Gender Differences in Japanese Conversation

Junko Ueno

Union College

Abstract

The present study aims to explore the differences between the interaction styles of Japanese men and women. The study specifically examines three interactional patterns as seen in a Japanese talk/variety show: interruptions, reactions to interruptions, and backchannels. The data are analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In the quantitative analysis, interruptions, reactions to interruptions, and backchannels are identified from the excerpts and categorized. In the qualitative analysis, the context of these various interruptions is closely examined, and the functions of interruptions are probed. The results are discussed following the implications.

Introduction

This study examines the interaction patterns of Japanese men and women, focusing on interruptions, reactions to interruptions, and backchannels. The way gender differences in conversational settings are expressed has been extensively explored in American linguistic research. Deborah Tannen (1990) stated that gender differences in language result from the different goals men and women have in conversation. According to Tannen, women tend to engage in a give-and-take style of speaking and listening. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to lecture in an attempt to establish authority. This difference is most evident in their use of listening responses. Women often use supportive backchannels, such as saying "uh huh," nodding, or laughing (Tannen, 1990). Men, however, are more likely to interrupt others (Holmes, 1995).

Gender differences in the Japanese language are usually marked syntactically and lexically. Particular sentence endings and word choices distinguish women's language from men's language. Previous studies have explored these "gendered" Japanese linguistic features. The linguistic differentiation of gender tends to make Japanese women's language sound softer, more polite, and less assertive. Japanese women also use honorifics more frequently than Japanese men use (Ide, 1993). Still, few studies have closely examined gender differences in the conversational patterns of Japanese men and women. It is true that 'gendered' linguistic forms are unique to the Japanese language, but gender distinctions in language use should exist in addition to these lexical and syntactic traits. Crawford (1995) stated that certain interactional features create characteristic patterns of speaking when men and women are involved in conversation. An exploration of the interactions of Japanese men and women should present new insight into how gender is expressed and created through language. The effects of gender will become more apparent when research attention shifts from a narrow focus on linguistic features to an exploration of the dynamics of interaction (Crawford, 1995). As Okamoto (2002) found in her research, the linguistic forms used by women are closely linked to social ideology. Social contexts such as the media subtly

encourage Japanese women to use feminine speech so they can appear attractive, beautiful, and feminine (Okamoto, 2002). It is worthwhile to examine if this social ideology is also extended to the interactional patterns of Japanese people.

When examining interactional patterns, understanding the cultural characteristics of the language being examined is essential. Therefore, culture should be a salient factor in the analysis of interactional patterns. As Canary and Dindia (1998) argued, sex or gender differences in language do not occur independently of social context. Yamada (1997) described the contrasting communication styles of Japanese and American as, respectively, "Listener-Talk" and "Speaker-Talk." In Japanese conversation, the listener plays an important role with frequent backchannels and by guessing the intentions of the speaker. In American conversation, however, a speaker is responsible for articulating their opinion clearly (Yamada, 1997). These contrasting communication styles may differentiate how Japanese men and women, and American men and women interact. Thus, an examination of the interaction of Japanese men and women will contribute to a better understanding of cultural issues created by gender differences in both Japan and America.

This study will analyze excerpts of a typical Japanese talk/variety show consisting of mix-sexed conversation. Interruptions, reactions to interruptions, and backchannels will be examined quantitatively and qualitatively. I will first review relevant literature and explore gender differences in American conversational settings, Japanese gender differences expressed in language use, and Japanese and American communication styles. I will then analyze the data of this study and discuss the findings. Finally, I will present the implications of the findings.

Japanese and American Communications Styles

Communication style is a salient feature that should be highlighted in discussing divergent cultural traits. Most scholars agree that Japanese and American communication styles, strategies, and goals differ (Maynard, 1997; Wetzel, 1988; Yamada, 1997). Wetzel (1988) noted that Japanese people value communication patterns that show sensitivity to the other: Japanese people tend to demonstrate their empathy, solicit agreement, and show concern about what others are thinking. Maynard (1997) contended that Japanese speakers place importance on cooperation and collaboration in face-to-face encounters (p. 133). Japanese people, therefore, try to be empathic and supportive of others. Yamada (1997) suggested that Japanese practice "Others-Centered Interdependence" through implicit communication and try to be group members who ideally bond in silence.

These communication styles are not necessarily valued in the same way in America. In contrast to Japanese Others-Centered Interdependence, Yamada (1997) claimed that Americans practice Equal-Opportunity Independence. Americans tend to favor explicit communication and endeavor to be outspoken individuals. Moreover, Wetzel (1988) argued that Japanese communication strategies are considered powerless, and are often related to female communication styles in the West. She further noted that the communication strategies that are linked to power in the West are the assertion of dominance, interrupting while others have the floor, challenging or disputing others' utterances, ignoring the comments of others, and making direct declarations of fact or opinion (p. 561). These strategies are seen as immature or childish from a Japanese point of view (Wetzel, 1988).

