Questions and Common Ground Building: Cross-Cultural Perspectives of Japanese and American English

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies have been made to reveal how and in what style American and Japanese speakers communicate with each other in order to achieve mutual understanding. The studies so far have obtained fruitful results showing the contrast between American and Japanese speakers on issues such as their preferred conversational styles (Mizutani 1983; Maynard 1997). The current study will analyze the use of questions in American English and Japanese conversation as an attempt to disclose how American and Japanese speakers establish mutual understanding. Moreover, the use of questions will be explicated by drawing upon the notion of “common ground,” i.e., “mutual knowledge, shared by social associates” (Enfield and Levinson 2006: 23) since this approach is thought to succeed based on the assumption that a question is one of numerous conversational devices that contribute to building mutual knowledge.

The motivation for this study to examine questions in conversation originates in an initial impression I formed from looking at the conversational data contained in the Mr. O Corpus. That is to say, in Japanese conversation, as the interaction proceeds, the distinction becomes blurred with regard to whom the utterance in question belongs, and vital information is buried in the conversational flow, while in English conversation the agent of the utterance in question is always obvious and the information offered is well ordered. A closer examination suggested that these differences rest largely on the differ-
ing patterns of question asking. Because a large part of the bilateral interac-
tional process depends on question-answer exchanges (Maynard 1997: 209),
discerning differences in the use of questions may result in shedding new light
on the contrastive features of Japanese and English communication.

Thus, this study aims to (1) investigate how English and Japanese speakers
engage themselves in participant roles and use questions in conversation, and
(2) illustrate how the use of questions is related to the feature of conversa-
tional development. Finally, the result of the analysis is explained in terms of
the notion of common ground building.

Because of the purposes of the study, both quantitative and qualitative
analyses will be conducted. The former discloses the distribution of questions,
and the latter denotes the distinctive features of question-asking and convers-
sational development associated with the use of questions.

2. Background of the study

2.1. Common ground and informational/affiliational imperatives

According to Enfield (2006), the term “common ground” includes two
levels of meaning: the cultural and personal levels. At the cultural level, the
term common ground encompasses a common language and common cul-
tural resources for participants to adopt culturally relevant participant roles
(Enfield and Levinson 2006: 20), which rest largely on cultural co-membership.
At the personal level, common ground refers to knowledge that is
openly shared by participants in their current interaction, i.e., what has been
described as physical and linguistic co-presence. Thus, it can be said that in the
course of interaction participants incessantly exploit common ground at the
cultural level, and produce common ground at the personal level.

Another key notion for this study is the “informational and affiliational
imperatives.” According to Enfield (2006), the act of common ground build-
ing is closely interlinked with these imperatives. The informational imperative
requires individuals to cooperate with their interlocutors in maintaining a
common referential understanding. Second, the affiliational imperative re-
quires interlocutors to maintain a common degree of interpersonal affiliation,
proper to the status of the relationship. Of special significance is the fact that
cultures differ with respect to the determination of relationship intensity, and
in the practices by which such intensity is maintained (Enfield 2006: 413). It would be reasonable, therefore, to assume that there are differences between English and Japanese speakers in their ways of handling the informational and affiliational imperatives.

2.2. Studies of questions
2.2.1. Studies of English questions

Questions have been studied by a number of scholars with different interests. Speech act theorists have classified questioning as a type of directive, which is an attempt by the speaker to make the audience react verbally (Austin 1962). Conversation analysts are interested in the sequence of questions and answers, as well as how they operate in the structure of conversation (Sacks et al. 1974). Anthropological linguists explore how each speech community develops its own norms for how questions are used (Gumperz 1982). And interactional sociolinguists have studied intercultural differences in question-asking (Tannen 1984). Of particular significance to this study are issues raised as to the interactional and conversational effects of questions. That is, questions other-select the occupant of the next turn and determine the sequential relevance of a next move (Sack et al. 1974); consequently, a large part of the conversational process is contingent on the use of questions. Moreover, due to the functions of gathering information, showing interest, and encouraging the addressee to participate in talk, questions create a momentary involvement in a topic (Tannen 1984).

2.2.2. Studies of Japanese questions

A number of studies have been made to examine Japanese questions in terms of their forms, functions, and modality. The National Institute for Japanese Language (1960), for example, presented a taxonomy of interrogative postpositions according to their functional types. As for the functions and modality of individual interrogative postpositions, productive studies have been presented by Nitta (1992), Adachi (1999), and others.

