

Lexico-grammatical structures of agreements with assessments in English conversation: From a Japanese perspective

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Abstract

This is an exploratory study of lexico-grammatical resources regularly employed to construct agreements with impersonal assessments in Anglo-American English in comparison with findings for Japanese. A major grammatical strategy in Japanese for constructing agreements to assessments includes positioning the gist of the agreement at the beginning of the turn, by exploiting the ease with which word order may be varied and arguments left unexpressed. Notwithstanding the divergent grammatical structures of the two languages, the data reveal that English speakers likewise display an orientation to operating on word order and to use ellipsis for achieving similar objectives. At the same time, however, there are constraints on the pervasive application of such strategies, reflecting the affordances of English grammar. Nevertheless, such grammatical constraints may be shown to be partly offset by the extensive use of formulaic expressions for producing agreements—a strategy that does not rely on syntax. The interactional resources in the respective linguistic environments seem to have evolved flexibly and ingeniously in ways that are concordant with the overarching lexico-grammatical structures of the languages while simultaneously accommodating the potentially universal interactional contingencies for displaying affiliation.

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1. Introduction

This study attempts to add to our understanding of the range of lexico-grammatical resources that are used in American and British English (hereafter ‘English’) for building agreements with assessments from the standpoints of conversation analysis and interactional linguistics (e.g. [Barth-Weingarten et al., 2010](#); [Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 1996](#); [Hakulinen and Selting, 2005](#); [Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 2001](#); [Ochs et al., 1996](#); [Sidnell and Enfield, 2012](#)). A cross-linguistic comparison with Japanese is employed as a heuristic to heighten sensitivity to the ways in which the conversational grammars of the two languages may figure in the construction of agreements in the respective linguistic environments. I begin by highlighting the lexico-grammatical resources commonly used in Japanese to construct agreements with assessments. This will be based on a literature review and synthesis of previous work on Japanese interaction pertaining to agreements with assessments and related phenomena ([Hayano, 2007, 2013](#); [Mori, 1999](#); [Tanaka, 2005, 2008](#)). It will be shown that Japanese speakers rely heavily on two prominent features of conversational grammar—namely the freedom to leave arguments unexpressed *and* the ease with which word order may be varied—for augmenting affiliation by indexing agreement at the earliest possible opportunity.

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An example of the first feature noted above is given below. (In the excerpts, initial assessments will be indicated by a plus-sign '+', and second assessments under scrutiny by an arrow '→'.)

(1) [Higashi 03-989 Paid leaves] predicate components are shaded

1 + Orië: yuukyuu tte ii yo ne
 paid.leaves TOP nice FP FP
 'concerning paid leaves, nice, aren't ((they))?'
 2 → Fumi: ii yo ne::
 nice FP FP
 'nice, aren't ((they))?'

In line 1, Orië proffers a positive assessment, constructed as a fully expressed turn with the reference formulation *yuukyuu tte* 'concerning paid leaves' (serving as the subject) followed by the predicate *ii yo ne* 'nice, aren't ((they))?'. To this, Fumi constructs an agreement through a simple repetition of the predicate: *ii yo ne::* 'nice, aren't ((they))?'. The operation of leaving the subject unexpressed results in an early positioning of the agreement at the opening of the turn.

Needless to say, similar operations are likely to have restricted utility in English conversation, in which expressing arguments is more obligatory and word order is relatively fixed (e.g. Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen, 2005). Such differences notwithstanding, interaction in either language arguably shares fundamental moves such as situated displays of affiliation and alignment, which in turn contribute to shaping the locally available linguistic resources in each language. It therefore seems salient to explore whether parallel resources as those observed in Japanese are likewise drawn on by English speakers for producing agreements, and in particular, the kinds of lexico-grammatical resources that are employed to achieve an early indexing of the gist of an agreement. The key resources identified include the turn-initial positioning of adverbs and the use of left-dislocations.

The utility of adverbs for this purpose is illustrated by the excerpt below:

(2) Nice little lady (SBL 2:1:8); transcript from Thompson et al. (2015:152)

1 BEA: hh hhh we:ll,h I was gla:d she could come too last ni:ght=
 2 + NOR: =sh[e seems such a n]ice little [lady]
 3 → BEA: [(since you keh) [dAwful]ly nice little person.
 4 t hhhh hhh we:ll, I: just

In response to Norma's first assessment describing the referent as 'such a nice little lady' (line 2), Beatrice comes in early with an upgraded agreement, designed as an adverb-initial phrase 'dAwfully nice little person' (line 3), which indexes a strong agreement at the opening of the turn, by leaving the referent unexpressed. What is remarkable about this instance is its striking structural similarity to excerpt (1) in Japanese, and how the constraints of English syntax are being overridden in the service of social action—namely, to hasten the delivery of the agreement. Despite the existence of a range of resources such as this which converge with those used in Japanese for constructing agreements, however, there appear to be limitations to their extensive mobilization. The paper will therefore end by examining a class of resources—formulaic expressions—that enable English speakers to bypass the constraints posed by a comparatively fixed syntactical structure.

Research focusing on one type of interactional task within a specific sequential context across different languages has recently been the target of heightened interest within the rubric of pragmatic typology, which explores the possible universality or cultural specificity of conversational structures in different languages (e.g. Dingemans et al., 2013, 2014; Dingemans and Floyd, 2014; Stivers et al., 2009). The enquiry undertaken here attempts to contribute to this body of work by harnessing the potential benefits of comparing two languages that are typologically very different. Certain grammatical devices that may feature prominently in the implementation of an interactional task in one language may come into play more subtly in another, thereby eluding immediate notice. Cross-linguistic investigations, however, may provide a prism through which to consider even counter-intuitive possibilities. For instance, applying the fact that operations such as expediting an agreement is influenced by flexible word order in Japanese could present an oblique angle for probing into the question of the extent to which parallel resources may or may not figure in the achievement of similar tasks in English with a relatively more constrained syntactic organization (e.g. Fox et al., 1996; Tanaka, 2008; Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen, 2005). Such investigations can moreover form a basis for shedding further light on the relatively uncharted connections between the structure of conversational grammar in a language and how it may be interrelated with the concrete ways in which social actions are realized in that language.

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