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## Nodding, *aizuchi*, and final particles in Japanese conversation: How conversation reflects the ideology of communication and social relationships

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### Abstract

It has been noted that Japanese differs markedly from languages like English and Mandarin in the use of head nods and *aizuchis* (short utterances roughly equivalent to English “uh huh” and “yeah”). In Japanese conversation, such behaviors are extremely frequent, and their placement is often unexpected from the viewpoint of speakers of languages like English and Mandarin. For example, these behaviors often occur in non-transition relevant places. Sometimes *aizuchis* can even be uttered by the turn-holder. In such cases, the conventional technical terms such as “back-channel”, “continuer”, and “reactive token” are hardly applicable. Furthermore, the turn-holder often actively elicits *aizuchis* from the listener. Final particles, which are very frequent in spoken discourse, play an important role in the elicitation. Finally, there is a discussion of how the Japanese ideology of communication and social relationships may provide motivations for the above phenomena.

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### 1. Introduction

The use of head nods and short utterances equivalent to English “uh huh” and “yeah” in conversation are ubiquitous across cultures. Such phenomena have been studied intensively, as

**Abbreviations:** ACC, accusative; CONN, connective; DAT, dative; FP, final particle; GEN, genitive; NEG, negation; NOM, nominative; PASS, passive; PRES, present; TOP, topic

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they reveal some important organizational principles of conversation (e.g., Schegloff, 1982; Goodwin, 1986; Bangerter and Clark, 2003). It has also been noted that manifestations of such phenomena vary considerably across cultures. Japanese, in particular, has been in a focus of cross-cultural comparisons (e.g., Mizutani, 1984; Maynard, 1986, 1990; Clancy et al., 1996; Kita, 1999). The cultural variation of such phenomena is an important topic of investigation, as it may shed light on the issue of how cultures can shape conversation.

The short utterances such as “uh huh” and “yeah” have been referred to by various terms, depending on the theoretical framework used to capture their distribution: back-channel (Yngve, 1970), continuers (Schegloff, 1982), reactive tokens (Clancy et al., 1996). As will be illustrated below, the distribution of analogous utterances in Japanese conversation does not perfectly conform to the theoretical frameworks that underlie these terms. Thus, in this article, the theory-neutral Japanese word *aizuchi* will be used to refer to these utterances.

The issue of how *aizuchis* and head nods are distributed in Japanese conversation cannot be separated from the specific ways in which they are elicited from the conversational partner. As will be discussed below, *aizuchis* and head nods tend to elicit further *aizuchis* and head nods (Iwasaki, 1997; Kogure, this issue, Kita, 1999). Also, so-called final particles, which are frequent in casual Japanese conversation, elicit *aizuchis* from the conversational partner (Maynard, 1986; Tanaka, 2000). Thus, the first goal of this article is to provide an overview of distributional characteristics of *aizuchi*, head nods, and final particles, and their relationship with each other, based on both a review of previous literature and new material presented here.

*Aizuchi*, head nods, and final particles shape Japanese conversation in its characteristic way. It will be argued here that the pattern of their use is not arbitrary in the Saussean sense, but is rather motivated by cultural values. This approach is in line with other recent work that sought cultural motivations for language-specific patterns in syntax and semantics (e.g., Enfield, 2002a). Linguistic politeness is another area in which cultural motivations for linguistic practice have been sought (e.g., Ide, 1989, 1997). Thus, we should be able to take a similar approach for conversational phenomena. Therefore, the second goal of this article is to discuss how the use of these communication management devices may be motivated by what is considered in Japanese culture to be important in communication and social relationships.

### 2. Frequency and distribution of *aizuchis*

In the investigation of turn-taking and floor management, short utterances such as “uh huh” and “yeah” drew the attention of many researchers. Schegloff's (1982) seminal work characterized the main function of such utterances as a “continuer”, with which the listener indicates that an opportunity to take a turn is being passed up and allows the current speaker to continue speaking. There is a continuing discussion on functions of such utterances (Goodwin, 1986; Kita, 1999; Maynard, 1986, 1990; Bangerter and Clark, 2003). As stated above, such utterances are referred to as *aizuchi* in this article.

