flow of the floor. These floor structure may appear during an ordinary conversation as well.
is the floor holder and those in the audience are floor supporters whose verbal participation is minimal. A person who discloses unshared information as a story-teller within a casual conversation becomes the floor holder and his interlocutors assume floor supporter roles. Floor supporters may quietly attend to the floor holder's talk, and in this situation "simultaneous talk seldom occurs, but supportive signals such as back channel cues including comments and questions ... are often observed in a fairly systematic manner" (Hayashi, 1996: 72). Floor supporters' involvement may become more active, however, and in this case short simultaneous talk and overlapping appears. When the topic of conversation is the kind of information that does not solely belong to one particular participant (i.e., shared or sharable information), the conversation may develop collaboratively. This type of conversation floor is the 'open floor', where all participants are collaborative floor developers and participate in the conversation simultaneously as floor holders and floor supporters, thus making it difficult or impossible to distinguish floor holders from supporters. 4 Participants in floor thus take roles of floor holder, floor supporter, or collaborative floor developer, and in this context participants' moves to claim, sustain, and yield a floor become important. I will examine these conversational moves carefully in Section 6.

To summarize this section, the 'conceptual floor' is an abstract cultural notion shared by conversational participants and it guides their behavior and information transmission in conversation. 'Unit-floor' is a unit of conversation which has a coherent speech activity such as topic development (as in the case of the current analysis). A unit-floor can be developed by one floor holder in a single person floor with the floor supporters listening, or it can be developed jointly in an open floor. When the speech activity involves topic development, a floor is made coherent by topic. As will be discussed later, participants display floor managing behaviors to negotiate their floor roles. We will reconsider the relationship between the conceptual floor and unit-floor in Section 7 of this paper.

4. Backchannel expressions

Some discussion of backchannel expression at this point will facilitate a later discussion of the loop sequence. The issue of backchannel expressions (or 'backchannels' for short) has been one of the major concerns among students of Japanese conversation. This is due to the fact that Japanese speakers use backchannels much more frequently compared to speakers of some other languages (Mizutani, 1983; Maynard, 1989; Clancy et al., 1996; Iwasaki and Horie, 1996). Backchannels are defined
here as any verbal attention whose main purpose is to respond in a supporting (i.e., non-disagreeing, non-challenging) manner to the other participant’s immediately preceding or current vocalization.

Backchannels are formally classified into three types: ‘non-lexical backchannels’, ‘phrasal backchannels’, and ‘substantive backchannels’. Non-lexical backchannels are vocalic sounds which have little or no referential meaning, and form a closed set. Phrasal backchannels are stereotypic expressions with more substantive meaning than non-lexical backchannels. This is also basically a closed set though occasional innovation is allowed, as recent innovation such as usso:: ‘You’re kidding’ or maji:: ‘Serious?’ attest to this linguistic inventiveness. Substantive backchannels, however, are not stereotypic expressions, and they are full of referential content. This type of backchannel is clearly an open class. Some examples of backchannels expressions are listed below.

Non-lexical backchannels:5

- mm, nn::, ee::, aa::, hai, hai a::, hoo, ho::, he::, hn::, etc.

Phrasal backchannels:

- honto?: Really?’
- soo desu ka: ‘Is that right?’
- usso: ‘I don’t believe it!’
- naru hodo: ‘I see what you mean.’
- sonna bakana: ‘How ridiculous!’
- maji?: ‘Are you serious?’
- etc.

Substantive backchannels: (any form of a sentence or a series of sentences)

Given the definition adopted here, substantive utterances such as repetition, a summary statement, or a clarifying question about the other speaker’s immediately preceding or concurrent talk qualify as backchannels. In other words on the surface substantive backchannels may not differ from normal ‘substantive utterances’, but all utterances coming from a floor supporter constitute backchannels. This is consistent with Yngve (1970)’s original defintion of backchannel expressions. Note, however, the reverse is not true and not all backchannels are floor supporter’s utterances. Such non-floor supporter backchannels occur when the floor supporter gives a rather extended backchannel, and the floor holder reacts to it with ‘back-backchannels’ (Yngve, 1970). Non-floor supporter backchannels also occur in an open floor where no distinction can be made between floor holder and supporter.

Another aspect of backchannels must also be noted. In my earlier research (Iwasaki, 1990), I argued that participants’ interactional moves are indispensable in characterizing backchannels (“some utterances may derive their character as

5 Non-lexical backchannels can be pronounced with two moraic length, in which case the first mora is accented. Thus, nn, ee, or aa, for example has the H-L pitch pattern unless the intonation alters the overall prosodic pattern (as in ee?). When the vowel is lengthened (as indicated by colons as in n:: or e::), the accent gets lost and the intonation takes over the overall prosodic pattern.
actions entirely from placement considerations” (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 299), and suggested that a backchannel will be treated as a ‘continuer’ (Schegloff, 1982) or as a ‘reactive expression’ by its recipient. A backchannel is treated in retrospect as a continuer when the floor holding speaker continues to talk without responding to it. On the other hand, it is recognized as a reactive expression in retrospect when he stops to respond to it. Although the interactional treatment of backchannel is essentially independent of the shape of the backchannel, there is a strong relationship between them. In the list of backchannel expressions shown earlier, non-lexical backchannels tend to be treated as continuers, and phrasal and substantive backchannels as reactive backchannels. This relationship can be understood if we notice the following facts. Many non-lexical backchannels (e.g., *nn, ee, hai*) are used as an affirmative answer token (i.e., “yes”) and inherently carry a property of the second pair-part. As such, non-lexical backchannels mark the end of an adjacency pair cycle, and its recipient does not usually need to attend to it. Consequently a non-lexical backchannel is usually treated as a continuer. News-receipt tokens such as *he:: ?* and *ha:: ?* also function as a second pair-part. On the other hand, many phrasal and substantive backchannels, especially those that take the form of a question, intrinsically constitute the first pair-part which requires a response. That is why these backchannels are often treated as reactive expressions.