In contrast to considerable attention given to the forms, functions, and modality of questions, only a few attempts have so far been made to investigate how questions are used in conversation. Sakakura (1954), one of a lim-
uted number of studies referring to the use of questions, used a play scenario as data and pointed out that more than half of the lines of the scenario expect completion by the addressee. He argued that a large part of so-called “declaratives” in the data are inclined to the category of interrogatives, since they are addressed to the other with the intention of soliciting a response. Kurosaki (1991), based on the investigation of the use of questions in conversation, claimed that half of the questions in the data requested confirmation. He also concluded that questions are likely to be designed to elicit affirmative answers, thus ensuring harmony between speakers.

3. Data

The data for this study consist of ten American English and ten Japanese conversations contained in the Mr. O Corpus. The participants in each conversation are two close female friends. The English participants are students studying in colleges in Tokyo, ranging in age from 20 to 22. The Japanese participants are college students living in Tokyo, ranging in age from 20 to 22. They are all native speakers of their language. The participants were asked to talk freely in pairs about things that have surprised them in their everyday life and they spent approximately five minutes engaged in dyadic conversation. The current study used the first five-minute conversation in each pair. The total length of the data is 50 minutes for both English and Japanese conversations.

4. Definition of questions

This study attempts to find a definition of questions acceptable to both languages, considering their forms and functions in context. Thus, questions in the current study are defined as utterances that meet both of the following conditions: (1) they have a form generally categorized as questions or rising intonation at the end, and (2) they trigger another utterance as a reply from the interlocutor. As for English, included in the form of questions are subject-auxiliary inversion, “wh” questions, and declaratives with rising intonation and interrogative tags. Moreover, expressions indicating the speaker’s doubt such as “I guess . . .” are included inasmuch as they elicit an utterance from the other. As for Japanese, included in the form of questions are declaratives
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with rising intonation, “wh” questions, and utterances that have postpositions listed in The National Institute for Japanese Language (1960). The listed items are postpositions such as *ka, no, ne, yone, kana, kashira, deshoo, jan,* and *janai(ka).*

5. Results and analysis

5.1. Frequencies and functions of questions

Using the above definition, 105 questions in the English conversations and 260 questions in the Japanese conversations were identified. To reveal how these questions function in their conversational context, the analysis begins by classifying them according to the following four functional types: (1) eliciting information, (2) eliciting confirmation, (3) eliciting a new topic, and (4) clarifying information. Definitions and examples of the functional categories are provided below.

(1) Eliciting information:

This type is a question that is asked to elicit new information. There are three kinds of informational questions, depending on the type of information that the questioner seeks. The types of information are (1) yes/no information, (2) “wh” information, and (3) alternative choice from two or more possible answers suggested by the questioner. The following are examples of questions by which the questioner seeks a yes/no answer.

(i) A: It was a big bumblebee too, it just like sat down, and I’m like, “Ow!”
B: *It stung you?*
A: Yeah.

(ii) A: *obakeyashiki hait-ta?*
haunted house enter-PAST

“Did (you) enter the haunted house?”
B: *haitya, byooin no yatsu.*
enter-PAST hospital GEN one

“Yes, (I) entered the one like a hospital.”

(2) Eliciting confirmation:

This is a question that is asked to elicit the other’s confirmation of the
proposition provided by the questioner. Nitta (1992: 152) calls this type of question a “pseudo-question” inasmuch as it is not used to request information, but rather to elicit confirmation about the proposition that the questioner has presented. In English, questions eliciting confirmation are mainly realized by tag questions, negative questions, declaratives with rising intonation, and expressions such as “I wonder.” In Japanese, they are realized by the attachment of postpositions such as ｙｏｎｅ, ｊａｎａｉ, ｊａｎ, ｏｒ ｄｅｓｈｏｏ.

(iii) A: **It’s like she’s just like sort of leaving, [right?**
    B: [Yeah, yeah.

(iv) A: ｄｅｍｏ, ｚｅｎｚｅｎ ｋｉｚｕｉｔｅ ｎａｉ ｗａｋｅ ｊａ ｎａｉ ｙｏｎｅ
    but utterly notice NEG case COP NEG FP
    “But it is not likely that (she) doesn’t realize at all, right?”
    B: ｓｏｏ ｄａ ｙｏｎｅ.
    so COP FP
    “That’s right.”

(3) Eliciting a new topic
This is a question that is asked to elicit a new topic from the other. The use of this type of questions makes a topic boundary.

