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Cooperation in Japanese Gossip Conversations:
An Analysis of Co-construction for Creating Mutual Understandings*

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Abstract

In conversations, multiple participants sometimes collaboratively construct utterances together. This phenomenon, called co-construction, has been studied in the fields of syntax and pragmatics. This paper explores the use of co-construction in Japanese gossip conversations. It was found that in Japanese conversations, what appears to be self-serving acts, such as overlapping, frequent interruption of small speech units, and transferring the right to speak, contribute to co-construction and create cooperative mutual understanding.

Keywords: co-construction, cooperation, Japanese conversation, mutual understanding

1. Introduction

It is generally assumed that in conversation, participants try to understand each other's utterances as much as possible. Mutual understanding is not only a goal, but also a prerequisite for successful conversation (e.g., Grice, 1975). In terms of the participants' behaviors and understanding of conversations, Foppa (1995) mentioned the following:

> … in most everyday conversations the participants do not seem to have any particular difficulties in understanding each other. At least, they frequently behave *as if* they have understood what has been said. They refrain from signalling understanding difficulties, and instead, they produce signals which can be interpreted as signs of understanding. For example, they nod, hum and try to give the impression of understanding the other interlocutor. (1995:150)

In conversation, people use signals related to their understanding. Many studies have examined signals that display their understanding, such as nodding (Stivers, 2008), and other practices to solve misunderstandings such as repair (Themistocleous et al., 2009). However, conversational participants can create mutual understanding by more actively participating in interactions. This paper proposes that the type of co-construction frequently observed in Japanese gossip conversations is a useful practice for creating mutual understanding.

2. Previous Studies

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Co-construction is a practice in which a hearer collaboratively produces what a speaker is saying or thought to be saying, or in a conversation among multiple speakers, speakers collaboratively produce what the first speaker is saying or thought to be saying. Thus, the term co-construction is used to refer to instances "where a syntactic unit (often what is loosely termed an 'utterance') is uttered by two or more speakers" (Haugh, 2010:352–353). This phenomenon has received significant interest from fields related to grammar in interaction and interactional points on grammar (Lerner, 2004; Ono & Thompson, 1996; Szczepek, 2000a, 2000b). Moreover, in pragmatics, there has been increasing attention paid to how participants infer what the original speaker is going to say (Haugh, 2010).

Co-construction consists of two subtypes: *completion* and *expansion* (Ono & Thompson, 1996). Completion refers to a case in which "the next speaker completes a syntactic unit that the first speaker has left incomplete" (Rühlemann, 2007:100). Conversely, in expansion, "the next speaker expands the first speaker's syntactically completed utterance into a longer syntactic unit […] e.g., by adding a prepositional phrase or a dependent clause" (Rühlemann, 2007:100). Regarding co-construction, including both subtypes, the following example is a typical case, which has been demonstrated in some previous studies.

(Example 1)
01 Nina: Most of the ones that we brought seem to have erm
02 Clarence: Survived.
03 Nina: Survived. Which I'm glad.

(Haugh, 2010, adapted from Rühlemann, 2007)

This fragment is a conversation between two participants. In line 01, the first speaker, Nina, said, "Most of the ones that we brought seem to have," and hesitated to continue. Because there was a hesitation at the end of the utterance, Clarence added "Survived" to complete the sentence. In response to this, Nina affirmed Clarence's suggestion in line 03 by repeating "Survived" and expanding the utterance by saying "Which I'm glad." In other words, the exchange over lines 01–03 shows that the utterance "Most of the ones that we brought seem to have survived, which I'm glad" is formed by multiple speakers. This sequence (01–03) is called co-construction. More specifically, in this case, Clarence's utterance "Survived" (02) is completion, and Nina's utterance "Which I'm glad" (03) is expansion.

Co-construction, as such, has also been studied in Japanese cases. For example, Hayashi (2003) conducted a pioneering study on co-construction in Japanese conversations. According to his study, the grammar characteristics of Japanese, such as the final particle uttered by the first speaker, allow other participants to co-construct the

following parts of the conversation. This paper shows highly active participation in interactions with others—a feature of co-construction in Japanese conversation.

3. Methodology

As a data resource, Japanese gossip conversations among sets of four university students were employed. These conversations are included in the Japanese natural conversation corpus, the Sakura corpus. The topic of these conversations is "What you look for in a partner." These conversations were employed as a data resource because casual gossip conversations can be expected to include multiple speakers' participation in interactions, which can lead to many cases of co-constructions. The Sakura corpus contains 18 files of conversation, with an average length of 25 minutes each. Audio and video recordings of the conversations, as well as their transcripts, can be accessed online[1]. All conversations were natural and on a given topic between four university students who knew each other well. The method of analysis involved listening to the entire conversation and manually searching for co-constructions.

