

# Different Interpretations of Pauses in Natural Conversation ---Japanese, Chinese and Americans<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to clarify different interpretations of pauses by Japanese, Chinese and Americans and to see their different responses and reactions to pauses during natural conversations. Also this study is to see who pauses most during the conversation, how differently each person from different socio-cultural background responds and reacts to each other's pauses, and how differently they interpret each other's pauses. The data is taken from the three groups (Group A, B, and C). Each group consisted of two Americans and two Japanese, two Americans and two Japanese, two Chinese and two Japanese, respectively. In all data, the participants spoke in English. The general findings are: 1) Americans and Chinese/Japanese have different perspective on pauses. 2) Americans try to fill the gaps during the conversation and while only Americans are talking, few pauses are found. 3) Chinese and Japanese do not mind long pauses. These different perspectives of pauses caused uneasiness and discomfort during the conversation. Consequently, different perception of pauses will generally develop unsuccessful management of communication. The result will contribute to prevent this kind of misperception.

## 1 Introduction

Any communicative behaviors consist of both sound parts and silent parts and this paper focuses on silent part. The purpose of this study is to clarify different interpretations of pauses by Japanese, Chinese and Americans and to see their different responses and reactions to pauses during natural conversations. Also, this study is to see who pauses most during the conversation, how differently the three nationalities respond and react to each other's pauses, and how differently they interpret each other's pauses.

## 2. Overview of the study of silence

First, some of the previous researches are overviewed. Saville-Troike (1985:3) observes, within linguistics, silence has traditionally been ignored except for its boundary-marking function, delimiting the beginning and ending of utterances. The tradition has been to definite it negatively---as merely the absence of speech. Linguists have treated pause as a relatively neglect component of human communication. Pauses have been thought to be out of awareness phenomenon because absence of sound is regarded as absence of communication. Ethnomethodologists, who started conversational analysis from sociological perspective, also suggested that pause are a kind of violation in the conversation as well as interruption and overlapping.

On the contrary, psychologists have the longer history of interest in the subject of hesitation phenomena in speech and role of pause in patterns in interpersonal interaction. Anthropologists concern the identification of cultural similarities and differences and this has included some pioneering work on silence (Hall, 1970, Basso, 1970). For example, we have well known research of Athabaskan Indians which define their quietness as negative value from Western perspective.

Influenced by psychology, anthro-linguists and linguists, in the field of sociolinguistics and conversational analysis, gradually have had interest in studying pauses. If indirectness is a matter of saying

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Received on Sept.1,2005

one thing and meaning another, a pause can be also a matter of saying nothing and meaning something. Some researchers also have started their researches from the point of view of politeness phenomena. From the view of the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), silence is the extreme manifestation of indirectness, that is, off-record strategies or 'Do not do the FTA' strategy. In the field of ethnography of speaking and the study of intercultural communication, researchers have revealed that 'rules for interaction' and 'norms of interpretation' of pauses differ when the social and cultural backgrounds differ. From metapragmatic perspective, interpretations of a pause depend on listeners' social background. For example, Deborah Tannen (1984), through her analysis of conversational style of New Yorkers of East European Jewish background said that pauses can be understood as growing out of an effort to avoid silence. For speakers of this style has a negative value on the usage of a pause. In this paper, pauses are defined as duration without any speech, any minimal back channeling, any laughter and any sound.

### 3. Conversational Data<sup>2</sup>

The following is a list of the three cross-cultural groups who cooperated with talking in English for this project. Each group conversation was audio and video recorded approximately 30 minutes. Follow-up interviews were conducted immediately after the recordings for each participant.

**Group 1** Topic: The preparation of a welcome party for the group of foreign students who have just arrived to study in a Japanese university

Takehiro - Japanese student (male): TOEFL 570, no experience of staying abroad. English major.

Makiko - Japanese student (female): TOEFL 570, no experience of staying abroad. English major.

Blake - American student (male): just arrived to study in a Japanese university. Art major.

Amy - American student (female): just arrived to study in a Japanese university. Japanese major.

**Group 2** Topic: Cross-cultural experiences

Shingo - Japanese (male) 40's: Assistant professor of physical education, Non-English major.