Yamada (1997) specifically described the contrasting communication styles of Japanese and Americans as Listener-Talk and Speaker-Talk. According to Yamada, Listener-Talk is the main mode of Japanese communication. In Listener-Talk, a listener's interpretation is fundamental; the audience possesses the critical responsibility of communication. This communication style is congruent with Japanese *sasshi no bunka* or "the guessing culture," as addressed by Wilson (1998). In *sasshi no bunka*, a Japanese must anticipate the intentions of another because social indirectness is regarded as ideal for interpersonal relations (Makino, 2002). In American conversations, however, a good communicator should clearly and quickly articulate their points. The speaker is responsible for monitoring the effect of her/his words on her/his audience. Thus, "Americans define the ideal communicator as a speaker-in-action, while the Japanese define the ideal communicator as a listener who cares" (p. 50).

Aizuchi, or backchanelling, is listed as one of the primary strategies used by listeners in Japan. Backchannels are vocal feedback from the listener, such as 'n,n,n' in Japanese and "un-huh," "yeah," and "right" in English. Backchannels frequently appear in Japanese conversations because they stress the listener's role as an interpreter and foster togetherness (Yamada, 1997). Head-bobbing, which usually takes place when a listener uses backchannels, is another feature of Listener-Talk (Yamada, 1997).

American Speaker-Talk does not seem to embrace the use of backchannels. A previous study has demonstrated that backchannels occur less frequently in American interactions than in Japanese ones (Furo, 1999). Yamada (1997) argued that the American concept of turn-taking results in less use of backchannels. According to Yamada in America, a turn is an opportunity to show credibility and power, and is normally held by one person at a time. Therefore, overuse of backchannels can be regarded as invading a speaker's right to talk rather than being supportive. Similarly, simultaneous talk happens in a competition to gain the floor in American conversations. Yet, in Japan, speakers utilize simultaneous talk to enjoy conversations in a more harmonious atmosphere that maintains and supports the speaking partners (Hayashi, 1988).

Thus, previous studies portray the overall Japanese communication style as cooperative and harmonious, while American communication is seen as explicit and assertive. Few studies, however, have explored non-harmonious situations in Japanese conversations, such as interruptions, or how Japanese people react when interrupted. Moreover, the communication styles may not necessarily be homogeneous among the entire populations of Japan and America. In addition to cultural characteristics, other factors such as gender play significant roles in communication.

Communication Styles of Men and Women in America

Scholars have extensively explored the different communication styles of men and women in America. Lakoff (1975) analyzed women's language use, and asserted that the speech of women is characterized by unique linguistic features such as specialized vocabulary, tag questions, intonation, hedges, and hypercorrect grammar. This speech style creates the image of hesitancy and weakness. She postulated that men and women's divergent social status and roles trigger these differences in communication styles. Lakoff (1975) also argued that women become unassertive and insecure because they have been taught to speak and act

like ladies. Women's speech styles are developed as a result of social sex-role expectations (Lakoff, 1975).

Maltz and Borker (1982) contended that because American men and women come from different sociolinguistics subcultures with different experiences and social contexts, different genres of speech and skill exist among them. Specifically, they propose that different cultural rules for interaction exist for American boys and girls. Haas (1979) explored the concept that girls and boys in contemporary America learn different ways of speaking by the age of five or earlier. For example, girls play in small groups in private or semi-private settings and their activities are usually structured in cooperative and noncompetitive ways (Goodwin, 1980; Lever, 1978). Girls try to create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality, and to choose acceptable ways of criticizing others (Maltz & Borker, 1982). Boys, on the other hand, play in a larger, more hierarchical groups where they learn to assert their position of dominance, attract an audience, and assert themselves when other speakers have the floor (Maltz & Borker, 1982).

The same trend continues when these boys and girls become adults. According to Maltz and Borker (1982), women tend to ask more questions than men, and are more likely to provide positive reactions such as backchanelling and agreeing. Women also tend to use the pronouns "you" or "we" to proactively involve others in the conversation (Hirschmen, 1973). Tannen (1990) asserted that women value community in their interactions; they are cooperative and given to affiliation. Women also prefer to solve disputes without direct confrontation (Tannen, 1990). Men, however, emphasize contest in their communication (Tannen, 1990). According to Hirschmen (1973), men are more likely to challenge or dispute their partners' utterances. Unlike women, they tend to disregard the comments of others and provide less backchanneling (Maltz & Borker, 1982). Men also tend to control the conversation by introducing new topics and personally developing them (Zimmerman & West, 1975). Tannen (1990) claimed that men are competitive and prone to conflict. They regard conflict as a place to negotiate their status (Tannen, 1990). Tannen (1990) summarized the fundamental gender differences in communication: " For most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. … For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order" (p. 77). Thus, American men's conversational style seems to better match the exemplary American communication pattern discussed in the previous section.

