

## **Learning Through Listening Towards Advanced Japanese Proficiency**

by

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The CALPER Japanese project pursues the investigation and re-specification of advanced language proficiency, which is closely tied to the ability to participate in a broad range of social activities conducted in Japanese. While language use can be observed in various genres and modes of discourse, this project pays special attention to spontaneous face-to-face interaction, which serves as a fundamental arena for language learners to establish membership in a new speech community.

Despite the obvious importance of the ability to carry on different types of mundane and professional interactions required of an advanced language user, the systematic analysis of the language and accompanying multimodal resources (e.g., gaze, gesture, and manipulation of surrounding artifacts) that enable participants to engage in interaction has a rather short history. Today, linguistic analyses of de-contextualized sentences and educators' introspection concerning language use still hold major influence over the development of materials and procedures for instruction and assessment of Japanese language proficiency. Model dialogues presented in textbooks have typically been scripted and may not fully account for details of actual language use. Further, learners' oral proficiency has mostly been determined by their performance in interviews and role-plays and does not provide adequate data to judge their ability to function in real-life social activities.

On the ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines, for example, one of the aspects repeatedly emphasized in the descriptions of intermediate and advanced level proficiency is "the ability to narrate and describe in all major time frames (past, present and future) in paragraph length discourse." This privileging of narration or description might occur because they are easier to elicit in the interview test setting. Or to put it differently, in the interview setting, learners are treated as a legitimate, and perhaps the most important, participant in the interaction, thus being

guaranteed the opportunity to produce extended talk. In naturally occurring mundane conversations, however, the order of speaking turns and their length are contingently negotiated, and therefore it can be a challenge for second language learners to identify, or create, an opportunity to deliver a lengthy narration or description. Facing a rapid succession of turns among participants, a speaker cannot suddenly start telling a story; instead certain steps are required as an intended story teller negotiates with the other participants regarding their momentarily assumed roles of story-teller and story-recipient. Thus, it is actually an achievement just to be able to initiate a storytelling, and this is one feature of advanced language proficiency that has not been emphasized in traditional literature on Japanese language education.

Further, in conversations, one simple sentence or even a single word, as opposed to a narration, delivered in a suitable form, at a right time vis-à-vis the development of interaction so far, can be deemed as evidence of advanced language proficiency. Such a performance indicates the speaker's ability to conduct timely analysis of the prior speaker's emerging talk both in terms of its form and function. This ability to provide well-timed and relevant uptake is also critical for learners' active participation in social interactions, which will consequently promote their membership in the community where the interactions take place.

Through the close examination of video-recorded spontaneous interactions among first and second language speakers of Japanese, the Japanese project attempts to shed light on interactional practices that have been underrepresented in advanced language proficiency education and research. The examination is largely informed by interactional linguistics, a research paradigm established as an intersection of conversation analysis, functional linguistics, and linguistic anthropology over the last two decades. The goal of the CALPER Japanese project is twofold: 1) it investigates the relationship between grammar and interaction, or rather the grammar of interaction, the mastery of which appears to constitute a critical component of advanced language proficiency; and 2) it makes short video clips of spontaneous interaction and accompanying instructional ideas available to teachers and learners of Japanese. These materials are designed to be incorporated into classroom instruction to increase learners' exposure to this particular mode of language and to enhance their awareness of sociolinguistic and paralinguistic features that contribute to participants' meaning making processes and construction of identities.

### **Grammar and Interaction**

As mentioned above, "grammar" introduced in language textbooks and classrooms tends to consist of prescriptive rules developed through native speakers' introspective grammatical

judgment as to whether a particular sentence is “well-formed” or not. While grammar developed through this method has its own benefit to language instruction, this is not the only grammar that speakers of a language acquire as they develop their proficiency, and manipulate as they engage in social interaction. Even native speakers do not always produce “well-formed” sentences, and yet, participants in interaction do not necessarily treat such seemingly “ill-formed” sentences to be problematic and typically continue on with their business. In fact, what may be dismissed as “performance errors” by linguists who develop their theories based on introspective judgment is exactly what interactional linguists aspire to investigate. That is, interactional linguists consider grammar to be something that emerges and transforms out of necessities in interaction and therefore they explore recurrent patterns and organizations of interaction that shape linguistic forms.

### **Illustrations from the CALPER Japanese Project**

This mutual relationship between grammar and interaction investigated in the CALPER Japanese Project can be illustrated by the following two examples from recent studies: one that examines the realization of a Japanese cleft construction in establishing extended talk and the other that explores the use of the demonstrative pronoun *are* as a placeholder.