Goro - Japanese (male) 40's: Assistant professor of mathematics, Non-English major.

Jack - American (male) 60's: School Teacher at a US Army Base in Japan. No Japanese ability.

Willis - American (male) 40's: Office Clerk at a US Army Base in Japan. Married to a Japanese woman. No Japanese ability.

**Group 3** Topic: Cross-cultural experiences

Lieu - Chinese (male) PhD student. Non-English major. No Japanese ability. Talks with his professor in English.

Song - Chinese (male) MA student, Non-English major. Japanese ability is very good.

Shingo - The same person as in Group 2

Goro - The same person as in Group 2

All participants excepting Shingo and Goro, who work at the same university, were meeting for the first time for the recording.

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Amount of talk

In order to see who talks most and who remains silent the most, the number of utterances and the number of words in an utterance are counted. Table (1) shows the amount of talk of each participant. Row 1 is the initials of participants. Row 2 shows the percentages of each participant's talk in each conversation. Since there are more than two participants, the disproportion among each participant can be anticipated. Row 3 shows the average number of words in one utterance by each participant.

In Group 2 and 3, Japanese participants Shingo and Goro are the same participants as mentioned above. So they are controlled participants in the data. When looking at the column of Group 2, it is clear that Japanese participants did not talk much. Shingo's number of utterances is the same as Jack. However, his utterances consist of five or six words. The number of words is clearly different between Americans and Japanese. American participants' number of words in one utterance is averaged about 30, whereas Japanese participants' number of words is less than one-thirds. But according to the number of utterance of Shingo and Goro in Group 3, it is almost the same. So it is said that Shingo and Goro did not participate differently in Group 2 and 3.

Suppose they are to participate in each conversation with the same attitude, we obtained very interesting comments from the Japanese participants, Shingo and Goro. They have contrastive feelings in each conversation. In Group 2, they had an uncomfortable feeling all through the conversation especially for the amount of talk. The followings are the comments from Shingo and Goro in Group 2.

We did not even have time to breaths.

We always had to concentrate on what the Americans were saying.

We must look for the place where to start talking and what to say.

All we could do was to follow what they said.

We've got very tired.

However, comments from Jack and Willis are;

The Japanese participants did not talk.

The Japanese didn't respond.

We will never become friends with them.

So all of them in this conversation felt discomfort through the conversation. Japanese participants, Shingo and Goro were under an extreme tension during the conversation since they felt to be forced to talk. In Japanese conversation, participants can usually remain silent, that is, remain to perform only listener's role. Opposite to that everyday experiences, being forced to talk is very difficult for the Japanese participants.

On the other hand, in Group 3, they enjoyed the conversation very much. They said that they enjoyed the conversation and they said there were no problems. Therefore, their behavior can be said to be accepted in Group 3 but not accepted in Group 2.

Table 1

|   | Group 1 |    |    |    | Group 2 |    |    |   | Group 3 |    |    |    |
|---|---------|----|----|----|---------|----|----|---|---------|----|----|----|
| 1 | B       | A  | T  | M  | C       | W  | S  | G | L       | S  | S  | G  |
| 2 | 22      | 19 | 39 | 19 | 23      | 45 | 23 | 9 | 33      | 17 | 38 | 12 |
|   | %       | %  | %  | %  | %       | %  | %  | % | %       | %  | %  | %  |
| 3 | 9       | 10 | 7  | 5  | 28      | 30 | 5  | 7 | 4       | 7  | 4  | 5  |

1 Participants' initial

2 Percentages of each participants' amount of talk

3 Average numbers of words in one utterance

Let us look some examples to see where such discomfort comes from. In example (1), Willis is asking Shingo and Goro 'Have you both been to the United States? Visiting or Working?'

(1) [Group 2]

Willis: Have you both been to the United States? Visiting or working?

Goro: (**Just shake his head right and left**)

&lt;Several turns are omitted&gt;

Shingo: yes, very open, very very open,

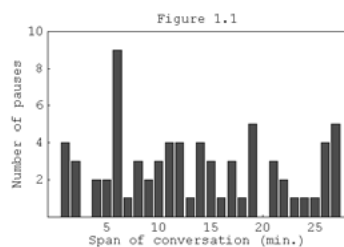
**(Pause: Willis staring at Goro, who does not seem to realize that he was given a turn)**

Willis: so, how did you...what... how did you learn English, or what makes you want to learn English, why? Did you learn English or want to learn to be able to speak...