Japanese conversation is noteworthy with respect to the use of *aizuchi*. They are extremely frequent in Japanese as compared to English (Maynard, 1986) and Mandarin (Clancy et al., 1996). For example, Maynard (1986) reported that, in face-to-face conversation, Japanese speakers use 2.6 times more *aizuchis* per unit of time than American English speakers.

Furthermore, the placement of *aizuchis* is fundamentally different in Japanese. The listener often provides *aizuchis* at the locations in the middle of the turn-holder's utterance that are not transition relevant places (Clancy et al., 1996; Maynard, 1986; see also Miyata and Nishisawa,

this issue). The *aizuchis* in (1) illustrate this. In line 1a, the first word by Speaker A is *de* “then” with a rising non-final intonation contour, indicating likely continuation of her turn, and then she pauses. In this pause, the speaker B produced an *aizuchi*, *ee*. The rest of the utterance on that line was produced without any pause, and the second *aizuchi* overlapped with the verb. In other words, these two *aizuchis* occurred at non-transition relevant places. Such *aizuchis* were unlikely to be a continuer or an expression of agreement with the turn-holder. In the literature, such *aizuchis*, instead, have been interpreted as a sign of emotional support for the turn-holder (Mizutani, 1984; Maynard, 1986; Clancy et al., 1996).

(1) (Mr. O. Corpus,<sup>2</sup> J03Cnv0)

Place: a room in a university in Tokyo, Japan

A: a university student

B: a university instructor

Topic: An incident in which the student fell down the stairs in a train station and injured her leg.

Note: Pairs of lines (e.g., 1a and b) for the original utterances are vertically aligned to show overlap of words between the participants. The translation is provided separately. In the translation, the timing of A and B's utterances is only an approximation at best, due to the different word orders of English and Japanese. See “Abbreviations” on the first page for the abbreviations in the gloss.

- 1a A: *de ano ekiinsan-o yon-de-kudasat-te*  
then well station.employee-ACC call-CONN-give:Polite-CONN
- 1b B: *ee eeee*  
Aizuchi Aizuchi
- 2a A: *ekiinsan-ni onbus-are-te (laugh)*  
station.employee-DAT carry.on.back-PASS-CONN
- 2b B: *eeeeeeee eeeeeee*  
Aizuchi Aizuchi
- 3a A: *ue-made agat-te*  
above-till ascend-CONN
- 3b B: *aaaa*  
Aizuchi

## Translation

- 1a A: “then, well, (someone) called a station employee”  
B: Aizuchi Aizuchi
- 2a A: “Being carried by the station employee on his back,”  
B: Aizuchi Aizuchi
- 3a A: “, (I) went upstairs.”  
B: Aizuchi

<sup>2</sup> The ‘Mr. O. Corpus’ is a cross-linguistic video corpus, collected under a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research from the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science for the project on “Empirical and theoretical studies on culture, interaction, and language in Asia” (No. 15320054, directed by Sachiko Ide at Japan Women’s University). It consists of conversations, narratives, and talk during a goal-oriented joint task in Japanese, English, Korean, and Chinese.

Note further that the *aizuchis* that fell near a clause boundary, a possibly transition relevant place, were not exactly placed at the transition relevant places (see the second *aizuchi* on line 2a and the one on line 3a). Instead, they overlapped with the clause final syllable of the turn-holder’s utterance, which prevented possible uncertainty of speakerhood at the imminent transition relevant place. Such instances are a type of emotional support for the turn-holder. These can be called ‘considerate’ (*omoiyari*, Lebra, 1976) *aizuchis*, since the listener preempts a potentially competitive situation in a transition relevant place, and thus eliminates any potential threat of a turn change that the turn-holder would have faced.

Even as the listener frequently expresses active support for the speakerhood of the turn-holder, the turn-holder also seeks *aizuchis* from the listener in various ways. For example, the turn-holder can add an *aizuchi* at the end of her utterance (Angles et al., 2000), which elicits an *aizuchi* from the listener (Kita, 1996, 1999), as in (2).

## (2) (Kita, 1996, 1999)

Place: in a house in a farming village in Hyogo, Japan.