The first example concerns the Japanese cleft construction, [clause] *no wa* [clause] *koto da*, which is considered to be comparable to the English WH-cleft construction, *what* [clause] is that [clause]. Reference grammar explains that this construction is composed of the basic topic-comment structure, *X wa Y da* (‘X is Y’): a clause marked by the nominalizer *no* and the topic marker *wa* is followed by a clause marked by a nominalizer such as *koto* and the copula *da*, which constitutes the comment component. As we examine spontaneous interactions, however, we encounter many cases in which the *-no wa* topic clause is not followed by a corresponding comment component marked by a nominalizer, as shown in the excerpt below. In this interaction, Eri, Mari, and another male student who had just returned to Japan after one-year study abroad in the US were discussing their experiences. Eri’s talk about what surprised her in the US started out with the *-no wa* clause (line 1), but did not end with *koto da*. Instead the *-no wa* clause is followed by a self-addressed question (line 2) and an utterance marked by a tag-question like expression *jana::i* (line 3).

Excerpt (1) [JA1c]<sup>1</sup>

1 Eri: =soo i- suggoi saisho:: suggoi bikkurishita no wa:::, .hhh  
so real first real surprised NML TOP

2 nan daro, yonaka no juuniji toka niji toka made-  
what COP midnight LK 12-oclock or 2-oclock like until

3 toshokan oo- (0.3) oopu[nshiteru jana::i. .hhh=  
library open TAG

**“Right i- what really really surprised me first is::, .hhh what can I say, like until 12 o’clock midnight or 2 o’clock, libraries are o- (0.3) open, right?”**

4 Mari: [u:::n  
uh-huh

**“uh huh.”**

5 Eri: =nanka sore made minna sa::: ttoka itte isshookenmei  
like that until all MIM like say hard

6 benkyooshiteru tte yuu no wa sugoi naa:::to[ka omotta::=  
studying QT say NML TOP impressive FP like thought

**“like everyone is studying really hard until then, and I thought (that was) really impressive.”**

7 Mari: [u:::n.  
uh-huh

**“uh huh.”**

A possible ending of Eri’s talk appears to be marked by the approximate repetition of her beginning clause, namely *sugoi naa:::toka omotta* (‘I thought (that was) really impressive’) (line 6). Close examination of the sequential development of talk and the participants’ non-verbal conduct observed in this case and others similar to this reveal that the *-no wa* clause, particularly those that express the speaker’s thought or emotion (i.e., “surprise” in this case), tends to be used

<sup>1</sup> The videorecording of this segment is available on the CALPER Japanese web site, under the topic of “College Life in Japan and in the US.”

to project extended talk, in which the speaker can embed various clauses that set up background information necessary to express the thought or emotion (Mori, 2008, forthcoming (a)).

Thus, how extended talk (or a “paragraph”) in spontaneous interaction is quite different from how a paragraph in written texts is organized. A set of complete sentences connected with conjunctions and other cohesive devices is not necessarily the way in which extended talk is constructed (or rather co-constructed with the other participants) in a conversation. A speaker may produce clauses and phrases that may appear as “fragments” to secure the audience’s attention for the initiation of extended talk, or to respond to their verbal or nonverbal reactions to the unfolding talk once the extended talk is launched. Grammar in such unplanned discourse that involves immediate, and sometimes unpredictable, reactions from the other participants takes quite a different realization than might be found in carefully organized writing. Grammar in interaction, thus, can be, and should be, studied not only from the perspective of accuracy determined in isolation of contexts of use, but also from the perspective of its instantaneous execution in response to continuously changing local circumstances of interaction. Namely, grammar is an important resource, along with other non-verbal resources, for accomplishing storytelling as well as many other types of interactional moves. Such an understanding of grammar sharply contrasts with the traditional understanding of grammar in language classrooms.

The second example involves the distal demonstrative pronoun *are* used as a placeholder by the speaker encountering trouble producing or remembering a word in the midst of turn. It has been observed that this “grammatical practice” is performed only by first language speakers and second language speakers who have extensive experience in out-of-class social interactions conducted in Japanese (Mori, forthcoming (b)). The following interaction that took place among Neal, Hao (experienced second language speakers of Japanese), and Hao’s Japanese wife, Saki when preparing dinner together illustrates how this practice works. Hao’s turn that includes *are* (line 4) occurred right after Neal’s explanation of a Korean dish he was about to serve. As Neal’s explanation, primarily addressed to Saki, was winding down (line 1-3), Hao came in to claim his understanding of Neal’s explanation, despite the fact that he was not able to remember the key element of his turn, the name of a dish similar to what Neal prepared. He employed *are* to fill this missing slot in his turn, and conveyed that he was pointing out the proximity of the two dishes before he uttered typical expressions for initiating a word search, *a:no: nan da-* (‘uh:m what is it’).

