

How questions facilitate first-encounter conversations in an intercultural setting: A case study of English and Japanese speakers who have different perspective on questions

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Abstract This study focuses on question-answer sequences in first conversations between new people in an intercultural setting. The goal of the first-time meetings with new people usually is to get to know each other, with participants trying to get information from other participants. At the same time, participants are often more polite than usual to the other participants since they are trying to make a good first impression in order to build new relationships. In addition, participants may perform according to norms of their socio-cultural background.

The videotaped data analyzed for this presentation are conversations between English speakers and Japanese speakers. The participants were all male. Two of the data collected were conversations conducted in English; the other two were conducted in Japanese.

The analysis of these conversations focuses on question-answer sequences in order to evaluate how certain sequences facilitate conversation in an intercultural setting. Following the recording of the conversations, participants were interviewed about their experience. The results of these interviews show that native English speakers and native Japanese speakers have differing perspectives on how to ask questions in a first-conversation setting. English speakers ask questions because they want to show their competence and intelligence, and they believe that the goal of conversation is to acquire new information and knowledge. On the other hand, Japanese speakers try not to ask questions. Some believe that asking questions is not polite behavior and that some people do not like to be questioned. In fact, some of the participants did say that they do not like to be questioned.

The data revealed that these different perspectives created an awkward atmosphere in the encounters. For example, during thirty minutes of recorded conversation of a first-time meeting, the American participant asked 120 questions while the Japanese participant asked only 18, often just to clarify words he missed. This reluctance to ask questions had the effect of irritating some of the native English speakers. The Japanese, on the other hand, often did not like the way the English speakers asked questions.

This study compares conversational data to see which encounters had a relatively good atmosphere and which had a relatively bad atmosphere in an effort to ascertain what key elements lead to effective first-encounter conversations in intercultural settings.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss discourse design in the conversation of unacquainted people in intercultural first-encounters. The research focuses on question-answer sequences and consists of two parts. First, I will examine the results of the follow-up interview. These interviews show that native English speakers and native Japanese speakers have differing perspectives on conversational behavior. Then, through the conversational data, I will show how these different perspectives emerge in intercultural conversations, affecting the flow of conversation.

As this research concerns first-encounter conversation, it is important to think about what we do when meeting someone for the first time. Often, the goal of a first-time meeting is to get to know someone new. Participants in these conversations try to make a good first impression, since, in the real world, a conversational situation may be the starting point of a new relationship with others. These people may be our co-workers, neighbors, business partners, classmates, life-long friends or partners, and so on.

In order to get to know each other, participants want to know who their fellow participants are. To do this, people must not only ask questions of their conversational partners, but they must also disclose information about themselves. Their affiliations, their backgrounds, and their favorite things are all important topics of conversation in first-time meetings. In asking and answering these questions, participants try to figure out whether or not they can get along with a new person.

Therefore, participants try to make a good impression on those with whom they are unacquainted. They will be cooperative and polite. If it is a conversation between strangers, the negative politeness of face work will be employed. This conversational behavior might be universal except for the fact that participants are often unconsciously controlled

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by norms of behavior embedded in their socio-cultural backgrounds.

2. Previous studies

This paper is a genre analysis of first-encounter meetings in intercultural settings (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984; Nao, 2015; FitzGerald 2003). FitzGerald (2003) argues that if someone behaves in an unexpected manner, people like to know what accounts for that behavior and that, sometimes, unusual behavior causes people to decide they cannot trust the other person. In the question-answer sequences, the question's role is to reveal information about the new person. Question and answer (Stivers & Enfield, 2010; Tsui, 1999) consisting adjacency pairs. We select forms and functions to ask new information. Participants' levels of knowledge are different. Almost zero about the unacquainted participants (Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

The research questions of this paper are follows:

RQ1: Do people from different socio-cultural backgrounds have different perspectives on the first-encounter conversations?

RQ2: If these perspectives are different, how do they affect conversations in an intercultural setting?

3. Research method

This paper consists of two parts: interviews and discourse analysis.

Interviews and conversations were recorded on video tapes and IC recorders. The recordings were transcribed for the analysis. The interviews are comprised of the responses from 51 native English speakers (25 British participants, 11 American participants, 15 Australian participants) and 25 native Japanese speakers. All interviewees participated in our video recording sessions, held for our research of discourse analysis. After each video recording, we conducted follow-up interviews, talking to each participant separately. Each interview lasted approximately five minutes; however, this varied due to the spontaneity of the interview process. All of the interviewers were female researchers and were the same researchers who videoed the first-encounter conversations (Shigemitsu, 2015).