A: a resident of the house

B: a relative of X, visiting from Tokyo

Topic: frogs in the rice field, which have disappeared over the years

- 1 A: *nooyaku yar-u kara ne un*  
pesticide give-PRES because FP Aizuchi  
“Because we give pesticide.” Aizuchi
- 2 B: *ee*  
Aizuchi
- 3 A: *shin-jau-shi*  
die-end.up-FP  
“they end up dying.”

The placement of a linguistic form like *un* as in line 1 of (2) contrasts with that of the English forms like *uh huh*, which could not be used in this context.

The function of *aizuchis* to trigger further *aizuchis* can lead to what Iwasaki (1997) called a “loop sequence” of *aizuchis* when none of the participants develop the content of conversation, as in (3) (see also, Kogure, this issue).

## (3) (Kita, 1996, 1999)

Place: at the reception in a university in Kanagawa, Japan.

A: a receptionist

B: Kita, who is interviewing X and her colleague

Topic: a professor, who ran past the reception, probably late for a meeting.

Note: the loop sequence is indicated by “=>”.

- 1 A: *konna-n densha-no tsugoo de okure-n*  
like.this-one train-GEN reason for late-Nominalizer  
*daru kedo-ne*  
probably but-FP  
“the one like this is probably late because of the train.”
- 2 => B: *ne*  
Final.Particle(functioning in a similar way to an Aizuchi)

- 3 => A: un  
Aizuchi
- 4 => B: un  
Aizuchi
- 5 => A: (0.75 sec. pause) un  
Aizuchi
- 6 B: kyo ima taifu-ga ki-te-te  
today now typhoon-NOM come-CONN-Resultative  
“Today, now, the typhoon is here [causing a delay in the  
train].”

### 3. *Aizuchis* and final particles

It has been noted that the use of so-called final particles such as *ne* and *yo* are closely related to the use of *aizuchis*. These particles are frequently used in conversation, but never appear in formal written discourse. They are typically attached to the end of a postpositional phrase, an adverb, or a clause. However, they can be used independently as an *aizuchi* utterance, as in line 2 of (3). Such examples highlight the limitation of the structurally motivated label “final particle”.<sup>3</sup> The functions of particles are still not well understood, but one of the functions is to index whether the speaker or the listener has the authority over the information expressed by the speaker (Kamio, 1994; see also Katagiri, this issue). Another function, especially for the particle *ne*, is to elicit *aizuchis* from the listener, as in lines 1–4 in (4) (Maynard, 1986; Tanaka, 2000; but see Ward and Tsukahara, 2000, for an alternative view).

- (4) (Mr. O. Corpus, J12Cnv)  
Place: a room in a university in Tokyo, Japan  
A and B: university students  
Topic: The opening sequence of a story about a surprising incident at a coffee shop where A has a part-time job.  
The arrows indicate an utterance ending with an FP (final particle) and a subsequent *aizuchi*, elicited by the FP.

- 1 => A: ano-ne  
well-FP  
“Well”
- 2 => B: un  
Aizuchi
- 3 => A: baito-de-ne  
part.time.work-at-FP  
“at my work”
- 4 => B: un  
Aizuchi
- 5 A: ano sutaba na-no  
well Starbucks Copula-Nominalizer  
“well, it’s Starbucks [the name of a coffee shop]”

<sup>3</sup> Due to the lack of widely used alternatives, the term “final particle” will be used in this article.

The final particles can be added to an element such as an adverb or a postpositional phrase in the middle of an utterance, as in lines 1 and 3 in (4), and they elicit *aizuchis*. This may partially explain why Japanese listeners provide so many *aizuchis* in the middle of the turn-holder’s utterance at what is not a transition relevant place.

Thus, final particles and *aizuchis* together shape the interaction between the turn-holder and the listener in the way characteristic of Japanese conversation. The understanding of *aizuchis* in Japanese conversation is not complete without the understanding of final particles, and vice versa.

### 4. Nodding

Many important aspects of face-to-face interactions can be revealed through investigation of non-verbal modalities of communication. It has been shown that gestures contribute to the organization of conversation in many different ways (e.g., Goodwin and Goodwin, 1986; Heath, 1992; Streeck and Hartge, 1992; Streeck, 1994; Hayashi, 2003; Stivers and Sidnell, 2005). Nodding is no exception (e.g., Stivers, in press). Nodding accompanies 63% of *aizuchis* in Japanese conversation (Maynard, 1990). Nods occurring without *aizuchis* are also common (30% of nods in Maynard, 1990). For example, nods and *aizuchis* can form a multi-modal loop sequence (Kogure, this issue).