Language Use of Men and Women in Japan

Japanese norms of behavior have traditionally been highly gendered (Okamoto, 2002). For example, women often cover their mouths when they laugh because showing the teeth is not considered aesthetically pleasing. Women are also expected to speak differently than men. The typical forms of Japanese women's language reflect both how women are seen in society and women's own self image; they are also closely connected to Japanese history. Feminine speech was encouraged in the *Meiji* era (the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century). In the *Meiji* era, the Japanese government standardized the Japanese language and emphasized the use of feminine speech according to the ideal of *ryoosai kenbo* "good wife, good mother."

The characteristics of feminine speech frequently cause people to interpret it as a symbol of Japanese women's social powerlessness and their low social status (Ide, 1982; Okamoto, 1995; Smith, 1992). Compared to Japanese masculine speech, feminine speech has been depicted as gentle, soft, indirect, nonassertive, polite, and powerless (Okamoto, 1995; Reynolds-Akiba, 1993; Shibamoto, 1985; Smith, 1992). Feminine speech is largely marked by sentence final expressions (pragmatic particles, assertive copula), referential terms, and honorifics (Matsumoto, 2002). For instance, male Japanese speakers use sentence finals such as *ze*, *yo*, and *na* that express abruptness and forcefulness. Female Japanese speakers, on the other hand, use *wa*, *no*, and *kashira* sentence finals implying a softening, hesitance, and lack of assertiveness (Ide, 1994). First pronoun use is another example. Women are supposed to use different first pronouns from men. *Atakushi* and *atashi* are for women, *boku* and *ore* are for men (Ide, 1990). Women are expected to avoid the deprecatory pronouns, such as *ore* and *boku*, and to exhibit a good demeanor (Miyazaki, 2002).

The linguistics forms that Japanese women use are inexorably linked to social ideology. Ide (1979) argued that feminine speech implies that the social role of women is to be gentle, to facilitate a bright and pleasant atmosphere for others, and to never put themselves forward. Ide (1990) contended that many Japanese actually believe that women should speak more politely than men should. This belief is reinforced by social constructs, such as the media. Okamoto (2002) noted that the media spreads the idea that speaking politely is an essential ability for a sophisticated and educated woman.

The speaker's gender does not always determine the use of masculine or feminine speech, however. Other factors such as psychological situational variables also contribute to the decision (Maynard, 1997). For example, female speakers may choose to use honorifics to show social distance rather than to merely demonstrate their good upbringing. Moreover, these days, as social diversity among Japanese women increases, speech styles have started to change. Miyazaki (2002) conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study and found that many Japanese junior high school girls used *boku*, a plain male pronoun, and/or a deprecatory male pronoun, *ore*. Takasaki (1993) examined the conversations of women of different occupations. Her findings show that homemakers use more feminine speech than students do, and that female office workers use more feminine speech than professional or self-employed women do. Okamoto's (1995) study also analyzed deviant cases of women's language. Her findings indicate that young Japanese women have increasingly discontinued the use of feminine speech; they tend to instead use moderately masculine and neutral forms. Finally, Matsumoto's (2002) study showed that there is a variation in the use of gendered forms even among upper-middle-class women in their late 30s and 40s who would normally thought of as prototypical speakers of feminine speech.

Thus, previous studies that have examined the linguistic forms used by Japanese women and that have investigated gender differences in the Japanese language tend to focus solely on lexical and syntactic levels. Yet, few studies have analyzed how Japanese women interact with others, let alone how their interactional patterns differ from those of men. Without a study that explores their actual conversational styles beyond these linguistic forms, it is not possible to understand how gender influences the Japanese communication style. It is thus important see how Japanese cultural values are characterized in women's and men's interactional patterns. Furthermore, it is essential to examine if the idea of how a woman should speak and the social ideology behind gendered forms conform to the interaction patterns of Japanese men and women. Culture, communication, and gender are intertwined.

The exploration of gender differences in interactions is crucial in the study of both gender relations and cross-cultural communication styles.
This study explores the communication styles of Japanese women and men in a non-harmonious conversational setting, interruption. Specifically, it examines who cooperates to or interrupts the conversation more frequently in Japan. The following research questions are thus posed in this study:

How frequently do Japanese men and women interrupt in mix-sexed conversation?
How do Japanese men and women react when they are interrupted?
How frequently or infrequently do Japanese men and women use backchannels in mixed-sex conversation?