Excerpt (2)

- 1 Neal: jitsuwa wakan nai kedo sore [kiita. ahahahaha  
*actually know NEG but that heard*  
**“Actually I don’t know but I heard so. ahahahaha.”**
- 2 Saki: [u::n  
uhhuh  
**“uh huh”**
- 3 Saki: °hu:[:n°  
hmm  
**“hmm”**
- 4 → Hao: [yoowa are to onaji da °yo.°  
*essentially that with same COP FP*  
**“Essentially it’s the same as are.”**
- 5 (0.6)
- 6 a:no: nan da-  
uhm what COP  
**“uh:m what is it”**
- 7 Saki: onabe desho nihon no.  
*hot.pot TAG Japan LK*  
**“hot pot, isn’t it? Japanese.”**
- 8 Hao: sss. so:: maa chu- chuukanabe demo onaji da mon na.  
*right well China.hot.pot also same COP NML FP*  
**“sss. Right. Well, chi- Chinese hot pot is the same way, too.”**

Indeed, Saki was able to figure out what Hao meant to say. If Hao had not said anything here just because he was not able to remember the word, the conversation might have shifted to a different topic and he might have missed an opportunity for demonstrating his understanding and regaining participation in the conversation.

This type of grammar is not usually introduced in classroom, and learners appear to acquire it through extensive exposure to, and participation in, Japanese speaking communities. More experienced second language speakers, like Hao, may employ this sort of grammatical practice to move forward with an intended action at an opportune moment despite the fact that they do not know or cannot remember a particular expression at that time. On the other hand,

less experienced speakers tend to cease speaking for a moment to initiate a word search, missing the opportunity to make a timely contribution.

In support of this type of research, the CALPER Japanese project continues to examine video-recorded conversations and interviews involving first and second language speakers to uncover how grammar is realized in these genres of discourse and how particular grammatical practices enable the speakers' active participation in social interactions and thus indicate their advanced language proficiency.

### **CALPER Japanese Project Pedagogical Resources**

Along with the research portion of this project discussed above, the CALPER Japanese project manages a web site that disseminates instructional resources that are developed from video-recorded interactions of first and second language speakers. Spoken discourse commonly introduced in classroom consists of scripted or planned speech such as dramas, TV or radio news, or taped lectures. For many learners studying outside of Japan, “naturally occurring interactions” that they are exposed to can be limited to classroom interactions with their instructors and peers, unless there is a large presence of Japanese expatriates in the community where they live. The materials provided through the CALPER web site serve to increase opportunities for these learners to experience language-in-action.

The materials currently available on the web site <http://calper.la.psu.edu/learningthroughlistening/index.php> are over sixty short video clips (1-5 minute in length) of interviews and conversations. These video clips are arranged according to topics of discussion (e.g., education, language learning, cross-cultural communication, college life, food culture, gender, home stay, etc.) so that they can be incorporated into the development of theme-based units, a common approach taken in intermediate and advanced level Japanese language courses offered in the US. The inclusion of varying genres of discourse discussing the same topic within a unit enables learners to study how different modes and genres of discourse affect the ways in which the language is produced and understood.

For those who have not yet participated in out-of-class interactions in Japanese and are used to listening to language that is scripted or controlled according to their level of proficiency, processing seemingly “fragmented” and yet rapidly progressing interaction can present a challenge. But in order to participate in real-life communication, this is a challenge that they need to overcome. In addition to skimming and scanning types of exercises that encourage learners to grasp the gist of talk, video clips make it possible to study interactions in details,

attending to the use of particular forms and styles of language, interactional moves, coordination of verbal and non-verbal behaviors and so on. Further, a wide range of speakers featured in these video clips, who represent different genders, generations, professions, or regional backgrounds, make it possible for learners to consider how the speakers' choice of particular language contribute to the creation of their images or identities.

Such close observation of verbal and non-verbal behaviors enhances learners' awareness and readiness to participate in out-of-class interactions and to reflect on their own behaviors. Finally, the instructor's manual provided on the web site explains how these materials can be incorporated in existing classroom instruction and each video clip is accompanied by a list of ideas for classroom activities.

## References

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## Transcription conventions

[	The point where overlapping talk starts
(0.0)	length of silence in tenths of a second
::	lengthened syllable
-	cut-off; self-interruption
=	"latched" utterances
?/./,	rising/falling/continuing intonation respectively
.hh	audible inbreath
◦ ◦	a passage of talk quieter than the surrounding talk

**Abbreviations used in the interlinear gloss**

COP	various forms of copula verb <i>be</i>	LK	nominal linking particle
FP	final particle	MIM	mimetic expression
NEG	negative	NML	nominalizer
QT	quotative particle	TAG	tag-like expression
TOP	topic particle		

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