4. Results and Discussion

The results showed that co-constructions occurred in 5 of the 6 conversations discussing the given topic for a cumulative total of 33 instances. The analysis revealed some characteristics of co-construction in Japanese. Thus, it was found that in Japanese conversation, highly active participation in interactions by others, such as overlapping, frequent interruption of small speech units, and transferring the right to speak, contributes to co-construction and creates cooperative mutual understanding. These methods may be self-serving acts, especially for non-native Japanese speakers, because, in English, for example, "messed up" constructions such as overlapping (Ono & Thompson 1996:83) can cause problems. Their study demonstrated a case in which overlap interrupted the flow of a conversation in English. Even though this problem often happens, it may not be a salient issue for the participants. The following are three typical examples of Japanese co-construction.

The first example is a case in which the second speaker used co-construction to encourage the first speaker to continue their utterance.

(Example 2)[2] from File 02 in the Sakura corpus:

[1] The URL is https://sla.talkbank.org/TBB/ca/Sakura.

[2] In the following samples, all utterances are written in three lines: the original Japanese text by the original transcription convention (in the first line in Courier New italics), the English translation for the above Japanese words (in the second line in Courier New), and the English translation for the above Japanese lines with the omitted content supplemented (in the third line in Times New Roman). These translations were carried out by the author. Speakers are also identified by letters of the alphabet, which are given in the order in which they speak in each example.

1 A: *ja: ore issho kamoshiren .*
so I same may
"So, for me, ((dating and marriage)) may be the same."
2 B: *issho da yo ne .*
same CP FP FP
"It's the same, isn't it?"
3 A: *nanka tsukiattara +...*
like go out:if
"Like, if ((I)) went out with ((someone))."
4→C: *++ sonomama .*
straight
"Straight to."
5 A: *++ ikitai naa tte iu .*
want.to.go. FP QT say
"((I)) want to go ((get married))."

In Example 2, four university students talked about the difference between dating and marriage. In line 1, Speaker A talked about the difference by saying, "So, for me, dating and marriage may be the same." In line 3, he tried to mention what would happen if he went out with a potential girlfriend. However, after he said "*nanka tsukiattara*," which means "Like, if I went out with someone," he paused. Thus, Speaker C said "*sonomama*," which means "straight to" in English, to encourage Speaker A to continue. Following Speaker C's utterance, Speaker A understood the ensuing part. Therefore, Speaker C co-constructed what Speaker A was going to say, in the form of the syntactically completing words.

As a result, the utterance "If I went out with someone, I want to go straight to getting married" was co-constructed by the two speakers. In Japanese conversations, this kind of cooperative conversation is frequently carried out; small fragments are combined by multiple speakers through co-construction.

Another example is as follows:

(Example 3) from File 02 in the Sakura corpus:
1 A: *koko kirai tte itte te mo*
here hate FP say:and even if
"Though ((we)) say, '((I)) hate this part ((of you))'."
2 A: *kekkyokuwa [sukina n da yo]*
after all love N CP FP
"After all, ((I)) love him."
3→B: *[kiraina tokoro mo] [sukina n da yo*

mitaina]

I don't like parts also love N CP FP like

"Like, '((I)) also love you, including the parts I don't like'."

4 A: *[soo soo soo]*

so so so

"Right, right, right."

In Example 3, the second speaker shows an interpretation when two students discuss that a girl tends to love her boyfriend, including the parts of him she does not like. The content is a general statement, not about anyone in particular, but it is potentially relevant to most girls. Thus, all participants, both boys and girls, could find common ground within the content.

As Speaker A said, "I love him" in line 2, Speaker B overlapped by uttering the same content in line 3, depending on his generally shared experience or knowledge. More specifically, Speaker B said, "*kiraina tokoro mo sukina n da yo mitaina*." Translated into English, this means, "Like, I also love you, including the parts I don't like." As a result of the co-construction from line 2 to line 3, the utterance "After all, I also like you, including the parts I don't like" was produced. It is remarkable that Speaker B started to utter this soon after Speaker A said "After all" in line 2 (i.e., before he heard what Speaker A had to say in the following part). This can reflect that Speaker B had already known about the situation before Speaker A explained it and had already understood what Speaker A had said previously well enough to anticipate what Speaker A was going to say next. Therefore, Speaker B's utterance can only be accomplished by understanding what Speaker A had said in previous discussions.