Methods

The focus of this study is interruptions, reactions to the interruptions, and backchannels in Japanese mixed-sex conversations. The term "interruption" usually implies the violation of another's right to speak; this term is used in this way both in ordinary speech and in technical research (James & Clarke, 1993). Not all the interruptions, however, are disruptive attempts at dominance. Some interruptions are meant to be supportive and cooperative. For example, asking a question or making a comment while another person speaks can simply be a sign of active listenership (James & Clarke, 1993). This study will examine both types of interruption, a term that can be broadly defined as "any deviation from a smooth switch between speakers." Furgerson (1977) articulated this definition and other researchers have since adopted it in their research (Craig & Pitts, 1990). This study classifies interruption into two types: dominance-associated and supportive interruptions. Findings of previous studies conducted in America show that patterns of interruption are asymmetrical and dependent on gender (Crawford, 1995). Namely, males interrupt their conversation partners much more frequently than females (Eakins & Eakins, 1976; West, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1983). Previous studies also found that women primarily use interruptions to indicate interest and rapport (Booth & Butterfield, 1988; Coates, 1989). This study will investigate if the same trend is evident in Japanese interactions.

It is important to note that the context in which interruptions are used also needs to be examined. Questions asked for clarification or agreeable comments can be attempts to obtain the floor, and disagreeing is not necessarily disruptive (James & Clarke, 1993). To explore the context of interruption this study analyzes the reactions of the people who are interrupted. Reactions are helpful in studying the communication patterns of Japanese men and women when they encounter unsmooth switches in interactions. Reactions to dominance-associated interruptions are divided into two sorts: (1) a relinquishing of the floor and (2) a maintaining of the floor (persisting in speaking). Reactions to supportive interactions are also categorized as: (1) an acknowledgement of a question or comment and (2) a lack of acknowledgement a question or comment.

Finally, in addition to interruptions and reactions to interruptions, this study will investigate the use of backchannels. Backchannels are a listener's utterances that are smaller than a lexical unit (Furo, 1999). Previously, Furo (1999) analyzed female conversations and male conversations of Japanese and Americans and found that backchannels occur more frequently in Japanese than in English. Her findings also indicate that Japanese females used more backchannels than men did. This study reexamines the use of backchannels in mixed-

sex conversations and compares this pattern with the interruptions of Japanese men and women.

Data Analysis

Excerpts from a Japanese talk/variety show comprise the data employed in this study. The variety show chosen is popular, one hour long, and consists of three or four sections where the host and guests are engaged in a conversation or game. For example, one excerpt involves the guests discussing whether a particular Japanese scarf would cost more or less than 20,000 yen. Guests are usually Japanese celebrities and include actors, singers, and comedians. Their ages typically vary from 20 to 50. Ten conversational settings were selected for analysis. Those were chosen for the following reasons: (1) these settings included both male and female speakers; and (2) all the speakers were actively engaged in the conversation and one speaker did not dominate the floor. Each excerpt is approximately fifteen minutes long and three to five male speakers and three to five female speakers were involved in the interactions.

Overall, thirty-eight male speakers and thirty-eight female speakers appeared in the ten selected conversational settings. Male speakers include the host and guests who were comedians and actors. The host was in his 40s, and male guests were in their 20s or early 30s, except for one guest who was in his 50s. Female speakers were all guests to the show. Twelve of the female speakers were in their late 30s or 40s, and the rest were in their 20s or early 30s. As mentioned earlier, interruptions, reactions to the interruptions, and backchannels were identified from the excerpts and placed into different categories. In order to clarify, several examples from each category are presented here. The names of the conversationalists from the show are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

<u>Interruptions: Dominance-Associated Interruption</u>
Excerpt 1:
Nami (female): *Ago wa zenzen nakattan desu ga, koko ni shirikon o irete…*
"I used to have no chin at all, but I got silicon here, and…"
Yoshiko (female): *Ago ga nai tomodachi watashi ni mo iru wa.*
"I also have a friend who does not have a chin."

In this excerpt, Nami was speaking about the cosmetic surgery she received in her chin. Yoshiko interrupted her and obtained the floor to talk about her friend.

<u>Interruptions: Supportive Interruption</u>
Excerpt 2:
Rie (female): *Doredake iki o tomerareruka ga*
"How long can he stop breathing, is…"
Takashi (male): *Kou iu no chanto kyoogi to shite aru no ka*
"Does this type of thing exist as a formal competition?"
Rie: *Hai, arimasu. Sorede…*
"Yes, there is. Then…

In excerpt 2, Rie was explaining a competition where one must put their face in water without breathing for as long as possible. Takashi interrupted her to ask her if it was a formal competition. Here, Takashi's interruption is a sign of interest in the topic rather than an attempt to obtain the floor.

Reaction: Giving Up the Floor

In excerpt 1, Nami was interrupted while speaking about her cosmetic surgery. However, she let Yoshiko have the floor and let her talk about her friend. In this setting, Nami gave up her floor.