(v) A: **Do you have a surprising story to share with me today?**
    B: Oh, okay.

(vi) A: **Ｎａｎｋａ ａｒｉ ｍａｓｕ か？**
    something have ADD HON Q
    “Do (you) have something (to talk about)?”
    B: ｅｅ, ｋｏｎｏｍａｅ, ｋｏｎｏｍａｅ, ｋｕｊｉｋｙｕｕ ｎｉ ｉｔ-ｔａ ｎｏ ｎｅ
    well lately lately Fujikyuu to go-PAST FP FP
    “Well, (I) went to Fujikyuu the other day.”

(4) Clarifying information:
This is a question by which the speaker asks for information to clarify the other’s prior utterance. The speaker is checking the accuracy of what is newly received, and sometimes conveying slight unexpectedness.

(vii) A: And during like, junior high and everything, they always try and separate twins.
    B: **Oh, do they?**
A: Yeah, they never put me and my sister in the same class.

(viii) A: *nai, watashi mo na[i.

NEG I either NEG

“No, I didn’t either.”

B: *[a, nai no?]

oh NEG FP

“Oh, (you) didn’t?”

A: *un, nai, nai.

yes NEG NEG

“No, (I) didn’t.”

Table 1 below shows the frequency of question occurrence according to their functional type.

Table 1. Functional types and frequency of questions in English and Japanese conversation (EN: 50 min., JP: 50 min.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional types</th>
<th>Raw count (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliciting information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes/no information</td>
<td>20 (19.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Wh” information</td>
<td>15 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative choice</td>
<td>11 (10.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliciting confirmation</td>
<td>28 (26.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliciting a new topic</td>
<td>16 (15.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying information</td>
<td>15 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>105 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The notable points that the data in Table 1 show are as follows. (1) In a 50-minute conversation, 105 questions occurred in English conversation, and 260 questions in Japanese conversation; questions in Japanese conversation occurred 2.47 times more frequently than those in English conversation. (2) The question type that occupied the greatest part in English conversation was question eliciting information (43.8%), while that in Japanese conversation was questions eliciting confirmation (54.6%). (3) There is a tendency for English speakers to use questions that pursue or clarify information, as shown in the relatively higher rates of questions which seek “wh” information and
alternative choice, as well as clarification questions. (4) There is a tendency for Japanese speakers to ask for a yes/no answer when using information questions, while primarily asking for the other’s confirmation.

What do these differences mean? In the following, English and Japanese examples of typical patterns are presented in order. The data are analyzed focusing on (1) how the speakers define their participant roles and use questions, and (2) how the use of questions contributes to conversational development.

5.2. Questions in English conversation

The qualitative examination of English data discloses a tendency that one partner is engaged in narrating a story about her surprising experience, while the other listens as well as supports the elaboration of the story by asking questions aimed at making the informational content more explicit or detailed. Thus, questions operate as a device that is mainly used by the topic recipient to garner further information from the topic provider. These findings correspond with the results of the quantitative analysis showing questions to elicit information accounting for 43.8% of the overall occurrence of questions.

Now we will show an example. In Excerpt 1, the topic provider E1 begins to talk about her experience of when she was shocked at the news of her sister’s pregnancy.

[Excerpt 1]
01 E1: I was surprised when my sister told me she was pregnant.
02 E2: Yeah, I was actually thinking of that because you told me, t — told me earlier, and that, I was thinking, and I bet that was a shocker for Sarah.
03 E1: Yeah, well, the reason it was so shocking is because she called me on my cell phone, and I had just gotten out of my friends play, and then, I don’t remember what I was doing, but anyway, she called me, and it was both my sisters and they just told me like, ‘Sarah, uhh . . . we have something to tell you’, and I was like, ‘What?’ and she’s like, ‘Oh, Hannah has like a bun in the oven’ or something, and I was like, ‘What?!’ [laugh]
04 E2: [Uh-huh.
05 E1: [And then, I was in the middle of this like huge crowd of people, and I was like, ‘Are you kidding?, like, what are you talking about?’
and then, I was very surprised. {laugh}
06 E1: And then I told my [friends, I was like ‘Hold on a second, my sister’s having a baby!’ {laugh}
07 E2: [Uh-huh.
08 E1: And then her boyfriend thought I was weird or something. {laugh}
09 E2: Your friend’s boyfriend or your sister’s?
10 E1: =My friend’s [boyfriend.
11 E2: [Uh-huh . . . [yeah.
12 E1: [Yeah.
13 E1: And the way they told my [parents was on Valentine’s day . . . well, my sister, my parents, my sister and her . . . that — at that point boyfriend were like, ‘Um, we have something to tell everyone, uhh . . . Hannah’s pregnant’.
14 E2: [Uh-huh.
16 E1: And it was the worst Valentine’s Day surprise ever.
17 E2: What did your parents do?
18 E1: Uh . . . my dad was just . . . didn’t say anything, he was just like, {laugh} completely silent.
19 E1: And my mom was like, ‘Well, what are you going to do about it?’