The analysis looks at two conversations between Japanese people and American people, selected from our eighty recorded conversations. Both of the selected conversations were held in English, and neither were successful conversations when compared to the other conversations. The analysis focuses on what went wrong in these conversations.

Participant pairs were instructed as follows: You are at a casual party at your friend's house. You happen to be sitting next to each other. You are meeting these guests for the first time. During the conversation, your common friend leaves to talk to another guest, so you have to carry on a conversation for the next thirty minutes.

The participants in this research study were recruited through an Oxford University mailing list. Some participants were also residents of Manchester, England and London, England, and some were students at the University of Texas and Sydney University. All participants were males, age twenty-two and above. All participants and interviewers agreed to the release of their recordings and interviews. Participants had no previous contact with each other. We examined only males to eliminate gender variables in the research results.

4. Result of the interviews

Interviewers focused their questions on participant's impressions of the conversation, which was held just prior to the interview. Some of the interviewees then elaborated on their answers, analyzing their conversations. Interviewees were asked some general questions, such as what they keep in mind when they are part of a first-encounter conversation. Interviewees were also asked to describe their idea of good and bad conversations.

When answering these questions, Native English speakers stated that "talk distribution should be the same" (27%) and "they try to ask questions" (8%). On the contrary, Japanese participants said that "they try to be a good listeners" (28%), "they try not to ask questions" (16%), and "they try to let the other person speak more" (16%). These comments tell us that native English speakers and native Japanese speakers have different perspectives on both talk distribution and on asking questions during conversation.

Native English speakers felt that a good conversation was one where they were "able to gain a new knowledge from the other participants" (14%) and where they had "conversation with intelligent people who have their own ideas and thoughts" (10%). Some also wanted to "cover one topic in depth 4" (8%). On the other hand, Japanese participants did

not have ideas about what constitutes a good conversation. However, when asked about uncomfortable or bad conversation, the Japanese participants disliked the conversations “with someone who asks questions to me” (8%) and “with someone who argues my talk” (8%).

Participants were also asked what image of themselves they want to portray to others in first-time encounters. The native English speakers’ core responses were to show their intelligence and competence (10%), while Japanese participants wanted to show their ability to match with others (20%).

Overall, we found that native English speakers have strategic design for conversation and have some idea of what to do in conversation. Japanese speakers, on the other hand, tend to talk without any design; they simply try to match the ongoing conversation. For example, they expect the other person to choose the topic for discussion and control the direction of the conversation. If the other people do not talk much, the Japanese participant will finally start to manage the conversation, but they always consider what the other person is going to do and what they would like to do. This is how they show respect and politeness to their counterparts.

These responses from the interviewees were spontaneous reactions to their conversations. They simply said what came to mind when asked about how they really think and feel in ordinary conversational situations. Thus, we can see that native English speakers and native Japanese speakers have different perspectives on first-encounter conversations and so conduct themselves differently. In the next section of the analysis, we will look at how these different perspectives can negatively affect a conversation, making participants feel uncomfortable.

5. Two cases of discourse analysis

As mentioned above, two intercultural conversations were selected for this case study of discourse analysis, coded IE3 and IE23. IE is an abbreviation for intercultural conversation in English. All participants were male and were 22 years and older. They were unacquainted with each other. In IE3, there were two American participants (A4 and A5) and two Japanese participants (J4 and J5). The American participants work at the time in an American army camp in the suburb of Tokyo. The Japanese participants teach at a university in the mathematics and sports science departments, respectively. In IE23, there was one American participant (A14) and one Japanese participant (J31). The American participant teaches English at a university in the suburb of Tokyo. The Japanese participant was an English linguistics graduate student at the time of recording. He now works at a university where he teaches English. The Japanese participants in IE3 and IE23 did not have experience living in an English-speaking country, but they read English books and wrote papers in English. They also had a good, working knowledge of English grammar and good English vocabularies when compared with the average person in Japan.

These two conversations were selected because, in the follow-up interview, the participants stated that the conversations were not successful. In particular, the American participants clearly said that they did not enjoy the conversation and did not like their conversational partners. On the contrary, the Japanese participants did not feel badly about the conversation; in fact, they said they enjoyed the conversation. It is possible that this answer is due to polite behavior; perhaps they did not want to offend the interviewer. However, it really did seem that the Japanese participants enjoyed their conversations and felt they fulfilled their roles in those conversations.

Let us look at the data to see what happens when participants with different perspectives on conversation get together to have one. We will start with the dyad conversation of IE23. Figure 1 shows the flow of the conversation in a thirty-minute talk.