Reaction: Not Giving Up the Floor

Excerpt 3:
Takashi (male): *Iya, Yamada san mo…*
"Well, Mr. Yamada also…"
Yoshiko (female): *Chotto, ima kocchi chiratto mite mukoo ni shita wa ne.*
"Wait. He glanced at this side and decided to go to that side."
Takashi: *Yamada san mo hisashiburi no toojyoo ni narimasu.*
"Mr. Yamada also comes to this show after a long interval."

In excerpt 3, while Takashi was speaking, Yoshiko attempted to complain about Mr. Yamada, who glanced at Yoshiko's team but decided to join the other team. Takashi did not let her take over the floor. He instead kept talking.

Acknowledging a Question or a Comment

In excerpt 2, Rie acknowledged Takashi's question and answered it before she continued her explanation. This is an example of acknowledging a question or comment.

Not Acknowledging a Question or a Comment

Except 4:
Kyoko (female): *Amata iru kankookyaku no nakade ne*
"Among many tourists there…"
Miyo (female): *Kizutsukimasu yo nee.*
"That would emotionally hurt, wouldn't it?"
Kyoko: *Sono naka de ne, watashi datta no yo.*
"Among them (tourists), it was me."

In excerpt 4, Kyoko was telling a story about how a kangaroo approached and then threw up on her when she was traveling in Australia. During her talk, Miyo commented and expressed her sympathy, but Kyoko did not acknowledge it and kept speaking.

Backchannels

Furo (1999) presents seven typical Japanese backchannels; *un un* (um), *un* (uh-huh), *uun* (huun), *haa* (huh), *heee* (uum), *huun* (humn), and *aa* (aaa). This study adds *hai* (yeah) as another backchannel. This is because the settings were formal/semi-formal and many speakers used *hai* instead of a casual response like *un* in this program.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

This section discusses the results of the data quantitatively. First, the total number of interruptions of Japanese men and women were compared. Overall, female interruptions (69 times) took place slightly more frequently than those of men (53 times). The difference, however, is slight. This result does not correspond to the previous studies of American conversation; American men interrupt their conversation partners more often than women do. No significant differences were observed among age groups.

Second, overall interruptions were divided into different categories. There is a similar trend in the types of interruptions between men and women. That is, supportive interruptions occurred approximately twice as frequently as dominance-associated interruptions. This result does not coincide with the findings of American research in which men tend to use mainly dominance-associated interruptions. The results do, however, correspond to the previous American findings showing that women use interruptions more frequently for collaborative purpose.

Third, reactions to interruptions were analyzed through the use of four classifications: giving up the floor, not giving up the floor, acknowledging a question or comment, and not acknowledging a question or comment. In this study, men were interrupted fifty-seven times and women were interrupted sixty-five times. Reactions to interruption vary. For men's reactions to interruptions, men chose to give up the floor 26.3% of the time, men chose not to give up the floor 12.2% of the time, men acknowledged the question or comment 26.3 % of the time, and men did not provide any acknowledgement 35.2% of the time. In terms of women's reactions to interruptions, females chose to give up the floor 18.8% of the time, females chose not to give up the floor 9.1% of the time, females reacted by acknowledging the question or comment 38.3% of the time, and females did not provide any acknowledgement 33.8% of the time. The results indicate that both Japanese men and women tend to give up the floor more frequently than they choose to keep speaking when interrupted. Women also seem to acknowledge a question or comment (38.3%) more often than men (26.3%). A relatively large percentage of men (35.2%) and women (33.8%) did not acknowledge the question or comment.

Fourth, numbers of backchannels of Japanese men and women were compared. Women used backchannels (186 times) more frequently than men (141 times). This finding coincides with Furo's (1999) study. It should also be noted here that backchannels happened much more frequently than interruptions in the data of this study.

Qualitative Analysis

This section discusses the results of the data qualitatively. First, in many cases supportive interruptions involved overlapped speech.

Excerpt 5:
Ken (male): *Kore sutuuru dattan da*.
"This was a stool."
Masa (male): *Dareka ga kansookonbu datte*.
"Someone said it's dried seaweed."
Ken: *Chigau. Chigau*.
"No. No."

In excerpt 5, Ken and Masa's utterances overlap; neither of them waits until the other finishes their sentence completely. The overlapped parts are underlined in excerpt 5.

Second, supportive interruptions occurred much more frequently than dominance-associated interruptions. As mentioned above, a supportive interruption can potentially be an attempt to obtain the floor. Supportive interruptions in this data, however, appear to be used solely for collaborative purposes.