The relationship between form and its interactional treatment, however, is always tentative, and can be overridden by the participants’ interactional moves. That is, although the producer of a non-lexical backchannel *nn* often uses it as a continuer and its recipient often treats it as such, the recipient always has the option to treat it as a reactive expression (we will see such examples in the discussion of the ‘loop’ sequence in the next section). Similarly a phrasal backchannel *naruhodo* ‘I see’ is often treated as a reactive expression, but in some contexts, it is treated as a continuer backchannel. The two excerpts on the following page clarify this point. Compare the expression of *naruhodo (nee)* in Excerpt 1 and Excerpt 2. (See Appendix for transcription convention.)

In Excerpt 1, Yasumi responds to Sayuri’s expression, *naruhodo nee* (line 6), with *n::* (line 7). In this exchange then *naruhodo nee* is treated as a reactive expression. Notice that Yasumi lost a turn to speak by reacting to the non-floor holder’s backchannel expression with her own backchannel, thereby creating a ‘loop’ sequence (discussed below in Section 6). In contrast, Yasumi does not react to the same expression *naruhodo* in Excerpt 2 but simply ignores it, and thus treats it as a continuer.

In summary, a backchannel expression, which is defined as non-confrontational verbal attention to the interlocutor’s utterance, takes the different formal shapes of non-lexical, phrasal or substantive backchannels. Their interactional state as a continuer or a reactive expression is determined by its recipient’s treatment of it. In other words, the status of a backchannel is always mutative and transformable. This mutability and transformability of backchannels is exploited fully in the ‘loop’ sequence as we examine in a later section.
EXCERPT 1 (JEQ#3)

Yasumi (female) 

1 nn soo yuu koto de nigeru hitsuyoo
2 wa nai tte yuu huu ni.
3
4 ... omotta kara.
5 s...(0.9) soo.
6 n::.
7
8
9
10
11
12

Sayuri (female)

nn

naruhodo nee.
nanka soo.
atashitachi wa nee.
(H) so uchi no .. tks< apaato mo kekkoo
thurui-n desu ne?
=chiku nannen ka wakannai-n desu kedo:* 

English translation of Excerpt 1

Yasumi (female)

1 so there was no
2 need to escape
3
4 ... so I thought.
5 ...(0.9) so.
6 n::
7
8
9
10
11
12

Sayuri (female)

I see what you mean.
like
we
... our apartment is also rather
old, you see.
= though I don’t know how long since it was built.

EXCERPT 2 (JEQ #3)

Yasumi (female) 

1 ...(1.0) nn ano toki sugu shoppingusentaa ni ikoo ka
2 tte yuu.
3
4 [kangae mo atta-n desu kedo [[nee?
5 [hai. [[naruhodo nee?
6 (H) sore wa yokujitsu ni: shita-n [da ke <$> do: @]* [@@@
7

Sayuri (female)

hai hai.

English translation of Excerpt 2

Yasumi (female)

1 ...(1.0) at that time (we thought) we should go to a
2 shopping center immediately
3
4 [so we thought about that, [[you see ?
5 [hai. [[I see what you
6 (H) we decided to do it the following [day.
7

Sayuri (female)

hai hai

[@@@
5. The floor transition

Participants in the present conversational data generally take turns to reveal their personal experiences of the earthquake in their single person floors. In other words, the general organization of the conversations is such that one person assumes the role of floor holder and discloses unshared information to his/her interlocutor who assumes the role of floor supporter. The floor supporters’ involvement as revealed in their use of various floor supporting verbal and nonverbal cues varies depending on their (real or pretended) interest in the story-in-progress. The moment when the current floor holder finishes telling one particular event (or reaches the end of a unit-floor) is a ‘floor transition relevance place’.

A floor transition relevance place is a special type of turn transition relevance place as discussed by Sacks et al. (1974), but at this location a qualitatively more significant speakerhood transfer is expected to occur, and a new speaker must take an active role in making a contribution to the conversation. A current non-floor holder who misjudges a floor transition relevance place may receive a negative evaluation from his interlocutor. If he initiates a floor before a floor transition relevance place, he may be judged to be interrupting and intrusive even if he observes local turn-taking rules. If he does not initiate his floor when a floor transition relevance place is reached, he may be judged to be inattentive (Schegloff, 1993: 106). 6

To alleviate the problem, participants display to each other various floor negotiating behaviors. These behaviors may take non-linguistic forms (e.g., gaze and hand gesture), para-linguistic forms (e.g., rhythm of talk and prosodic features) and linguistic forms. Two prevalent linguistic signs of floor initiation in the current data base are a mention of speaker referential term (often with a particle wa or mo) and a discourse marker demo ‘but’. Among 143 unit-floors identified in the four dyads in the current data set, the distribution of floor initiation marked by either or both of these signals is presented in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of floors with speaker referential terms</th>
<th># of floor with discourse marker demo ‘but’</th>
<th>Total # of floors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of 143 floor initiations, 54 (37.8%) contain some kind of speaker reference terms and 27 (18.9%) contain demo. In the next segment from JEQ#4 four unit-floors are identified and one floor initiation contains demo ‘but’ (Floor 1) and three contain boku wa ‘I-topic marker’ or boku no tokoro/heya wa ‘my place/room-wa’ (Floors 2,3,4).

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6 This is an area where great cultural and subcultural misunderstanding may develop. See Tannen (1990, 1993) among others.
EXCERPT 3 (JEQ #4)

Akira (male)  
Takashi (male)  

FLOOR 1  

[ee.  
zenzen so< soko ma i< dewa nattenai to  
omotta-n desu kedomo ne:*  

[odorokimashita dakara.  
=<@ denki tsukete @>mitara.  
o denki tte yuu no wa kaichudentoo desu  
kedo.  

FLOOR 2  

boku wa mo<.  
... sugu denki kiemashita yo [ne.  
taoreteru no ga.  
... (.6) []<x oto ga x>  

< 24 LINES OMITTED >

su< sugoi desu nee. @@  
[x x] sootoo yureta-n desu ne.  
papari nee.  