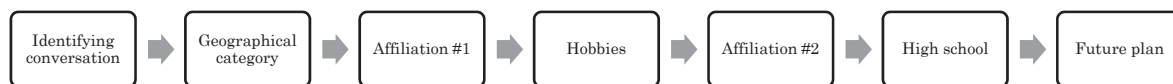


Figure 1. A topic flow chart of IE23.

Since this is a genre of first, unacquainted conversation, the topics have some features of first-encounter talk. Identifying conversation, geographical category, and affiliations are such features. The participants of IE23 started their conversation as we see in Excerpt 1.

(1)

01 A14: Okay. Hi, I am A14.
 02 J31: Hi, I am J31.
 03 A14: Nice to meet you.
 04 J31: Nice to meet you.
 05 A14: So, J31, where're you from?

The line 05 is a trigger for shifting the topic to the geographical category. The conversation continues to Excerpt 2. Grammar mistakes are transcribed as they uttered.

(2)

01 A14: So, J31, where're you from?
 02 J31: I am from Tochigi.
 03 A14: Tochigi, where is that?
 04 J31: Uh, it's north of Tokyo.
 05 A14: How far north?
 06 J31: Tochigi Prefecture.
 07 A14: How far north of Tokyo?
 08 J31: Uh, maybe 200 kilometers or so.
 09 A14: Okay. And when did you move to Tokyo?
 10 J31: Uh, I come to Tokyo, um, five years ago.
 11 A14: Oh, five years ago.
 12 J31: Yeah.

In this excerpt, A14 asks questions while J31 gives short answers. Notice that in lines 04, 08 and 10, J31 utters 'uh' at the beginning of his turn. According to Maynard and Zimmerman (1984), "uh" indicates dismay in English, showing that the questions were problematic. Therefore, A14 may feel that he has been asked some problematic questions and may get confused. This part of conversation continues to Excerpt 3.

(3)

01 A14: And so how do you like it?
 02 J31: Uh, yeah, I think Tokyo is a good place, but a little crowded.=
 03 A14: =Little crowded, okay. So what do you . . .
 04 J31: There are too many buildings.
 05 A14: Too many buildings.
 06 J31: Yeah.
 07 A14: So what about the people? Are they different from Tochigi people?
 08 J31: Uh, no, I don't think so.
 09 A14: Okay.
 10 J31: Yeah.

In line 01, A14 starts topical talk beyond the identifying exchanges. In line 03, A14 begins to ask new question, "So what do you," but it is interrupted by J31. J31's answer to the question in line 01 still continues in line J31. A14 repeats J31's words to show he understands J31's answer and confirms it. Again, in line 08, J31 starts his utterance with "uh." This may indicate dismay, making the question in line 07 seem problematic. In line 10, A14 says, "Okay." According to Hiraga and Turner (1995), this response is a way of requesting J31 to elaborate on his answer, and A14 may expect him to add the reason he does not think Tochigi people are different from Tokyo people. However, he does not do that, saying instead, "Yeah," in line 11. This may be understood by A14 as an indication that J31 wants to quit this topic. The same phenomenon is found in line 06. J31 could have elaborated on his answer here as well.

As we see in Excerpt 4, A14 changes the topic by asking questions about J31's hobbies. A14 finds that J31 likes movies, just as he does. A14 regards this as a common interest, and he tries to expand on this topic by going more deeply into it.

- (4)
- 01 J31: So, yeah, it is a difference I think.
- 02 A14: =All right. So do you have any hobbies, interests?
- 03 J31: Yeah, um, my hobby is to watch movies.
- 04 A14: All right. You prefer Japanese movies or foreign movies?
- 05 J31: Foreign movies.
- 06 A14: Mostly Hollywood movies or European movies, Chinese movies?
- 07 J31: Um, yeah, my favorite is Hollywood movies.
- 08 A14: Hollywood.
- 09 J31: Yeah.
- 10 A14: So for example, what's one of your favorite movies?
- 11 J31: Uh, okay, my favorite one is Indi-Jones or . . .
- 12 A14: Oh, okay.
- 13 J31: Indiana Jones, yeah.
- 14 A14: Yes, you like the adventure type?
- 15 J31: Yeah.
- 16 A14: Okay, cool.
- 17 J31: Or Star – Star Wars or something.
- 18 A14: Star Wars =
- 19 J31: =Yeah.=
- 20 A14: =Like fantasy, Lord of the Rings that kind of movie.
- 21 J31: Yeah.

Again, in this part, A14's questions and J31's short answers are patterned. In line 07 and 11, we again see the interjection "um," and "uh," and, again, J31 does not elaborate on his answer. He answers, "Yeah," repeatedly. Still, A14 sticks to this topic and asks J31 various questions, as seen in Excerpt 5.