Excerpt 6:
Miho (female): *Kore ne, arienai tte.*
"This, it's impossible."
Takashi (male): *Sonna chicchakatta no.*
"Was it that small?"
Miho: *Chicchakatta no. Sorede ne, sogoi tsukarete te*
"It was small. Then, I was very tired and …"

In excerpt 6, Miho was talking about her experience of taking a bath in a small tub at a hotel. While she was speaking about how extraordinary her situation was, Takashi interrupted with a question. Neither Miho nor Takashi took this question, as an attempt to take the floor, however, because Miho kept talking after her brief answer to his question, and Takashi did not try to interrupt a second time.

Third, quite a few questions or comments were disregarded completely. After being ignored, the interrupter did not try to bring it up again.

Excerpt 7:
Kyoko (female): *Shigotogara, takusan haku mon de.*
"I wear them often because of my work."
Masa (male): *Machi demo haite irun desu ka.*
"Do you wear them in a city, too?"
Kyoko: *Kore wa motomoto ohuro agari ni tsukaoo to omotta no.*
"I originally thought that I would use this after taking a bath."

In excerpt 7, Kyoko did not answer Masa's question and kept speaking. Masa did not attempt to seek an answer again and dropped the question. There appears to be no animosity in this interruption, however. In other words, neither Kyoko nor Masa seemed to be upset about being interrupted or being disregarded. A supportive interruption appears to work as a backchannel in this case. This could also be because of the fast-paced, funny, and interactive nature of the show.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study by answering the research questions posed in the beginning.

First, how frequently do Japanese men and women interrupt in mixed-sex conversation? The results indicated that Japanese women interrupt slightly more frequently than Japanese men do. These results are not consistent with previous studies on American men and women that found that American men tend to interrupt the conversation more often than women (Crawford, 1995). These results also do not correspond to the characteristics of

prototypical Japanese masculine speech, which tends to sound abrupt and forceful, and of feminine speech, which is more likely to sound soft and polite. This finding can be interpreted as a reflection of the current trend of young Japanese women discontinuing the use of feminine speech, even though no significant differences were apparent between younger and older women. A previous study did find, however, that older women (late 30s and 40s) do not necessarily follow prototypical female speech (Matsumoto, 2002). Women's professions have also been found to influence their speech patterns. It has been shown that Japanese professional women tend to use more neutral and masculine forms than homemakers (Takasaki, 1993). Considering that all the Japanese women on the TV show were professionals, they may be more assertive and vocal. They may not feel intimidated in speaking and interrupting because they have the same professional backgrounds as the men in the show. Feminine speech was originally encouraged along with the ideal of *ryoosai kenbo* "good wife, good mother." Its use has gradually decreased, as many women do not fall into the simple category, *ryoosai kenbo,* any more. This change in women's culture and language use may extend to their interactional patterns as well. As mentioned above, the effect of gender is significant in communication patterns. The finding of this study reinforces the significance of gender in communication by showing that Japanese women's changing speech patterns is also evident in their interruption tendencies.

The difference in men and women's interruption patterns was, however, relatively small. Therefore, one could assume that Japanese men and women interact similarly in terms of interruptions. Moreover, many of the interruptions seen in this study were supportive rather than dominance-associated. This communication pattern is congruent with the Japanese ideal of a cooperative and harmonious communication style. Supportive interruptions also indicate that a listener tries to be more responsive, which is a characteristic of "Listener-talk." It is possible that Japanese people, men and women, interact harmoniously in group settings due to their experience as children. Maltz and Borker (1982) contended that American boys and girls acquire their way of speaking by the age of five. Japanese children also learn how to communicate when they are young. Peak (2001) examined Japanese children's interaction patterns in the pre-schools of a middle-class, residential neighborhood in Tokyo. In a typical Japanese pre-school, excessive assertion of independent desires is regarded as inappropriate. Children learn to interact smoothly and harmoniously with others and to willingly participate in group activities (Peak, 2001). This culturally formed interactional pattern seems to be learned from childhood and appears to be influential in the predominance of supportive interruptions. Thus, in Japan both gender and culture seem to affect the style and variety of interruption patterns.

Second, how do Japanese men and women react when they are interrupted? The results illustrated that there are similarities as well as differences in Japanese women and men's reactions towards interruptions. Both men and women tend to give up the floor more often than continuing to speak when interrupted. This happened frequently when the interruption was dominance-associated. This tendency appeared to be an avoidance of conflict and an emphasis on harmony, which is consistent with Japanese communication strategies scholars have previously explored (Maynard, 1997; Yamada, 1997). Neither men nor women, however, acknowledged the large number of supportive interruptions such as questions and comments, and kept speaking. This behavior of the speakers may appear to be rude and aggressive. Qualitative analysis shows, however, that it is not the case that speakers disregarded supportive interruptions in order to prevent the floor from being taken. In

Japanese interactions, the "one at a time" rule is not always applied because simultaneous talk is common (Yamada, 1997). Simultaneous talk happens frequently in Japanese conversations because simultaneous talk is a way of supporting the speaker instead of competing for the floor (Hayashi, 1988). In this study, supportive interruptions seemed to be dropped often during simultaneous speech. Speakers may even regard the function of simultaneous talk as similar to that of backchannels. Yet, the finding shows that women acknowledged supportive interruptions more often than men did. This finding implies that, similar to the communication patterns of American women, Japanese women tend to be more cooperative in building rapport in interactions. These results also suggest that gender might affect interactional patterns beyond the cultural factors in the communication style.