In this type of co-construction, words using examples in the form of direct reported speech are frequently used, such as "*mitaina*." These words allowed Speaker B to participate in the conversation without interrupting the conversation's flow or intervening excessively by helping Speaker A expand the current conversation flow. In addition, the reality of the topic can be enhanced by displaying examples in the form of direct reported speech (i.e., by playing the role of a typical girl who takes the perspective of loving her boyfriend, including the parts she does not like). Thus, while Speaker B suddenly took a turn speaking, he was able to contribute to expanding and livening up the conversation by providing an example related to the prior talk of Speaker A. After that, Speaker A affirmed Speaker B's co-construction (line 4), which could confirm that the content suggested based on Speaker B's understanding was acceptable to Speaker A.

Finally, Example 4 is a fragment of a conversation among four female students.

(Example 4) from File 08 in the Sakura corpus:

1 A: *dekiru koto wa yatte kuretara*

can do thing TP do:and gave:if
"If ((a boyfriend)) can do what he can."

2 A: *nanka ryoori dekinaku te mo so janakute*
like cooking cannot do even if so not:and
"Like, even if he cannot cook, not so."

3→B: *osara dashit(e) oite kureru toka saa .*
plates out put:and given like FP
"Like ((he)) puts plates out for me."

4 C: *un .*
yes
"Yes."

5→D: *ryoori no hon mite mitaina. kenageni kenageni ikitehoshii.*
cooking of book read:and like admirably admirably hope.to.live
"Like, ((he)) reads recipe books. I hope that he will live admirably."

6 B: *ittara yatte kurereba ii yo ne .*
tell:when do:and given:if good FP FP
"It's good that if I tell him to do ((something)), he does ((it))."

They talked about how they would like a man who does housework, especially cooking. As in Example 3, the words giving examples, such as "*toka*" and "*mitaina*," were used in this co-construction. The interesting thing about this fragment is that multiple speakers freely co-constructed the ongoing utterance. After Speaker A said, "Like, even if he cannot cook," Speaker B gave an example of things that she wanted her boyfriend to do to the extent that he could by saying, "Like, he puts plates out for me." Speaker D also gave an example of what she wanted her boyfriend to do, even if he could not cook well. As a result, the utterance, "Even if he cannot cook, like, he puts plates out for me, like, he reads recipe books," was co-constructed. However, it was still not a completed utterance, and in line 6, Speaker B concluded the content with, "It's good that if I tell him to do something, he does it." Therefore, this example showed that co-construction was carried out by multiple speakers, and as a result, it comprised multiple speech units. Speaker A was not concerned about how her story would turn out, suggesting that it was not unusual for multiple speakers to freely co-construct a conversation. This suggests that, in Japanese conversation, the active participation of multiple speakers in interactions is often welcomed, especially when the participants' common understanding or stance on a topic (in this case, what you look for in your partner) is important.

In summary, in Japanese conversations, co-constructions tend to comprise small speech units and tend to be produced by overlapping speech units, but speakers do not feel that they are being interrupted by other speakers. A fairly cooperative co-construction of fine-grained units can be carried out successfully when the participants fully understand what the speaker is saying and are able to demonstrate this understanding to the speaker in the co-construction. Therefore, this type of co-construction is created on the basis of understanding and reinforces understanding. Specifically, co-constructions are generated by the participants' comprehension in that they must fully understand preceding discussions with the first speaker to expect the subsequent content. However, the achievement of co-construction—which can be shown in cases where the co-construction is acceptable to the speaker—enhances the legitimacy of understanding in that if the co-constructed part is problematic for the first speaker, the first speaker will point this out. Therefore, for the original speaker, highly interactive and cooperative co-construction can effectively convey how the hearers understood prior conversations and that they comprehend the prior conversations adequately.

5. Conclusion

This paper showed a feature of co-construction in Japanese conversation: highly active participation in interactions by others, such as overlapping, frequent interruption of small speech units, and transferring the right to speak. Although they seem to be self-serving acts, in these Japanese gossip conversations, they are welcomed by the first speaker (and other speakers) and help create mutual understanding. This is because (1) by co-construction, the participants can convey their understanding to the speaker, (2) the first speaker can confirm their understanding, and (3) by confirmation, they can also check whether their understanding is acceptable to the first speaker. Notably, this study has some limitations. First, it is not clear whether highly active participation in interactions can contribute to mutual understanding, even if there is no co-construction. The analysis revealed that co-construction, including when using these practices, is helpful in creating mutual understanding. However, it has not yet been proven whether mutual understanding is created in the same way when these practices are not included in the co-construction. Second, this analysis did not compare Japanese and English. As noted above, overlapping and frequent interruptions of small speech units, which may iinitially appear to be self-serving acts for English speakers, are some of the features of co-construction in Japanese gossip conversation. Indeed, these practices tend to be more welcomed in Japanese conversations than in English conversations. However, this study did not analyze co-construction in English gossip conversations. Thus, it is possible that these practices also occur in English conversations, depending on the situation and context. Further research is needed to reveal the characteristics of Japanese co-construction and the effectiveness of its practices.

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