- (5)
- 01 A14: Are there any movies out there that you want to see?
- 02 J31: Do you like Japanese movie?
- 03 A14: I used to watch Kurosawa movies.
- 04 J31: Akira Kurosawa, yeah. He is a famous.
- 05 A14: Yeah, he was great. Of course, I saw *Zatoichi*. =
- 06 J31: =Yeah.
- 07 A14: And I saw – what was it? The last Japanese movie was *Shall We Dance*. =
- 08 J31: =Uh, huh.
- 09 A14: You know it?
- 10 J31: Yeah. But I haven't seen it.
- 11 A14: Oh, you haven't seen it. I liked it a lot, because it kind of – it connected with
- 12 everyday life.
- 13 J31: Uh, huh.
- 14 A14: Do you know the story of *Shall We Dance*?
- 15 J31: I don't know. Sorry.
- 16 A14: Oh, it's about a salary man who rides the train every day. And he looks out the window and
- 17 thinks there is something better for him. And, of course, he saw a pretty dance teacher, and uh,
- 18 his life changed a little bit.

The question, "Do you like Japanese movie?" is the first question that J31 asks of A14 in this conversation. However, in the framework of conversation analysis, this is an insertion question; that is, J31 asks this question instead of

answering the question in line 01, “Are there any movies out there that you want to see?” This insertion implies that J31 is asking permission to talk about Japanese movies. He wants to make sure that A14 is familiar with them, and if he is, J31 can include Japanese movies in his answer to the question in line 01. If A14 is not familiar with them, J31 thinks he should eliminate Japanese movies from his answer. From line 12 to 14, J31 pretends that he knows the movie *Shall We Dance*. He then apologizes in line 15. In the previous chapter, we show that Japanese participants try to match other participants. J31’s behavior in this excerpt shows this at work. Not only does J31 feel it is impolite to choose a topic that A31 is not familiar with, he also pretends to know the movie so that A31 will not have to change the topic. However, when, in line 14 A14 starts confirming that J31 knows the movie, J31 confesses that he does not. He is ashamed, believing he has done something wrong, and so has to say, “I’m sorry.”

It is worth noting that we saw some problems in IE23. During the video shooting, A14 started to get irritated. We can speculate that this was due to the fact that J31 only answered questions. During the thirty minutes of conversation, A14 asked 120 questions, while J31 only asked 18. J31 gave minimal answers to the questions he was asked and did not elaborate. J31 never returned questions. When J31 asked questions he felt A14 could answer, he felt badly when A14 was unable to answer. J31 never asked A14 questions about himself, and J31 did not ask questions that would generate topical talk. A14 tried to continue conversation by asking more questions when he felt J31 declined the topic, and while these questions facilitated the conversation, the conversation overall was not functioning properly.

Now let us see the IE3 data. The topic flow chart is shown in Figure 2.

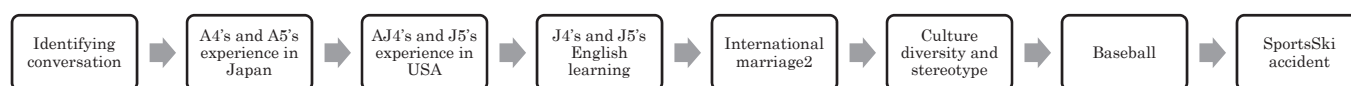


Figure 2. Topic flow chart of IE3.

In this conversation, we found other evidence of other cultural norms that are permitted in Japanese conversation but are not allowed in English conversation. In Excerpt 6, J5 shook his head in line 02 as a way of response, although no participants noticed this.

- (6)
- 01 A5: Have you both been to the United States? Visiting or working?
- 02 J5: (Shakes his head, but no one is looking at him. It goes unnoticed.)
- 03 J4: Oh I . . . I had been to the United States in San, un to, Santa Barbara...
- 04 A5: Santa Barbara? In California?
- 05 J4: California, yes, Santa Barbara about two weeks.
- 06 A5: Okay, so I think there a pretty, a lot of a, different races and people.
- 07 J4: P . . . pardon?
- 08 A5: Um. Different cultures?
- 09 J4: Different culture. Ah, Yes, UC in Santa Barbara, students in UC Santa Barbara, every students
- 10 No shoes, pants, and, uh, tank top, very rough style.
- 11 A5: Probably sandals?
- 12 J4: Yes, very open, very very open, I, ah, yes.
- 13 (Long pause, A4 staring at J5)
- 14 A5: So, how did you or, what, how did you learn English, or what made you want learn to English,
- 15 why? Did you learn English or want to learn to be able to speak.