Maynard (1993) reported that Japanese speakers nod three times more frequently than American English speakers. One of the main contributors to this cross-linguistic difference was the fact that, in Japanese conversation, the turn-holder nods often, especially at the end of a grammatical unit, as in (5). Maynard (1986, 1987) suggested that this is one of the ways in which the turn-holder elicits an *aizuchi* from the listener.

- (5) (Mr. O. Corpus, J25Cnv0)  
Place: a room in a university in Tokyo, Japan  
A and B: university students  
Topic: What surprised A about the contents of a lunch box when she was in Canada.  
Note: Pairs of lines (e.g., 1a and b) for the original utterances are vertically aligned to show overlap of words between the speakers. Angular brackets represent a nod. The translation is provided separately. In the translation, the timing of A and B’s utterances is only an approximation at best, due to the different word orders of English and Japanese.
- 1a A: to watashi-wa mae it-ta-kamo-shire-<nai>-<kedo>  
and I-TOP before say-Past-maybe-become.known-NEG-but
- 1b B: un  
Aizuchi
- 2a A: kanada-ni <it-te-t>a toki-<ni>  
Canada-DAT go-Resultative-Past time-DAT
- 2b B: <un>  
Aizuchi
- 3a A: ano obento tsukut-te-kur-u-wake-yo-<ne> (0.5 sec. pause)  
well lunch.box make-CONN-come-PRES-Nominalizer-FP-FP
- 4a A: hosuto<fami>ri-<i-ga>-ne  
host-family-NOM-FP
- 4b B: <un> <un> <un> <un> <un> <un>  
AZ AZ AZ AZ AZ AZ (“AZ” stands for Aizuchi.)

## Translation

- 1a A: “and, I might have told you (this) before, but”  
(two nods at the end of the utterance before B’s *aizuchi*)
- 1b B: *Aizuchi*  
(with a nod)
- 2a A: “When I was in Canada”  
(one nod in the middle of the utterance, and another nod at the end of the utterance)
- 2b B: *Aizuchi*
- 3a A: “well, (one) has prepared a lunch box.” (0.5sec. pause)  
(a nod at the end of the utterance before the pause)
- 4a A: “The host family (has prepared it)”  
(two nods in the middle of the utterance)
- 4b B: *Aizuchi Aizuchi Aizuchi Aizuchi Aizuchi Aizuchi*  
(all *aizuchis* are accompanied by a nod.)

In Example (5), the turn-holder A nods with the last morpheme of lines 1a and 2a, and they are followed by B’s *aizuchi* utterances, *un* (lines 1b and 2b). The turn-holder also nods at the end of line 3a with the final particle *ne*. The combination of the nod and *ne* provides a very strong context in which an *aizuchi* or perhaps other types of uptake from the listener is expected. However, the listener does not give any *aizuchi*, and 0.5 s of silence occurs. Then, the turn-holder adds a nominative postpositional phrase in line 4a to clarify the unexpressed subject of the verb phrase in line 3a.<sup>4</sup> This clarification supports the interpretation that the turn-holder is expecting a response from the listener after line 3a. Interestingly, B starts to produce a nod (plus an *aizuchi*) already on the first syllable of the clarification on line 4a, and repeated it five more times. B’s initial nod (plus an *aizuchi*) cannot be mere acknowledgement of the content of A’s clarification, as the content has not yet been made clear at that moment. The long sequence of B’s nods can be interpreted as an attempt to amend the socially awkward moment of silence between lines 3a and 4a. It should also be noted that the first four of B’s nods (plus an *aizuchi*) in 4b do not occur at transition relevant places, as was seen also in some of the *aizuchis* discussed in (1).

It has been also noted that, in Japanese conversation, two participants often nod simultaneously (Maynard, 1987), and the simultaneous nods can form a sequence (Kita, 1996, 1999), as in (6). Such nod sequences seem to be associated with positive affect as the two participants started to smile as soon as the sequence started (towards the end of lines 1a and b), which indicates that establishing rapport is an important function of simultaneous nodding.