FLOOR 3  

(H) dakedo.  
... (.5) boku no heya wa soo yuu huu ni koo:,  
mono ga.  
.. ippai taoreta-n desu kedomo.  
yappa onaji:: apaatode.  
...(.8) onaji::: sono kai no.  
... sono: tokoro wa.  
.. hotondo.  
... nanimo taoretenakute:.  
ano tatoeba.  
.. koo yuu hondana no ni oitearu.  
.. [anoo nanteiundeshoo.  

<23 LINES OMITTED >

dakara.  
(H) hoka no hito no heya miruto.  
so higai ga sore hodo demo nai no ni.  
nande @@ boku no heya dake @>.
... konna taoreta-n daroo tte omotta-n desu
kedo:*

a soo desu ka.

FLOOR 4

=boku no tokoro wa.
.. boku no heya wa.
s::o:: demo nakatat:ta-n desu yo.

< FLOOR CONTINUES >

English translation of Excerpt 3

Akira (male)

FLOOR 1

[ee.
I didn’t expect that the damage was that
extensive

So I was surprised,
<@ when I turned on the light. @>
uhm, I mean a flashlight.

[ee:

[[oh, (you could) hear?
you hear the nose?

What I did was
... the light went out immediately, [right?.

(The sound of things) falling.
... (.6) I ] <x The noise x>

< 24 LINES OMITTED >

[wh< what a story! @@

[<x x> it shook very strongly.
Indeed.

FLOOR 3

(H) but,
... (.5) in my room, like I said,

It shook very hard.

Takashi (male)

FLOOR 2

... oh but that’s about it? uhm
you didn’t think (things) would fall [down?

a::

... probably the building got squashed,
[I thought.

nn.
[and <x x>
came falling
but in the same building
...(8) on the same floor
that location
barely
... anything fell down.
uhm for example,
things on a bookshelves
.. [how shall I explain

< 23 LINES OMITTED >

so
(H) When I look at other rooms,
the damage was not extensive.
Why <@only in my room@>.
did (things) fall down? I wondered.

ee.

Oh, is that right?

FLOOR 4

=FLOOR 4

=My place,
.. my room
didn’t receive much damage.

< FLOOR CONTINUES >

While personal reference terms and a discourse marker signal the floor initiation,
other linguistic devices signal floor yielding. A question inviting the other to respond
is the most obvious such device. One example is shown in the next excerpt.

EXCERPT 4 (JEQ #3)

Sayuri (female)                      Yasumi (female)

FLOOR 1

atashi wa nee*
uesuto rosanzerusu na-n desu ne.
[de bandii tte owakaridesu ka?

.. e[e.

aa hai hai hai hai

< 9 LINES OMITTED >

nn.
soo na-n desu yo:*

s<

jaa apaato mitaina.

.. aa:::

< FLOOR CONTINUES >
... yasumi-san wa doo na-n [desu ka.

[nn nn
.. hai hai

[ano paamusu.
paamusu [[no:*
benisu no toori.

< FLOOR CONTINUES >

English translation of Excerpt 4

Sayuri (female) | Yasumi (female)

FLOOR 1

I live in West Los Angeles.
[and do you know where Bundy is?
.. e[e.
aa hai hai hai hai.

< 9 LINES OMITTED >

nn.
That's right.

s<

FLOOR 2

.. How about you, [Yasumi?

[uhm Palms,
Palms [and
Venice Boulvard.

< FLOOR CONTINUES >

Floor 1 is opened by Sayuri by her own floor claim turn with watashi wa 'I-topic marker'. At the beginning of Floor 2, Sayuri produces a floor yielding turn which asked Yasumi, yasumi-san wa doo na-n desu ka 'How about you, Yasumi?'

6. The 'loop' sequence

The loop sequence is another device for floor negotiation. It can either close or sustain a floor. As described at the outset of this paper, the loop sequence is a turn-taking pattern consisting of a consecutive backchannel and back-backchannel expressions, produced by different speakers. The first backchannel expression, which is directed to the preceding or concurrent utterance by the other speaker, is identified here as the 'loop-head' and the second one (back-backchannel) which is
directed to the 'loop-head' is identified as the 'loop-tail'. Thus the identification of 'loop-head' is contingent on the discovery of a 'loop-tail'. Let's observe an example of loop sequence.

EXCERPT 5 (JEQ #5)

Yasumi (female)                                          Sayuri (female)

Floor 1

1 pa akaruku nattekuru to nee*

3 nanka.
4 ... katazu<@keyoo ka tte ki mo suru@>
kara yappashi heya ni.
6 <x x> kabin toka ne.
8 (H) n:::

Floor 2

atashitachi nanka soo.
abutaashokku de:* (H) mata kuzureru kamo shirenai kara
tte nanka.

English translation of Excerpt 5

Yasumi (female)                                          Sayuri (female)

Floor 1

1 When it became light,

3 somehow
4 ... I <@felt like cleaning@>, so indeed, in the room
6 <x x> the vase and things like that.
8 (H) n:::

Floor 2

We
Aftershocks
(H) may damage (the building) again so...

<FLOOR CONTINUES>
In the first part of this segment, the floor holder, Yasumi, explains that she felt like cleaning the quake damage in the room when the dawn came. During the explanation, the floor supporter Sayuri once gives a backchannel (line 2). After Yasumi says kabin toka ne ‘like a vase, you see?’ (line 6) as an example of items she had to clean, Sayuri gives another backchannel ha:::n? (line 7). The current floor holder, Yasumi, however, counters this backchannel with a back-backchannel n::: in line 8, thereby turning ha:::n? in line 7 into a reactive expression. Hayashi (1994) calls the type of utterance such as n::: (u:::n in his transcription) in line 8 above “the third-position u:::n” and explains that “(the third-position u:::n and the like) occur after another participant’s minimal response to a prior talk”. He further claims that “the production of the third-position u:::n is oriented to by participants as a display of its producer’s preparedness to shift from speakership to recipiency”. In this view, n::: in line 8 in the above excerpt indicates its producer’s intention to terminate the stretch of utterances, thereby indicating a floor transition relevance place. In other words, if Yasumi wants to maintain her floor, she can easily treat the non-lexical backchannel ha:::n? (line 7) as a continuer, but instead she produced n::: (line 8), thereby registering her intention to close her floor (see also Kita, 1996).

