Mutual Gaze State and an Environmental Approach to Recipient Response Behaviors in Japanese

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Previous studies of recipient response behavior, often called “backchannels” (Yngve 1970) or aizuchi in the Japanese context, have tended to look mainly at verbal responses (Tanaka 2004, Koiso et al. 1998, Iwasaki 1997). Since Maynard’s (1989) study, which included vertical head nods as a topic of study, other nonverbal behaviors have been gradually gaining the interest of researchers. For example, Kogure (2007) looked at recipient smiling and nodding, while Szatrowsky (2002) investigated speakers’ head nodding and gaze as a prompting device for recipient’s verbal responses and head nods. Despite the growing interest in previously ignored nonverbal behaviors, however, most papers select one or two specific examples for analysis without regard for the complex environment in which they are produced. Hayashi’s (2003) study on joint utterance construction in Japanese clearly demonstrates the complexity and depth of interaction of the verbal and nonverbal moves made by both speakers and recipients during the course of talk. In this paper I describe a promising approach to recipient response behaviors based on the environment in which they are produced.

For this study, I collected audio/video data from 5 pairs of Japanese native speakers, half of whom were shown a video and asked to describe it to their partner, who had not seen the video. Based on some initial qualitative observations of speaker gaze that were supported by Goodwin’s (1981, 1980) findings from English, I quantified all types of recipient responses that occurred (verbal utterances, head movements, posture shift, and gestures) based on the state of mutual gaze between speaker and recipient versus a non-mutual gaze state.

The results from the quantitative analysis showed that a very high proportion of recipient responses, 419/440, were performed during mutual gaze with the speaker, while only 21/440 were performed in the absence of mutual gaze. Following up with close qualitative analyses of several instances of recipient responses, I found that gaze initiation by the speaker marks the beginning of a coordinated sequential interaction in which the recipient is allowed and expected to respond. The type, timing, and manner of the recipient’s response determines whether the speaker breaks mutual gaze and continues the narrative or is required to negotiate further via repair (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) before continuing. Based on these findings, I propose that mutual gaze is a useful indicator in determining the interactive environments where recipient responses occur in Japanese. Additionally, I suggest that coding data for analysis based on the state of gaze allows for an environment-oriented approach to recipient response behaviors that has the potential to reveal much more about recipient responses than other approaches that group or categorize specific response forms based on their similarity of appearance.

References