- (6) (from Kita, 1996, 1999)  
Place: a room in a university in Kanagawa, Japan  
A and B: university students  
Situation: A had been shown an animated cartoon and was retelling the story to B.  
The following segment is at the very end of the story telling.

<sup>4</sup> The speaker incrementally reveals more information as the unfolding interaction reveals how well the listener understands the message. This may be seen as an instance of the mechanism of “increment” in Ford et al. (2002).

Note: Pairs of lines (e.g., 1a and b) for the original utterances are vertically aligned to show overlap of behaviors between the speakers. A pair of angular brackets represents a nod. Thus, for example, A’s first nod with the word *hun* is simultaneous with B’s fifth nod. The translation is provided separately, without the indications of nods.

- 1a A: tena kanji-de owachat-ta-tte kanji <hun>< >> >  
like kind.of-with end-Past-CONN kind.of *Aizuchi*
- 1b B: < >< >< > < > huun < >< >< >  
*Aizuchi*
- 2a A: <wakari><-mashi-ta>< >< >  
understand-Polite-PAST
- 2b B: < >< ><wakari> -mashi-ta  
understand-Polite-Past

## Translation

- 1a A: “It kind-of ended kind-of like this. *Aizuchi*”  
(three synchronized nods starting with A’s own *aizuchi*)
- 1b B: “*Aizuchi*”  
(four nods towards the end of A’s sentence. After B’s *aizuchi*, three more synchronized nods)
- 2a A: “Did you understand?”  
(two nods during A’s own sentence and two more nods during B’s sentence)
- 2b B: “I understood.”  
(two synchronized nods during A’s sentence and one more synchronized nods during B’s own sentence)

Table 1 summarizes the features of *aizuchis*, nods, and final particles highlighted in this article so far. *Aizuchis*, nods, and final particles can all be used by the listener and the turn-holder. When used by the listener (non-turn-holder), *aizuchis* and nods can be placed at non-transition relevant places (there is no data so far to see if final particles can be placed in non-transition relevant places). *Aizuchis* and nods can elicit further *aizuchis* and nods, and create a loop sequence. Final particles can also elicit *aizuchis* and possibly also nods. Nods can be produced simultaneously by

Table 1  
Summary of the features of *aizuchi*, nods and final particles in Japanese conversation

	Can be produced by			Elicits from the partner
	The listener	The turn-holder	Multiple participants simultaneously	
Verbal and non-verbal tokens	<i>Aizuchi</i> Frequently [(1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (6)]	Sometimes [(2)]	Not attested	<i>Aizuchi</i> [(3)] Nod [(Kogure, this volume)]
	Nod Frequently [(5), (6)]	Frequently [(6)]	Sometimes [(6)]	<i>Aizuchi</i> [(5)] Nod [(5), (6)]
	Final particle Sometimes [(3)]	Frequently [(2), (3), (4), (5)]	Not attested	<i>Aizuchi</i> [(4)] (Nod?)

The numbers listed in square brackets indicate example numbers in this article. “Frequently” and “Sometimes” reflects the authors’ estimate of the relative frequency.

multiple participants. Analogous simultaneous production has not been attested for *aizuchis* and final particles. Nods, especially simultaneous ones, seem to establish a socially positive feeling among the participants.

### 5. Interwoven “phatic communion”

The general picture that emerges from the above examples is that, in Japanese conversation, there are a variety of ways to elicit *aizuchis* and nods from conversation partners, even at non-transition relevant places. *Aizuchi* and nods can form a “loop sequence”. The two participants sometimes even nod simultaneously. These exchanges of *aizuchis* and nods do not seem to have arisen solely from the need for efficient management of limited conversational resources such as floor or turns, as has often been claimed for forms such as “uh huh” or “yeah” in English conversation (but see Stivers, in press). In addition to the turn management function, another motivation for exchanging *aizuchis* and nods in Japanese conversations seems to be coordination for the sake of coordination, like dancing a waltz, through which a social bond between the participants of a conversation is established and maintained. This is especially the case when the participants are on friendly terms (see, however, Saft (this issue), for a role of *aizuchis* in more confrontational talk).