Third, how frequently or infrequently do Japanese women use backchannels in mixed-sex conversation? The results indicated that both men and women utilize backchannels much more frequently than they use interruptions. The harmonious Japanese communication style is evident in these results as well. Furthermore, the findings show that although Japanese men use a large number of backchannels, Japanese women use backchannels even more frequently. These results are consistent with that of Furo (1999), and correspond with previous American research that shows women use more backchannels than men use (Tannen, 1990). This finding also suggests that Japanese women may be more willing to show their support to the speaker and are more collaborative in rapport building, even though Japanese men are also highly cooperative. Again, gender appears to differentiate the interactional patterns strongly, even though cultural factors are also prominent.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has examined Japanese women and men's interactional patterns, focusing on interruptions, reactions to interruptions, and backchannels in mixed-sex conversations. Excerpts from a Japanese talk/variety TV show were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Findings of this study indicate that both Japanese men and women tend to give up the floor instead of continuing to speak when interrupted. They both provide supportive interruptions more frequently than dominance-associated interruptions. These tendencies are consistent with the cultural characteristics of Japanese communication, in which conflicts are avoided and simultaneous speech is common (Yamada, 1997).

Gender, however, seems to be a significant component in Japanese conversational behavior as well. Women were found to interrupt the conversation slightly more often than men do. These findings may be a reflection of the current Japanese professional women's speech pattern. The change in Japanese women's speech patterns appears to be evident in their interactional behavior. Japanese women were also found, however, more willingly to acknowledge supportive interruptions and to provide more backchannels than Japanese men. These results support the previous American findings showing that women tend to be supportive and cooperative in interactions. Thus, Japanese patterns of interruption and backchannels were found to be divergent in males and females.

It must be stressed here that the data sets of this study are limited and there are no attempts to generalize. The context of this study's data is very specific: excerpts from a talk/variety show on TV. People in the show were celebrities who were used to being on stage and more inclined to be outgoing. Further, the diversity in a study's population is also crucial because neither women nor men form homogeneous groups. Even though gender is a

critical factor, other components such as social status and social roles must also be explored. Different results may have been found if the setting was a business conference, a classroom setting, or a family conversation. Further exploration of Japanese men and women's interactional patterns in different social settings will lead to a better understanding of gender and cultural issues. Additionally, as Yamada (1997) suggested, the Japanese interactional patterns found in this study, especially the frequent use of supportive interactions and backchannels, may be challenging to acquire for American learners of Japanese who are accustomed to a "one at a time" approach. In other words, the acquisition of Japanese interactional patterns should indicate that the learner has a high pragmatic competence and a good cross-cultural understanding. An examination of students' interactional patterns in Japanese and how they are correlated to their proficiency is also recommended as a future study.

References

Booth-Butterfield, M., & Booth-Butterfield, S. (1988). Jock talk: Cooperation and competition within a university women's basketball team. In B. Bate & A. Taylor (Eds.), *Women communicating: Studies of women's talk* (pp. 177-198). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Canary, D., & Dindia, K. (1998). Prologue: Recurring issues in sex differences and similarities in communication. In D. Canary & K. Dindia (Eds.), *Sex differences and similarities in communication* (pp. 1-18). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Coates, J. (1989). Gossip revisited: language in all-female groups. In J. Coates & D. Cameron (Eds.), *Women in their speech communities* (pp. 94-122). London: Longman.

Craig, D., & Pitts, M. (1990). The dynamics of dominance in tutorial discussions. *Linguistics, 28*, 125-138.

Crawford, M. (1995). *Talking difference*. London: Sage Publications.

Eakins, B., & Eakins, R. (1976). Verbal turn-taking and exchanges in faculty dialogue. In B. Dubois & I. Crouch (Eds.), *The sociology of the language of American women* (pp. 53-62). San Antonio, TX: Trinity University.

Furgerson, N. (1977). Simultaneous speech, interruptions, and dominance. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 16*, 295-302.

Furo, H. (1999). Listening responses in Japanese and US English: Gender and social interaction. In B. Swierzbin, F. Morris, M. Anderson, C. Klee, & E. Tarone (Eds.), *Social and cognitive factors in second language acquisition* (pp. 445-457). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.