As seen above, the loop sequence creates a context in which participants negotiate floor structure, and in many cases actual floor holder change takes place. Among the 78 cases of loop sequence found in the data, 25 cases clearly show this pattern. ‘Prelude to floor change’ is another recognizable pattern in which the floor holder shift is not effected immediately after the loop, but the loop initiates a movement towards the shift. ‘Reconstruction’ is another observable pattern in which the first loop sequence shifts the speakership to the current floor supporter and the second loop which immediately follows returns the role of floor holder to the original floor holder, thereby maintaining the current floor structure. Finally, the loop may appear in an open floor. The distribution of these types of loop sequence is given in the next table and each type of loop sequence will be discussed in the subsequent sections in detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Types of loop sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floor transition</td>
<td>Prelude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 (33.3%)</td>
<td>14 (17.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.1. Floor transition

We have already observed immediate floor transition after the loop in Excerpt 5. Here are two more such examples. In Excerpt 6 below, the loop sequence appears twice. Each time it appears right before a floor holder change.

In the first floor (lines 1–16), Yasumi is a floor holder who is explaining that she was surprised by her neighbors’ initial reaction to the earthquake: they moved their cars out of the garage and were getting ready to evacuate in them. She did not feel
EXCERPT 6 (JEQ#3)

Yasumi (female) Sayuri (female)

FLOOR 1

1 ... koo yuu toki ni nani suru ka .. tte
2 ittara.
3 mazu kuruma o zenbu dooro ni
dasu tte yuu no ni odoroi.

[soo soo soo soo soo. 4

< SEVERAL LINES OMITTED >

5 (H) kanzen ni anzen na basho tte
6 yuu no wa.
7 dooro ni.
8 ...() aru wake da kara:*

9 nn nn.

10 ... nn soo yuu koto de nigeru
11 hitsuyoo wa nai tte yuu huu ni.

13 ... omotta kara.
14 ...() soo.

16 nn.

FLOOR 2

nanka saa.
atashitachi wa nee.
... so uchi no .. k< apaato mo
kekko no hurui-n desu ne.
=chiku nannen ka wakannai-n desu
kedo:*

< SEVERAL LINES OMITTED>

24 (H) iya samukatta samukatta.

27 a: n:::

FLOOR 3

29 ...() iya da< ahutaashokku<
30 ... sugu dakara rajio: o ne?
31 kaarajio o minna ga.

< FLOOR CONTINUES >
English translation of Excerpt 6

---

**FLOOR 1**

1. ... Do you know what they do in a situation like this?
2. They took out their cars to the street. I was surprised.

**Sayuri (female)**

[soo soo soo soo soo.]

< SEVERAL LINES OMITTED >

5. (H) The safest place is the street.
6. ... ( ) That's where it's safe.
7. ... nn so I thought there's no need to escape.
8. That's what I thought.
9. ... so.

**Yasumi (female)**

10. nn nn.
11. nn.
12. nn.
13. ... I see what you're saying.

---

**FLOOR 2**

14. Well, in our case, our house is rather old.
15. It was cold, right?
16. So we <@ inside a car <x (we're were) staying x> <x x> @> @@
17. < SEVERAL LINES OMITTED >
18. 24 (H) Yes, it was cold.
20. 29 FLOOR 3
21. 31 ... ( ) uhm so aftershocks<
22. ... so we turned on the radio.
23. everyone (was listening) car radios
24. 25 So we <@ inside a car <x (we're were) staying x> <x x> @> @@
27. 29 FLOOR 3
28. 30 ---
29. 31 ... ( ) uhm so aftershocks<
30. ... so we turned on the radio.
31. everyone (was listening) car radios
32. < FLOOR CONTINUES >
that was necessary since the safest place is the street in front of her apartment building. Notice that the sequence of the loop head naruhodo nee 'oh I see' (line 15) and the loop tail nn (line 16) succinctly transfers the floor holder. In the second floor (lines 17–28), Sayuri is a floor holder and explains that she moved out of the building and stayed in the car because it was cold outside. Yasumi's backchannel in line 27 was responded by Sayuri's loop tail which completes this round of loop sequence, thereby transferring floor to Yasumi again.

6.2. Prelude to floor transition

Some loop sequences are not immediately followed by floor holder shift, but initiate an exchange of turns as if it is a prelude to such a shift. In the excerpt below the loop-head is Akira's ha:: (line 11) and the loop-tail is Takashi's ee (line 12).

Excerpt 7 (JEQ #4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Akira (male)</th>
<th>Takashi (male)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floor 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;SEVERAL LINES PRECEDE&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ima mo .. tashika ni sono.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hibi:&lt;</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hokano apaato ni kurabete.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[aru kara.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a uchi no apaato tte chotto.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@@@koozoojoo mondai ga atta no</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kana to omotte.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... ee.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 ... hibi ga sugoi desu ka.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 [ha::</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 ... nanka chotto ko&lt;@wai@&gt;@@</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 ha:::</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 &lt;x soo x&gt;</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 .. sore wa chotto kowai desu nee.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 .. denwa toka wa.</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 nani?</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 .. daijoobu deshita ?</td>
<td>.(7) dame dat ... [ta dakede.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 22 [a zenzen. | 23 ...
| 23 ... zenzen tsunagarimasen. | 24 |
| <=ee. | 25 |
| Floor 2 |
| 25 e boku-n toko wa. | 26 |
| 26 mochiron chokugo ni wa | |

[


Now we have certainly 1
more cracks 2
compared to other apartment 3
buildings.