The social bond engendered through coordination differs from the affiliative social relationship that emerges through a converging stance on the content of the conversation. It has been noted that, in conversation, socially affiliative actions (e.g., agreement, acceptance of an invitation) are preferred to disaffiliative actions (e.g., disagreement, rejection of an invitation) (see Goodwin and Heritage, 1990, Heritage and Raymond, 2005, for an overview). Stivers (in press) argued that, in American English story telling, the listener’s nodding indicates that the listener shares the evaluative stance on an event or situation in the story with the speaker, and thereby indexes affiliation. Such affiliation is mediated by the content of conversation, whereas the social bond that emerges through coordination of nods, *aizuchis*, and cues that elicit them in Japanese conversation does not rely on the content of conversation. Due to this content-free nature, social bonding through coordination can occur pervasively in conversation.

Exchanging *aizuchis* and nods, which have little referential content, is in some ways similar to exchanging greetings. They may both have a function, which Malinowski (1936) called “phatic communion”. Malinowski suggested that the purpose of exchanging greetings such as “Nice day, today”, “How are you?” is not to transmit thoughts to each other, but to break a silence and establish “a common sentiment” by “communion” (sharing) of words. This sharing establishes a social bond between the participants. Small talk is also considered to have a similar social function (e.g., Bickmore and Cassell, 1999). Greetings and small talk serve what Dunbar (2004) calls the “grooming” function of language, with which a social bond among group members is established and maintained.

Nods, *aizuchis*, and final particles, however, differ from greetings and small talk in some important respects. Greetings occur in a very specific interactional context in conversation. For example, “hello” is used immediately after an encounter as an opener for a potential conversation. In contrast, nods, *aizuchis* and final particles are more flexible as to the interactional contexts in which they can occur. Small talk goes on for an extended period of time, and has specific referential contents, albeit inconsequential ones. Nods, *aizuchis*, and final particles have a compact form and their referential content is minimal.

Thus, nods, *aizuchis*, and final particles in Japanese conversation can be used flexibly and frequently in utterances with varied content in a variety of interactional contexts. As has been

shown, nods and *aizuchis* can be elicited and exchanged in parallel to the exchange of referential information. In other words, social bonding can be established through the exchange of nods and *aizuchis*, relatively independently from the referential content of conversation (unlike the affiliative actions such as agreement and acceptance). Therefore, Japanese conversation can constantly interweave two streams of activities, namely phatic communion and exchange of referential information, at the micro-interactional level.

### 6. Socio-historical motivations

The importance of exchanging *aizuchis* in Japanese linguistic practice is also apparent from the fact that *aizuchi* is not a technical term, but a part of the everyday vocabulary of Japanese speakers. Its etymology goes back to a technical term in Japanese traditional sword making. To make a sword, the master and the assistant hammer the iron alternately with a regular rhythm. The master, with a small hammer, sets the pace and instructs the assistant with a big hammer where to hit next. The assistant’s blows physically shape the sword out of a lump of hot iron. *Aizuchi* originally referred to this assistants’ blow, which must carefully follow every master’s blow and yet plays a major role in shaping the sword (Ono et al., 1974). The contemporary use of this term typically focuses on the alternation of blows. For example, Kindaichi et al. (1991) defined the term as the rhythmic coordination with the interlocutor’s speech. The existence of this folk terminology indicates a high meta-awareness of the phenomenon among Japanese speakers. The folk conception of conversation symbolized in *aizuchi* is rhythmic alternation and immaculate coordination between participants.

In contrast, English does not have any folk terms to refer to short utterances such as “uh huh” or “yeah”. Linguists had to invent technical terms to refer to such phenomena: “back-channel” (Yngve, 1970),<sup>5</sup> “continuer” (Schegloff, 1982), “reactive tokens” (Clancy et al., 1996). These terms are strictly technical, and are not part of everyday vocabulary. Each of these terms reflects the theoretical framework with which the functions and distributions of these utterances are explained.