In line 01, A5 asks, “Have you both been to the United States? Visiting or working?” The target for the question is both J4 and J5. J5 shakes his head “no” while J4 answers the question verbally. In essence, both of them answer the question. However, J5’s head shaking is not seen by anybody, and A5 waits for him to say something on this matter. A4 stares at J5 for more than five seconds during which J5 does not have eye contact with anybody. J5 does not realize that he is expected to say something. Since J5 seems to decline this topic, A4 changes the topic to learning English learning, as seen in Excerpt 7.

- (7)
- 01 A5: So, how did you or what . . . how did you learn English, or what made you want learn to English?
- 02 Why? Did you learn English or want to learn to be able to speak.
- 03 J4: Un, why? Um, I, I need English conversation to because I went to international congress. In
- 04 international congress, I poster session. I, I have to learn English conversation.
- 05 A5: What's international congress, do you know? I don't know.
- 06 J4: Physiological, ah, sports and international congress.
- 07 A5: Is it a conference?
- 08 J4: A . . . congress.
- 09 A5: Congress, international congress for sports.
- 10 J4: But I can't speak, uh, English and then I, I poster session.
- 11 A5: Okay, what about you, sir? (Stares at J5.)
- 12 J5: I, I'm not studying English, but now I am interested in speaking in Chinese. I'm learning Chinese
- 13 now.
- 14 A5: So you speak a little English and a lot of Chinese and Japanese, so that's good.
- 15 A4: Are you going to go over to China, exchange visit and will you teach in China?
- 16 A5: Or work?
- 17 J5: No, I, when I first went to China, it was a, just the sightseeing trip, then I several occasions to
- 18 attend international conferences in China.
- 19 A4: The reason I asked is was last summer I was at Shian, North.

Again, in line 10, J4 answered first. In Japanese conversation, not all participants have to answer if the person asking the questions does not select a target respondent. Therefore, J5 may have thought that he did not have to answer this question because J4 had answered. However, in English, the rule of "talk-distribution-must-be-the-same" may require every member's response. A5 stares at J5 to encourage him to respond.

Another problem that occurred was that the Japanese participants just kept listening. The American participants tried to select topics that the Japanese participants could join. They said that they like Ichiro, a well-known and skillful Japanese baseball player. However, the Japanese participants did not join the conversation. After both A4 and J4 found that they like skiing, A4 tried to elaborate on this topic, talking about downhill skiing and mentioning that two American celebrities, Kennedy and Sonny Bono, crashed into trees during downhill runs. The Japanese participants did not seem to know about these events but never asked questions, just kept listening. In this conversation, the two Americans sometimes talked together for a while because the Japanese participants did not seem interested in what the Americans were talking about.

There were several problems in IE3. Japanese participants kept the listener's role throughout the conversation. The Japanese participants never asked questions that would lead a topical talk. The Japanese participants did not ask questions even when they did not follow the topic. The Japanese participants ignored the slots where they were expected to take a turn to talk. The American participants chose topics that they thought the Japanese participants were familiar with, but the Japanese did not join the interaction. Only the American participants talked with each other, in part because the Japanese participants did not join in. As in IE23, the American participants did not feel satisfied by this conversation, but Japanese participants said they enjoyed themselves very much.

6. Conclusion

This paper shows that the goals and expectations for conversation are different between native English speakers and native Japanese speakers. While English speakers expect conversation with intelligent people who have their own ideas and thoughts, in the two cases examined here, the English speakers' expectations were not met and they were not satisfied with the conversation.

However, and quite to the contrary, the Japanese participants were satisfied with both the conversation and with the American participants. Japanese participants were asked many questions and could answer most of them. This was because they were able to listen well, understand the talk, and let the other participants speak more. They behaved

politely throughout the conversation.

For intercultural communication in English, we found that Japanese people should learn more about the conversation style of their own language, as well as the target language. Acknowledging the difference in conversational styles from culture to culture is important, as the employment of one's own conversational style can cause problems in intercultural communication. As FitzGerald (2003) claims, different turn-taking styles and the distribution of talk are bound in culture, and, as a result, are the source of many problems.

The limitations of this paper suggest the need for future research. The qualitative analysis should be more detailed, and we need more data, collected in intercultural settings, for needs analysis for language teaching and learning. Since the amount of data from an intercultural setting was small, this paper omitted the qualitative analysis of intercultural data. For intercultural setting and intercultural competence, data from intercultural settings should be analyzed in detail in the future and, from the results, suggestions for improved communication should be presented to foreign-language learners.

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