[we have many.
so (I thought) our building

@@@ had structural problems,
I wondered.

... ee.

The phone ... 20
for one day 21
didn’t work [that’s all.]
backchannel expression, Takashi responds with ee (the ‘loop-tail’), thereby turning Akira’s previous backchannel ha: : into a reactive expression rather than a continuer. Now the pressure to continue the conversation is on Akira, who repeats (or ‘recycles’) his earlier utterance (line 14) and proposes a new topic, i.e., the condition of the telephone (lines 15–17). Takashi’s response to this new topic is minimal (lines 18–21) and despite Akira’s renewed attempt in lines 22 and 23 to encourage Takashi to continue his floor, Takashi responds with a backchannel (line 24) and finally the floor transfers to Akira at line 25. Notice that this last exchange from 22 through 24 constitutes another loop sequence, since Akira’s utterances in lines 22/23 are a rephrasing of Takashi’s utterance in line 21 and therefore constitute a substantive backchannel.

For Takashi the current floor is terminated at his utterances 9 and 10 and the loop-tail is a way of signaling this new state of floor structure to Akira. Despite Akira’s effort to restore the structure of the floor (see next section), in which he is a supporter and Takashi the floor holder, this floor does not further develop. Maynard (1989: 157–158) notes that “at the point where a current theme of conversation comes to a close and participants have not yet identified the next theme” prolonged halting occurs, and during such a halting period, fillers, uninterpretable noises, laughter tokens, and metacommentary are found. The loop sequence is also found in this environment and gives time for participants to negotiate both the topic and the person who will develop the topic in the floor.

6.3. Floor reconstruction

There are times when a loop sequence seems to move the floor to a close despite the participants’ intentions. In this situation, the second round of loop sequence appears to restore the proper floor structure and allows the current floor holder to continue to develop the floor. This situation happens frequently when a backchannel expression takes the form of a phrase or substantive utterance. Observe Excerpt 8 below.

Excerpt 8 (JEQ #1)

**Akai (female)**

1 demo ano: ryoo ga anmari higai ga nakatta
2 to yuu-no wa sugoi desu [ne:*]
3 = mukashi no ta]temono to [yuu-no wa
4 yoku kangaete tsukutte aru-no ka ne:*][n:::*
5 (HH) are wa (HH) ... anmari ano: hoshoo
6 no nai tatemono na-n desu tte ne:*]
7 =atode kiitara.
8 [n:::*
9 a soo na-n desu ka:.
10 n:::*
11
12 .. de hokano ryoo wa nanka (HHH) ano:
The floor holder, Akai, is saying, “It was great that the dormitory building didn’t have much damage” (lines 1/2), and is pondering if “older buildings are well designed” (lines 4/5), and telling Tanaka, “(the dorm) didn’t have any guarantees (against earthquakes)” (lines 6–8). To this stretch of talk, Tanaka responds with a phrasal backchannel a soo na-n desu ka: “oh, is that right?” As discussed earlier, a phrasal backchannel like this one often solicits a response as a first pair-part, and indeed Akai responds with n:: in line 10. This backchannel assigns the slot of speakerhood for Tanaka, and Tanaka could have taken this opportunity to start a new floor, but he opts not to take it and instead returns the floor to Akai. Notice that the loop is cyclically applied. That is, in the first cycle, Akai responds to Tanaka’s phrasal backchannel, i.e., the loop-head (line 9), with a non-lexical backchannel, the loop-tail (line 10). And to this backchannel which is now treated as the loop-head, Tanaka produces the loop-tail n::: (line 11). The loop sequence appearing in this type of situation clearly shows mutual floor negation by the two participants.

The excerpt on the next page contains a substantive backchannel. In this segment, Takashi is the floor holder in his single person floor. In lines 1 through 14, he explains that due to gas and water leaks in his apartment building he could not live normally for one week after the quake. Akira sends his backchannel in line 8 which is reacted to by Takashi’s ‘back-back channel’ (line 9). Notice this sequence could have developed into a loop sequences, but Takashi instead follows up with his own utterance.7 This shows clearly that treatment of backchannel is determined each time by the participants, and it is up to them whether or not they develop a loop sequence.

7 Though there is a pause between ee (line 9) and chitto koo ‘a little’ (line 10), it is a normal length pause between two intonation units as indicated by three dots (approximately 0.3 seconds). I thus interpreted that Takashi continues to talk without a break. If the pause were more significant in length, Takashi would be responding to a ‘null-loop-head’ as discussed immediately below.
Excerpt 9 (JEQ #4)

**Akira (male)**

5 ee.

8 aa hontoni.

12 [ee.

13 [[a:::.

14 tsu< tsujoo no are ga okurenai: :

16 ... jookyoo datta.. -n desu ne.

18 n:::

21 a::::::::.

23 [soo yuu no ookii desu yo ][ne.

26 [<xx>

27 [[ee

29 tashikani.

English translation of Excerpt 9

**Akira (male)**

I really

especially

... at our apartment building

gas

5 ee.

8 oh really.

**Takashi (male)**

... boku mo honto

tokuni

... uchi no apaato.

gasu ga.

... morete.

suido morete.

ee.

... chitto koo.

i<

... jishin kara isshuukan gurai [koo:

... seekatsu dekiru: .. ][jootai

janakatta-n desu yo.

are de nanka seekatsu no peesu o

midasasrete.

... de mo[o nanka.

[[ee.

torimodosu no ni::,

... [n dondon tamachaimasu yo

[[ne.

shukudai nante.

... ee.

are de moo.

...(9) n nanka koo.

torimodosenakute.

... leaked and

water leaked and

ee

... a little

one<

... one week after the quake, [like,
To continue to examine Excerpt 6, to the last statement made in lines 12–14, Akira makes a substantive backchannel by summarizing what Takashi has just explained (lines 15/16). To this backchannel, Takashi responds with a back-back channel, ee. Now the floor is open for Akira to develop, but he produces a loop-tail to return the floor to talk to the current floor holder. After the loop sequence here, Takashi continues to develop the floor.