The existence of the Japanese folk terminology indicates that *aizuchi* and, more generally, immaculate coordination between participants of conversations are considered to be very important. This cultural emphasis on coordination dovetails with suggestions that the Japanese emphasis on consideration (*omoiyari*) and cooperation is reflected in the use of *aizuchis* and conversational style in general (Mizutani, 1984; Maynard, 1990; Clancy et al., 1996; Kita, 1999). One of the important features of consideration and cooperation in Japan is assimilation among people (Lebra, 1976; Sakamoto, 1993). This seems to be reflected in the fact that the turn-holder and the listener play similar roles in the production of *aizuchis* and nods (Kita, 1999). The turn-holder as well as the listener can produce *aizuchis*, as in (2), and nods, as in (6). In addition, loop sequences of *aizuchis*, as in (3), further blur the distinction between the turn-holder and the one who passes a turn-taking opportunity. In simultaneous nodding, as in (7), the distinction between the turn-holder and the listener is not meaningful, as the concept of turns is not applicable. The turn-holder often elicits *aizuchis*, as in (2), (3), (4), and (6), which leads to frequent exchanges of *aizuchis*. This mechanism interweaves the exchange of phatic communion into the exchange of referential information at the level of the micro-structure of conversation.

<sup>5</sup> See Kita (1996, 1999) for a discussion of the different metaphors that underlie the Japanese term, *aizuchi*, and the English term, back-channel.

'Considerate' *aizuchis*, discussed in example (1), may be another phenomenon that is motivated by a virtue that Japanese people take as common sense. In example (1), the turn-holder was developing a narrative smoothly. The listener may have anticipated the turn-holder's wish to keep developing the narrative, and thus pre-empted the occurrence of a transition relevant place by placing an *aizuchi* at the last syllable of the clause in the turn-holder's speech. Anticipation of others' needs and wants is considered to be a virtue (referred to as *omoiyari*) in Japan (Lebra, 1976), and considerate *aizuchis* can be understood as manifestations of this virtue.

As has been shown, Japanese conversation puts emphasis on mutual coordination and social bonds. This is consistent with the view that the Japanese concept of self is socially defined, and can be seen as "seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and action of others in the relationship" (Markus and Kitayama, 1991:277).

### 7. Cultural specificity and cross-cultural commonality

The preceding sections has provided a brief overview of the phenomena concerning *aizuchis*, nodding, and final particles that shape Japanese conversation in its characteristic way, and offered a discussion of possible socio-cultural motivations for the phenomena. This gives rise to the question about the extent to which the phenomena described here are specific to Japanese conversation. It might be the case that they also exist in other languages like English, but simply have not been described. It is perhaps the case that certain phenomena are easier to see in one language than in others because the frequency is higher and/or because closed-class words are involved. It is also possible that certain principles are common across cultures, but the domain of their applications may vary. For example, nodding may establish a positive social relationship cross-culturally between participants of a conversation. In Japanese, the relevant positive relationship can arise from good coordination of conversational acts as in the case of simultaneous nodding (or from an attempt to amend, through nodding, an awkwardness that resulted from poor coordination). In American English, the positive relationship can arise from the shared evaluative stance towards referential contents of the conversation (Stivers, in press).<sup>6</sup>

In this article, not only have linguistic phenomena that vary cross-culturally been described, but also an explanation of the linguistic differences in terms of socio-historical differences across cultures has been attempted. This approach is in line with previous research that argued for cultural motivations for syntactic and semantic phenomena (e.g., the articles in Enfield, 2002a) and pragmatic phenomena such as linguistic politeness (e.g., Ide, 1989, 1997). Though there is still no 'gold standard' for methodology for the investigation of the cultural influence on language structure and use (Enfield, 2002b) and further discussions on methodology are needed, we argue that cultural variation can explain a substantial part of the cross-linguistic variation of conversational phenomena.

When discussing cultures (as opposed to culture), it is important to distinguish the monolithic view and the generalization view of cultures (Enfield, 2002b). It should be noted that use of "cultures" here does not entail the assumption that a given culture is monolithic. It is merely presumed that certain observations and theoretical claims over a certain group of people can be generalized to a larger group.

<sup>6</sup> It is also possible that this difference may simply be due to the lack of description of the relevant phenomena in the respective cultures.

### 8. Final words

It is the hope of the authors that this article can be a catalyst for studies of conversational phenomena that are prominent in Japanese but have not been explored in other languages so far, and for cross-linguistic studies of conversation. The accumulation of such studies is essential for the further development of descriptive and theoretical frameworks for cultural specificity and commonality of various conversational phenomena. Such a development will lead to a deeper understanding of the human capacity for conversation, and will further the discussion on language behavior in its cultural context.

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