In Excerpt 1, two questions are presented by the topic recipient E2 (lines 09 and 17). The clarification question in line 09 is asked to obtain an accurate understanding of the proposition being provided by E1. In line 17, right after E1 concludes her story (line 16), a “wh” question is asked to gain information about E1’s parents’ reaction when they heard that their daughter was pregnant. This question prompts E1 to talk further, by which E2 successfully acquires further information. Although it is implied by E2’s utterance in line 02 that a certain part of this story has already been shared by E1 and E2, who are close friends, E2 is persistently engaged in a role of listening and supporting
the elaboration of E1’s story by asking questions. E1, on the other hand, is engaged in a role of providing information. Consequently, through the interactive process of E1’s providing information and E2’s question asking, mutually shared knowledge is built and amplified.

The tendency illustrated in Excerpt 1 is not unique, but rather it is pervasively observed in English data. Let us show another example. In Excerpt 2, E3 broaches her topic: she is surprised to know that some of the athletic clubs at Japanese colleges make a rule of not drinking water during practice.

[Excerpt 2]
02 E3: In when they have like clubs in Japan at schools . . . like you know they do the whole senpai-kohai [thing.
03 E4: [Uh-huh.
04 E3: And they make these rules.
05 E3: So my, one of my girlfriends at college is in a club, like . . . on . . . with our . . . the like the Japanese campus . . . she’s on the cheer club.
06 E4: Yeah.
07 E3: And, they make these rules where like you can’t do things or you have to do things, which is, you know xxx, we kind of do that kind of stuff [in the States.
08 E4: [Yeah.
09 E3: But they don’t let them drink water.
10 E3: At least the cheergirl, she can drink like this Gatoraid stuff, but my friend who is on the track team; nothing.
11 E4: Na [. . .
12 E3: [They go to practice right after school, like th[ree.
13→E4: [How long is practice?
14 E3: She said it was like four hours long.
15 E3: They have to run all the relays, they do all their practices, you know, and [the . . .
16→E4: [And they don’t drink in between?
17 E3: No, the . . . the little kids weren’t allowed to . . . not the little kids,
but like the . . . you know the freshmen, the sophomores weren’t
allowed to drink anything.

Excerpt 2 exhibits a pattern of conversational process and question asking
similar to that seen in Excerpt 1 — one participant plays a role of narrating a
story and the other listens and asks questions. Two questions which occurred
in Excerpt 2 (lines 13 and 16) are asked by the topic recipient, E4, and they
contribute to producing a further stage of E3’s story. The “wh” question (line
13) elicits detailed information (lines 14 and 15). The eliciting confirmation
question (line 16) suggests a reasonable consequence guessed from what E3
has told so far. E3 replies to it in the negative and commits herself to adding
further information (line 17). Consequently, E3 is engaged in the role of the
information provider, and E4 the information recipient as well as elicitor
throughout.

As illustrated in the two examples above, in the setting where two close
friends are asked to talk freely about surprising experiences, English speakers
spontaneously define their participant role as a topic provider or a topic re-
cipient, and these roles continue for as long as the topic itself is sustained. The
questions mainly function as a device for the topic recipient to gain addi-
tional information, and to make information provided by the other more ex-


glicit and detailed.

It is worth mentioning that the results of our English data showing that
question asking serves to clarify and expand on information have much in
common with previous studies (Yamada 1997: 6, Maynard 1997) which claim
that the goal of American communication is to make messages negotiated
between individuals explicit. It could be inferred that questions are one of a
number of devices used in negotiations conducted for the purpose of attaining
a communicative goal, namely, to make messages explicit.

5.3. Questions in Japanese conversation

The quantitative analysis showed notable differences in the distribution of
questions between the English and Japanese data. As mentioned earlier, in
Japanese conversation the overall frequency of questions is 2.47 times higher
than that in English conversation. The higher frequency is largely attributed
to the confirmation questions, which comprised 54.6% of the overall occurrence of questions.