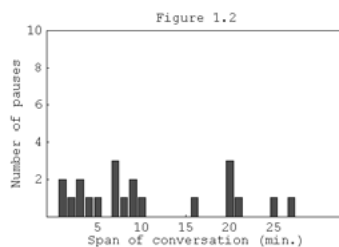
As shown in (1), just after his question, Goro shook his head very slightly from right to left, showing "no." This is all of Goro's response to this question. His head movement is too slight so we are not sure Willis saw it or not. Then Shingo started to talk his experience in UCLA and talk exchanges between Shingo and Willis continued for one minute (This part is omitted in (1)). After several exchanges, Willis expected Goro to start to talk and 'stared' Goro for five seconds to give a chance to start talking. But Goro did not respond to it even without eye-contact because he thought he had already finished his answer with his head movements.

#### 4.2 Distribution of Pauses

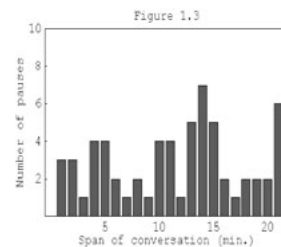
The following figures<sup>3</sup> show the number of pauses during each conversation.



Group 1



Group 2



Group 3

Horizontal lines show the span of conversation. They are divided by one minute scale. Vertical lines show the total length of pauses in each minute. In Group 1, first, they started from introduction so there are no pauses. In the duration of 4<sup>th</sup> minute and the duration of 20<sup>th</sup> minute only Amy and Blake spoke. Group

1 is a task-based conversation, so it shows different participant organization from Group 2 and 3. But we could see while two American talked, there were fewer pauses.

In Group 2, as shown before in the table (1), Jack and Willis were the main speakers. During the conversation, Japanese were surprised at their non-stop talking. For the first eight-minute, four of them introduced each other. After that, Jack and Willis started to talk very rapidly about their experiences. Although it was very natural conversation for American, it sounded too fast for Japanese to find a pause to talk. So the Japanese participants did not find a gap where they could talk. As a result, they remained quiet while Americans were talking. At last, Shingo found a short pause at 16<sup>th</sup> minute and eventually he made some comments. However, the topic finished one and a half-minute ago. So Americans found his comment very odd. Japanese felt the behavior of Americans was disgusting because they seemed to ignore Japanese participants. In Group 3, pauses constantly appeared several times and Chinese and Japanese participants have almost the same conversational style so they did not find the conversation uncomfortable. Comparing Group 1, 2 and 3, combinations of participants from different background showed different patterns.

### 4.3 Reactions to Pauses

Let us focus on Group 2 and 3, because they are controlled. The following figures show that who started after each pause. The left part of each graph is the frequencies of non-Japanese participants started after a pause and right part is the frequencies of Japanese participants did. Vertical line in each figure shows the length of a pause. Therefore, we can see who started after a certain length of pause. Figure 2.1 and 2.2 show that Japanese did not start even after the longer pauses.

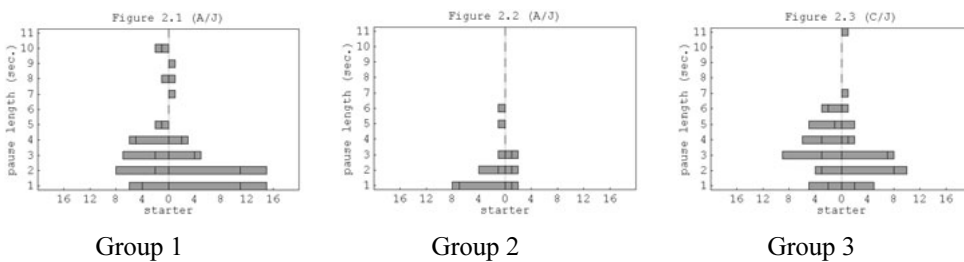


Figure 2.3 shows that Chinese and Japanese graphs look similar. It may be said that Japanese and Chinese share their conversational style and they are more patient for longer pauses. These two data tell us American participants' expectation of pauses and Japanese and Chinese participants' expectation of pauses are clearly different.