The loop sequence can be constructed with null loop-head/loop-tail as well. In Excerpt 10 the non-floor holder does not take up the invitation to claim the floor created by the loop-tail. When Akai’s loop-head (line 4) is responded to with Tanaka’s loop-tail in line 5, Akai does not respond, thereby producing a noticeable lapse of 1.2 seconds (line 6). Lapse in this environment may be heard as Akai’s intention to pass the turn, i.e., as a null-loop-tail. Tanaka pushes Akai one more time by producing another non-lexical backchannel, which meets with another non-response (a 0.7 second lapse as a null-loop-tail) from Akai. Tanaka finally resumes his talk. Even though there was no actual floor holder shift in these cases, the loop sequence’s force of moving the conversation towards that direction is obvious. In other words participants show their sensitivity towards their interaction with the loop sequence.

6.4. The loop sequence in the open floor

The loop sequence examined in the previous three sections appear in a single person floor where one floor holder is identifiable. The loop sequence to be examined in this section appears in the open floor, which is constructed by both participants collaboratively. While the topic in a single person floor is generally accessible only to the floor holder, the topic in an open floor is shared or sharable among the par-
Excerpt 10 (JEQ #1)

**Akai (female)**

1. dare ni kaku-n desu ka?
2. 
3. 
4. a:::::::
5. 
6. ... (1.2)
7. 
8. ... (0.7)
9.  
10. 
11. [n:::.]
12. 
13. n::::::.
14. 

**Tanaka (male)**

1. daigaku-n toki no tomodachi ga ooi desu yo.
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
7. 
8. 
9. daigaku-n toki no tomodachi: .. n::::::. ga:
10. hotondo de kookoo no toki no
11. tomodachi ga ikunin ka de roonin [toki
12. no tomodachi ga ikunin ka,
13. 
14. tsk sono kurai desu yo ne:*  

English translation of Excerpt 10

**Akai (female)**

1. Who do you write to?
2. 
3. 
4. a:::::::
5. 
6. ... (1.2)
7. 
8. ... (0.7)
9.  
10. 
11. [n:::.]
12. 
13. n::::::.
14. 

**Tanaka (male)**

1. Mainly to the old friends from college.
2. 
3. 
4. nn.
5. 
6. n::::::.
7. 
8. n::::::.
9. Friends from college .. n::::::. are
10. the majority and the friends from high
11. school are
12. several and the friends from the [time of
13. prep school are a few.
14. 

tsk that’s about it.

Participants. Such topics in our earthquake conversation data include: a general description of Americans’ emotional reaction to the earthquake, people’s general attitude towards disasters, a description of the dorm both participants are familiar with, dorm residents’ reactions reported in the student newspaper, earthquake damage to the area known to both participants, earthquake prone areas in Japan, time of the earthquake (early morning), news of the quake reported in Japan, social and natural problems in Los Angeles, emotional aftermath of the quake, people in the hard hit areas, damage to buildings on campus, and so forth. Some loops appearing in the open floor are used to negotiate floor structure as has been observed, but some others are used to co-develop a topic. Observe the next excerpt, in which two loops are found.
EXCERPT 11 (JEQ 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Floor 1 (open floor)</th>
<th>Floor 1 (open floor)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asada (female)</td>
<td>Hashimoto (male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 [ anmari:,</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 soo desu nee.</td>
<td>10 = demo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 = demo.</td>
<td>11 (H) ano. hokkaidoo no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 .. chuushinbu toka ni wa anmari nai</td>
<td>12 .. chuushinbu toka ni wa anmari nai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 deshoo?</td>
<td>13 deshoo?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 .. kitto.</td>
<td>14 .. kitto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 &lt;= [ kiita koto [[ nai desu yo nee?:</td>
<td>16 &lt;= [ kiita koto [[ nai desu yo nee?:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 ano kushiro toka. aa yuu:;</td>
<td>17 ano kushiro toka. aa yuu:;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

< SEVERAL LINES OMITTED>

19 (H) oosaka wa amari jishin nai tokcro desu yo nee? 20 [[ kihontekini. 21 [[ nn. 22 (H) de atashi wa: 23 ..(0.5) aru-n desu kedo:* 24 .. anoo. 25 .. nanteiundaroo.  

< FLOOR CONTINUES>

English translation of Excerpt 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Floor 1 (open floor)</th>
<th>Floor 1 (open floor)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asada (female)</td>
<td>Hashimoto (male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 [ not really,</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hokkaido

often

not really

Izu uhm<

would be hit, I thought, but
That’s right.

Hokkaido was
hit unexpectedly

but,

(H) uhm Hokkaido’s
... central region is not hit often,
right?
... probably.

<= [ Never heard, [ right?

For example, Kushiro and

<= ee ee.

<= (H) Osaka is not an earthquake prone
area, right?

[I in general.

Floor 2

(H) and I
...(0.5) have an experience
... uhm
... how shall I explain?

< FLOOR CONTINUES >

In the first floor of the above excerpt, the participants talk about earthquake prone areas in Japan. Hashimoto begins this open floor by mentioning Hokkaido as the place of the recent earthquake in Japan. The first loop sequence (lines 8-9) shifts the speakerhood to Asada. This is a familiar type of exchange except that strictly speaking this speakerhood change is not a floor holder shift because the both participants in an open floor are floor holder and supporter simultaneously. Of special interest is the second loop sequence in the excerpt (lines 15-18). This sequence consists of two loop cycles. The first loop-head is a substantive backchannel (line 15) and its substantive backchannel loop-tail recycles the loop-head (line 16 by Asada). This loop-tail is treated as the loop-head for the second round by Hashimoto’s second nn in line 16. All these activities happen very rapidly as indicated by overlaps, creating a lively impression of the interaction as if the two participants are becoming one floor creator psychologically as well as temporally. This type of loop sequence encourages the other to contribute to the topic under joint development. Although the impressions received from this type of loop sequence in an open floor and the other more canonical ones are different, the motivation is the same, namely, to encourage the other to contribute to the floor.
7. Discussion