The qualitative analysis revealed that these differences are the outcome of Japanese speakers’ differing ways of defining participant roles and of using questions. Unlike English conversation, in which one of the pair spontaneously assumes the role of narrating a story and questions are mainly used in such a way that the topic recipient elicits further information, in Japanese conversation neither the topic provider nor recipient has such an intense attachment to their respective participant roles as do the English speakers. Instead, Japanese speakers tend to blur the boundary between the topic provider and recipient through the use of questions from both sides. To put it more precisely, the topic provider narrates using questions to elicit a response from the other, while the topic recipient extends her involvement in the progression of the story by eliciting further information as well as adding something to the story, which then calls for the topic provider’s confirmation.

Now let us present an example. At this point, in Excerpt 3, J1 begins to talk about a dying crow she found on the way to college.

[Excerpt 3]
01 J1: *gakko kuru toki ni*
   “When coming to college.”
02 J2: *un*
   “Yeah.”
03 J1: *mejiro doori aru jan?*
   “There runs Mejiro street, right?”
04 J2: *un un un un*
   “Yeah yeah yeah yeah.”
05 J1: *futsuu ni aruiteta no*
   “I was walking as usual.”
06 J2: *un*
   “Yeah.”
07 J1: *soshitara karasu no nakigoe ga shita no ne*
   “Then I heard a cry of a crow.”
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08 J1: shitara shita ni ite karasu ga de hikkuri kaettete
“And then there was a crow on the ground and it lay down on its back.”

09→J2: ee, hikkuri kaetteta no?
“Oh, did it lie down on its back?”

10 J1: de shinisoo datta no
“And it was going to die.”

11 J2: be
“Indeed.”

12→J1: de, nande daroo, mushi ga shinisonano to chigatte karasu tte okkii desho?
“And, how to say, differently from a bug being dying, a crow is big, isn’t it?”

13 J2: un un un un
“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.”

14→J1: de, makkuro jan?
“And it is really black, isn’t it?”

15 J2: un
“Yeah.”

Note that in line 3, J1 broaches her topic using a confirmation question and gains J2’s affirmative response (line 04). It is about the public fact (“There runs Mejiro street”) that J1 asks for J2’s confirmation. It would be alternatively possible for J1 to lead in the topic without using a confirmation question, just like “Gakko ni kuru toki ni Meijiro doori wo aruite itara (When I came to college, I was walking along Mejiro street).” If it had been presented like that, how-
ever, a definite response like “un un un un (yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah)” would not have been elicited from the other. Therefore, this confirmation question, which can be interpreted either as an attempt to call J2’s attention to what J1 is beginning to talk about, or else to avoid beginning narration without regard for J2, causes the effect that shared context is created so that J2 is promoted to be involved in the progression of the story J1 is narrating.

After line 08, four questions occurred (lines 09, 12, 14, and 17). The clarification question used by J2 (line 09) conveys her slightly surprised feelings when receiving J1’s prior utterance, and is followed by J1’s continuation of her narrating. The two confirmation questions in lines 12 and 14 are used by the topic provider, J1, where she tries to illustrate how terrible the dying crow was, and the two questions result in eliciting an affirmative response from the other (lines 13 and 15). Thus, these confirmation questions function as a device for J1 to make it possible to relate a story on the one hand, and elicit J2’s response at times on the other hand. Finally, in line 17, J2 uses a confirmation question to say “bibiru yone? (We get cold feet, don’t we?).” This question conveys a consequential assessment that the topic provider, J1, is expected to have been going to present. It is thought that J2’s substitution for J1 to make a consequential remark is triggered by J1’s way of narrating the story, that is, narrating with questions that allow space for the other to be involved in and develop the story. Thus, the two speakers bi-directionally co-create a story and do not show very intense attachment to distinctive roles as a topic provider or recipient.

This type of interaction and question asking was distinctively and pervasively observed within our Japanese data. Let us look at another example.

In Excerpt 4, J3 begins to talk about her experience of going to a haunted house at Fujikyuu, an amusement park. Just after raising her topic, J3 asks a yes/no questions (line 03).