Goodwin, M. (1980). Directive-response speech sequences in girls' and boys' task activities. In S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker, & N. Furman (Eds.), *Women and language in literature and society* (pp. 136-165). New York: Praeger.

Haas, A. (1979). The acquisition of genderlect. In J. Orasnu, M. Slater & L. Adler (Eds.), *Language, sex, and gender: Does la différence make a difference?* (pp. 101-113). Annuals of the New York Academy of Sciences 327.

Hayashi, R. (1988). Simultaneous talk – from the perspective of floor management of English and Japanese speakers. *World Englishes, 7*, 269-288.

Hirschmen, L. (1973). *Female-male differences in conversational interaction*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, San Diego, CA.

Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, men, and politeness.* London: Longman.

Ide, S. (1979). *Onna no kotoba, otoko no kotoba*. Tokyo: Keizai Tsushinsha.

Ide, S. (1982). Japanese sociolinguistics: Politeness and women's language. *Lingua, 57*, 357-385.

Ide, S. (1990). How and why do women speak more politely in Japanese? In S. Ide & N. McGloin (Eds.), *Aspects of Japanese women's language* (pp. 63-79). Tokyo: Kuroshio.

Ide, S. (1993). *Sekai no joseigo, nihon no joseigo: Joseigo kenkyuu no shintenkai o motomete*. *Nihongo-gaku, 12* (6), 4-12.

James, D., & Clarke, S. (1993). Women, men, and interruptions: A critical review. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Gender and conversational interaction* (pp. 231-280). New York: Oxford University Press.

Kobayashi, M. (1993). *Sedai to joseigo: Wakai sedai no kotoba no 'tyuuseika' ni tsuite. Nihongo-gaku, 12* (6), 181-192.

Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and woman's place.* New York: Harper and Row.

Lever, J. (1978). Sex differences in the complexity of children's play and games. *American Sociological Review, 43*, 471-483.

Makino, S. (2002). *Uchi* and *soto* as cultural and linguistic metaphors. In R. Donahue (Ed.), *Exploring Japaneseness on Japanese enactments of culture and consciousness* (pp. 29-64). Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing.

Maltz, D., & Borker, R. (1982). A cultural approach to male-female conversation. In J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and social identity* (pp. 196-216). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Matsumoto, Y. (2002). Gender identity and the presentation of self in Japanese. In S. Benor, M. Rose, Sharma, D., Sweetland, J., & Q. Zhang (Eds.), *Gendered practices in language* (pp. 339-354). Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

Maynard, S. (1997). *Japanese communication.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Miyazaki, A. (2002). Relational shift: Japanese girls' nontraditional first person pronouns. In S. Benor, M. Rose, Sharma, D., Sweetland, J., & Q. Zhang (Eds.), *Gendered practices in language* (pp. 355-374). Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

Okamoto, S. (1995). "Tasteless" Japanese: Less "feminine" speech among young Japanese women. In K. Hall & M. Bucholtz (Eds.), *Gender articulated: Language and the socially constructed self* (pp. 297-325). New York: Routledge.

Okamoto, S. (2002). Ideology and social meanings: Rethinking the relationship between language, politeness, and gender. In S. Benor, M. Rose, Sharma, D., Sweetland, J., & Q. Zhang (Eds.), *Gendered practices in language* (pp. 91-114). Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

Peak, L. (2001). Learning to become part of the group: The Japanese child's transition to preschool life. In H. Shimizu & R. Levine (Eds.), *Japanese frames of mind* (pp. 143-169). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reynolds-Akiba, K. (1993). *Onna no nihongo.* Tokyo: Yuushindo.

Shibamoto, J. (1985). *Japanese women's language*. New York: Academic Press.

Smith, J. (1992). Women in charge: Politeness and directive in the speech of Japanese women. *Language in Society*, *21* (1), 59-82.

Takasaki, M. (1993). *Josei no kotoba to kaisoo. Nihongo-gaku, 12* (6), 169-180.

Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand*. New York: William Morrow.

West, C. (1985). *Routine complications: Troubles with talk between doctors and patients.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. (1983). Small insults: A study of interruptions in cross-sex conversations between unacquainted persons. In B. Thorne, C. Kramarae, & N. Henley (Eds.), *Language, gender, and society* (pp. 102-117). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Wetzel, P. (1988). Are powerless communication strategies the Japanese norms? *Language in Society*, *17*, 555-564.

Wilson, M. (1998). The guessing culture of Japan: gain or pain? In R. Donahue (Ed.), *Japanese culture and communication: Critical cultural analysis* (pp. 215-218). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Yamada, H. (1997). *Different games, different rules*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zimmerman, D., & West, C. (1975). Sex roles, interruptions, and silences in conversation. In B. Thorne & N. Henley (Eds.), *Language and sex: Difference and dominance* (pp. 105-129). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.