The loop sequence, an exchange of backchannel and back-backchannel, exploits the local turn-taking system which allocates the next speaker in conversation. Treating this phenomenon simply as a local turn-taking management system, however, does not answer the question of why there are so many loops employed in Japanese conversation (78 instances found in the current data). To approach this question, we must broaden our perspective from the local level of turn-taking to the level of floor. As seen in the previous sections, within the organization of floor the loop is used primarily to allocate, not simply the next turn holder, but the appropriate person who should hold the floor. More importantly, we should note the significance of the loop sequence as a device which provides an opportunity for participants to negotiate the floor structure, rather than that which deals with the actual floor holder shift itself. This type of floor negotiation is, of course, not an exclusive phenomenon of Japanese conversation, as the phenomenon of 'terminal exchanges' in English conversation (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973) seems to address similar interactional needs. The frequency with which the loop sequence appears in Japanese conversation, however, demonstrates its particular significance for its participants. This assessment is supported by the fact that occurrences of loop sequence are very infrequent in comparable Thai and American English data. In the Northridge Earthquake Conversation

---

8 The next is an example of 'terminal exchanges' cited in Schegloff and Sacks (1973: 318). After B offers a summary of the previous talk ('topic-bound technique', 1973: 306) in lines 1 through 3, C sends a series of backchannel expressions ('Hmh' and 'Ehyeah'), to which B in turn responds with his 'Yeah' in line 6. A place is offered for C to propose a new topic to develop. Instead of proposing a topic, C produces another backchannel 'Yeah', which allows B to continue. At this point B produces a closing remark ('Alright. Well I'll give you a call before we decide to come down. O.K.'), which is followed by exchanges of short turns to lead to the final ending. In the terminal exchanges participants are checking each other to determine whether the conversation should be pursued or dropped.

Excerpt A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Well that's why I said &quot;I'm not gonna say anything, I'm not making any comments //</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 about anybody&quot;</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hmh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ehyeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Alright. Well I'll give you a call before we decide to come down. O.K.?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Alrighty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>We'll see you then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Bye bye</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Project Data there were only ten instances found in the four English conversations and only two instances in the four Thai conversations, compared to 78 loop sequences found in the four Japanese earthquake conversations.\textsuperscript{9}

I propose that the frequent use of the loop sequence is a consequence of the Japanese conversationalist’s preference towards ‘mutual dependency’, a concept held to be important in Japanese interaction. Terms such as \textit{omoiyari} ‘empathy’, \textit{amae} ‘dependency’, \textit{enryo} ‘self restraint’, and \textit{wa} ‘harmony’ which are often used to describe characteristic Japanese behaviors (inter alia Nakane, 1970; Doi, 1971; Lebra, 1976; Reischauer, 1977; Matsumoto, 1988; Wierzbicka, 1991) all point to the value for ‘mutual dependency’, which contrasts sharply with the value for ‘independence’ and ‘individualism’ found in some other cultures. Thus when two or more people meet in the Japanese context, they try to psychologically depend on each other by understanding the other’s feeling (\textit{omoiyari}), restricting one’s actions to avoid encroaching on others (\textit{enryo}), relying on the other’s reciprocal kindness (\textit{amae}), and keeping a harmonious atmosphere as a group (\textit{wa}).

In actual conversation, the working of mutual dependency can be observed in different dimensions. First, since conflict must be avoided to preserve mutual dependency, participants in Japanese discussion sessions, for example, often pre-arrange the order of talk to avoid possible conflicts in interaction before they set out to discuss the items on the agenda (Watanabe, 1993); they also use a long pause to avoid premature topic closure before moving on to a new item for discussion in business meetings (Yamada, 1992: 81–83). Second, to sustain mutual dependency, ‘empathy’ must be valued. Lebra (1976) notes “(empathy) is manifested in the conventional form of communication where Ego tries not to assert himself unless Alter is found to agree with him”. As specific cues to contextualize this concern, she mentions conversationalists’ behaviors such as leaving out the predicate from a sentence, soliciting agreement from a listener with a pragmatic particle \textit{ne}, and signaling with backchannels to indicate one’s attention to the communication process (see also Hinds, 1978: 107–116; Maynard, 1989: 219–220).

An important thing to note here is that mutual dependency is a cultural specific norm which escapes the universal politeness principle of Brown and Levinson (1987). Matsumoto (1988: 410) explains that mutual dependency is established and preserved by behaviors of “acknowledgment of interdependence”. As Matsumoto (1988) demonstrates, acknowledgment of interdependence is epitomized in a greeting expression of the initial encounter, \textit{doozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu} ‘I ask you please treat me well’. Taken superficially, this expression is a direct request, and thus an imposition on the addressee because it violates negative politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The reason why this expression is not considered to be a face threatening, non-polite expression is because the members of the Japanese culture understand that acknowledging one’s position vis-à-vis his interlocutor is a culturally encouraged pattern of behavior. The above greeting expression, on the one hand,

\textsuperscript{9} The bases (data) of frequency comparison is rarely comparable. The Northridge Earthquake Conversation Project Data has remedied this difficulty since all the data were collected uniformly (cf. Schegloff, 1993).
reveals the utterer's helpless and submissive position, and on the other, it acknowledges his addressee's powerful, higher, or privileged position that could render a help and protection. Being regarded by others as having such a celebrated position is a positive experience, not an imposition.