[Excerpt 4]
01 J3: ee, kono mae [laugh] Fujikyu ni itta no ne
    “Well, I went to Fujikyu before.”
02 J4: un
    “Yeah.”
In the same way as in Excerpt 3, the topic provider in the current example uses a question in leading in the topic. In line 03, J3, who has just started her story,
changes her orientation and moves into asking a question to find out whether or not J4 has been to Fujikyuu, and she gains J4’s positive response (04). In line 07, J3 uses a confirmation question when narrowing the story into her experience of going to a haunted house.

Following on, the topic recipient J4 asks a question to obtain further information about the haunted house being talked about (line 10). Finally, in line 14, J4, who originally was the topic recipient, concludes the story calling for J3’s confirmation saying “obakeyashikikei bikkuri suru ne (All kinds of haunted houses are surprising, aren’t they?),” and obtains J3’s positive response.

The questions that occurred in Excerpt 4 are interpreted similarly as those in Excerpt 3. The former two questions asked by J3 facilitate J4’s involvement in the current story J3 is telling. J4 supports the development of the story by eliciting further information, and finally is led to substituting for J3 to make a concluding remark.

What the two examples above show is that it is typical for questions in Japanese conversation to occur from both sides, unlike English questions, which tend to occur in the phase where the topic provider goes through her story telling and in turn the recipient supports the expansion of the informational content. The question types most frequently used by Japanese speakers are, as the data in Table 1 showed, confirmation questions, and they are followed by information questions that seek a yes/no answer. In particular, questions to elicit confirmation are productively used throughout the conversational process in order to offer propositional content conveying expectation of the other’s accordance. This leads to creation of shared context and allows the other space to add something to the story being narrated. The frequent use of confirmation questions would not be impossible to explain as no more than a “fashion of speaking.” However, it cannot be ignored that relating with confirmation questions results in eliciting some verbal response from the other and can affect how the speakers play participant roles in conversation as well as how the story develops, as discussed above.

6. Questions and common ground building

According to Enfield (2006), individuals being engaged in interaction incessantly exploit common ground, i.e., mutual knowledge. At the same time,
they are inclined to satisfy the informational and affiliational imperatives. That is, in the course of conversation, participants cooperate with their partners in maintaining a common referential understanding, while maintaining a common degree of interpersonal affiliation proper to the status of the relationship. Now, the results of the analysis are explicated in terms of the criteria suggested by Enfield (2006).

As for the English pairs, the informational imperative is satisfied through the integration of narrating a story on one side and supporting the elaboration of the story on the other. The latter is realized by question-asking, whereby the mutual knowledge is made more comprehensive. On the assumption that neither the informational nor affiliational is primary or secondary (Enfield 2006: 399), the satisfaction of the affiliational imperative is understood to be attained by subordinating the bilateral contribution to the production of mutual knowledge. Thus, in English conversations, the fulfillment of the informational and affiliational imperatives can be conveyed by the two sides’ jointly building common ground that contains sufficient and elaborated information.

On the other hand, the way in which Japanese participants meet the informational imperative is through narrating a story on one side and expanding involvement in the story being narrated on the other. Questions are mutually used throughout by both sides so that a common ground is bi-directionally created that constitutes an accordant context. Devoting themselves to the process of common ground building inevitably leads the participants to fulfill the affiliational imperative as well.

The realization of differing types of common ground building observed in English and Japanese data can be attributed to the cultural common ground shared by pairs of close female friends who speak a common language. It is thought that the differences in the act of common ground building between English and Japanese speakers are the outcome to differing cultural common ground, namely differing cultural resources that make the speakers play culturally relevant participant roles.

7. Conclusion

This study has illustrated differing ways in which English and Japanese
speakers build common ground through using questions. Yet the remit of the analysis is limited to the data using participants who are close female friends, so it is important to note that the results do not imply that Japanese speakers are never interested in acquiring explicit information, or that English speakers are never interested in creating an accordant context. We still have a long way to go before we arrive at a disclosure of pragmatics of questions in English and Japanese conversation.

Notes
1 In this study, “English,” “American(s),” and “American English” are used to refer to American English or American English speakers.
2 The “Mr. O Corpus” was collected in Tokyo in 2004, under the project “Empirical and theoretical studies on culture, interaction, and languages in Asia,” (Grant-in-aid for scientific research, directed by Sachiko Ide). It consists of conversations, narratives, and talk during a goal-oriented joint task in English, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese.
3 Transcription conventions are as follows: ADD HON=addressee honorific; COP=copula; FP=final particle; GEN=genitive; NEG=negation; PAST=past; Q=question marker.
4 “——” indicates an omission of a middle part.

References