### 4.4 The meaning of Pauses

Then we would like to know what the meanings of pauses. In (2), while talking with Americans, Shingo did not expect machinegun questions, since skiing is definitely snow skiing in Japan. When Shingo tried to understand Willis's question, Willis asked the question again and again. Shingo felt being interrupted. Even Goro helped Shingo with saying 'water skiing' in a little soft voice, Shingo was in panic and did not hear it.

(2) [Group 2]

Willis: What sport do you like best?

Shingo: Oh, my, my con my I like sports and um...cro...cro ski, skiing.

Willis: Oh, skiing? I like skiing. Water skiing? Snow skiing?

Shingo: Hah?

Willis: Snow ski?

Shingo: Snow...

Willis: Water ski?

Shingo: Ha?

Willis: Water skiing.

Goro: Water skiing.

Shingo: Wa, Wata ski? (Wata means cotton in Japanese.)

Willis: Yeah, same thing as it's on snow, but it's on water.

In (3), Song was telling that skating is a required class in Harbin where he comes from. However, other participants could not understand it. This questioning-pause-answering-pause-questioning-pause pattern repeated for four and a half minutes before they found out what Song wanted to say.

(3) [Group 3] /=a brief pause [ ] inaudible

Shingo: In (-) in Harbin err are there ski area/ In Harbin

Liu: Yes, [yes]

Shingo: [ski area/

Song: I can't ski ((people laugh))

Song: But er er I can ske [skate]

Shingo [ah skate] ah

**((pause))**

Liu: I was in college, I can skate((pause; speaker thinking)) sports(u) er in ((pause; speaker thinking)) cold winter. (--) er have to skate. Its students, it's students shop (choir?)

**((pause; people don't understand))**

Shingo: ((chuckling)) I don't sorry I don't under understand

**((pause))**

Goro: Do native people in Harbin skate from when they are children skate and from home to school

Song: Er I means skate(u) is like **((pause))** er for students is like English mathematic

**((quiet laugh))**

**((pause, others trying to understand and guessing what C2 means))**

What was happening during the pause is that all participants were seeking the meaning of what Song was saying without clarification question. In about five minutes, they dared to ask questions at last. During the following-up interview session, Japanese participants said changing topic and asking question are very rude behavior so they did not. Long pauses are not rude to some extent. This norm is thought to be shared by Japanese and Chinese so Japanese and Chinese pleasantly went on their talk without uneasiness. Asking question is ruder.

## 5 Discussions and conclusion

It is confirmed that for American participants' pauses are just durations of an empty message. It is one of the violations of conversation as well as interruption and overlapping. So they try to avoid it. And they also think any pause is not acceptable in conversation. On the contrary, Chinese and Japanese would have similar perspective on pauses. They also feel uncomfortable with very long pauses. However, they can accept even more than a 5 seconds pause. A pause is not a breakdown of communication for Chinese and Japanese. During a pause, some participant might seek answers, try to interpret what other interlocutors say, and try to think about new topic, to consider other participants, so they are occupied doing some activity.

Although this is the preliminary findings, from metapragmatic perspective, if interlocutors find an unexpected pause, they seek a metamessage. But such metamessages usually tend to be bad images of other participants. So far, most of the researches have found the cultural/social differences. This paper suggests that we should see how the participants find the way to mitigate such norms in inter-cultural communications.

### Notes:

1 This paper is based on the presentation 'Different interpretations of pauses, Japanese, Chinese, and Americans' in the panel titled 'Discoursal Problems in Cross-Cultural Conversations (Organizer Motoko Hori) in 9th International Pragmatics Conference, Riva del Garda, Italy, 10-15 July 2005.

2 Part of this research is funded by the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research, Category C. No. 15520379 in 2003 and 2004. Participants' names are assumed name. I must appreciate the participants who joined the video shooting.

3 I appreciate Yoshiaki Ueno who helped me with these figures. He also supported our research.

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