The loop sequence which transfers speakerhood creates exactly the same effect as the greeting expression in question. The producer of the loop-tail reveals his helpless and submissive position (“I cannot contribute to the floor now. Help me out.”) and at the same time his trust in, or dependency (or amae) on, the other who he believes can provide a help. In other words, a loop-tail has the same functional significance as the greeting of *doozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu*. The recipient of the loop-tail may either take up his responsibility and become the floor holder, or he may show his own helpless stance and counters the other’s loop-tail with his own loop-tail. That is, taking a floor in conversation is sometimes more of an obligation that a more powerful party must fulfill at a given moment in interaction rather than a right that he is entitled to (“we share the floor and the interaction, and we also share the burden of having to talk” (Yamada, 1992: 83)). Similarly when a loop sequence appears in an involved open floor, the producer of the loop-tail may show his strong dependency (amae) on his interlocutor, trusting that the interlocutor will exhibit alignment with his stance, thereby creating psychological unity and ‘common ground’ (see Strauss and Kawanishi, 1996, for this notion; see also Akatsuka to appear). This explanation will also clarify why there were much fewer loop-sequences in Thai and American English earthquake data. In the Thai and American cultures, a norm of independence and individualism figure more prominently than mutual dependency (Horie and Iwasaki, 1995).

The loop employed to reconstruct the floor structure has a slightly different motivation, but still shows the loop-tail producer’s weaker position and his request for assistance. This type of loop appears when the violation to the current floor structure and a threat to mutual dependency are noticed by the offender. Causing a threat to the mutual dependency puts him in a weaker position in Japanese cultural setting so the offender immediately remedies this problem. In order to regain the equilibrium of mutual dependency he appeals to the other to continue his floor (“Please forgive my intrusion and continue”). In summary, all types of loop sequence exhibit loop-tail producer’s concern towards mutual dependency by acknowledging his weaker (lower) position and his interlocutor’s stronger (higher) position.

Let us pose a question at this point regarding the relationship between the two notions of floor, namely the ‘conceptual floor’ and ‘unit-floor’, as explained in Section 3. In the preceding discussion, the loop sequence has been examined as an interactional behavior within a unit-floor which contextualizes a culturally significant principle of mutual dependency. This means that the unit-floor is sensitive to cultural norms, and as such it is closely related to the conceptual floor. When entering into an interaction, participants immediately evoke a culturally specific conceptual floor so that they can construct unit-floors which regulate appropriate behavior and transmit or receive information effectively. The conceptual floor is thus similar to the ‘frame’ as a concept which provides participants with the ground for action and interpretation (see Tannen, 1993), especially at the initial phase of interaction. How-
ever, the conceptual floor is self-renewing as Hayashi (1996: 34) notes: "(conceptual floor is) self-productive and self-operative, dynamically building up new structures while providing new situational knowledge".

In sum, throughout their interaction Japanese participants continually form and reform the conceptual floor which guides their behavior toward each other. In particular, the conceptual floor encourages Japanese interactants to employ loop sequences which contextualize, and signal to each other their understanding of, the culturally important notion of mutual dependency.

8. Conclusion

I have examined the loop sequence, a behavioral pattern often exhibited by Japanese conversational participants, in a framework of functional analysis of conversation which examines a conversational activity as a meaningful communication process. Thus the loop sequence whose structural property can be explained by Sacks et al.'s (1974) model of local turn-taking rules was investigated for its functional aspect in the conversational floor. The current research has clarified that the 'conceptual floor', a culturally defined abstract construct, leads interactants to proper behavior and facilitates information exchanges within a 'unit-floor'. In particular, the cultural notion of mutual dependency leads Japanese conversationalists to an interactional behavior of the loop sequence in negotiation of the next appropriate floor holder. The loop-tail simultaneously encodes its producer's powerless position (either because he has nothing to say or he blindly trusts his interlocutor to agree with him or because he has just violated the code of mutual dependency) and his interlocutor's assured ability to rescue the situation.

"(S)peaking ... shows cultural patterning" (Hymes, 1974: 446) and both the content and the pattern found in various speech activities are constrained culturally (Gumperz, 1982: 166) because conversation is a fundamental socio-cultural activity in which people engage throughout their daily lives. Our survey of loop sequences has provided evidence that Japanese speakers constantly breathe life into an abstract notion such as mutual dependency in real conversational activity. It is through this and other similar activities that the notion of mutual dependency will continue to be regarded as an important concept affecting the ethos of Japanese communication and culture.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

The transcript is presented in a two-column format (see Ochs, 1979). English translations provided should be taken as a 'rough' semantic approximation of corresponding intonation unit in Japanese. It should be noted especially that overlapping materials shown in English translation do not always reflect exact morphemes in overlap in the Japanese original due to structural dissimilarities between the two languages. Non-lexical backchannel expressions (e.g., nn, ee, hai) are not 'translated' into English. Punctuation symbols in English translation are used for syntactic information not for prosodic information (see 2 below.)
1. Intonation Unit: Each line corresponds to one intonation unit (see Du Bois et al., 1992, 1993; Iwasaki, 1993). When one intonation unit is too long for one line, it is broken into separate lines with the second line indented.

2. Tail pitch movements: Each intonation unit is concluded by one of several pitch movements (see Nagahara and Iwasaki, 1995).

Three major movements:
- Period (.) = a natural falling intonation contour
- Question mark (?) = a rising contour with various degrees of rising
- Asterisk (*) = a rise-fall contour

Two minor movements:
- Comma (,) = continuing contour
- Greater than sign (<) = sudden cut off with a glottal stop

3. Pause length: Three different lengths are identified.
- Short break in timing
- A short pause (about 0.3-0.4 seconds)
- A longer pause (longer than 0.5 seconds); the actual length of a pause is indicated when it is significant (e.g., ... (0.7))

4. Overlap: The beginning of an overlap is indicated by a square bracket (\[\]). Overlapping and overlapped materials are found on the same, or adjacent, line across two columns. Where there are several overlaps in a short span of time, a double square bracket (\[[\]) is also employed to avoid confusion.

5. Vowel lengthening is indicated by colons (:).

6. Other symbols used in the transcripts are as follows:
- = latching to the previous utterance by the same speaker
- @ latching to the previous utterance by a different speaker
- (H) inhalation
- (.H) exhalation
- <x words x> uncertain hearing
- ((explanation)) transcriber’s comment
- tsk a click of the tongue

References


