

A Comparative Study of English and Japanese: How Topics are Structured in Conversation

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1. Introduction

Many people who communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries have experienced communication gaps. One of the factors that cause such a gap is pragmatic transfer,¹ which many researchers have investigated using conversation analysis. Though there have been a large number of comparative studies on conversation at the word and sentence levels, there has been a noticeable lack of studies at the topic level.² One possible reason for this is that how topics are structured by speakers has been considered to be relatively universal, as Hinds (1982) and Maynard (1993) suggest.³

Nevertheless, many scholars accept that the differences are not limited to grammatical features, but also include pragmatic features between English and Japanese, such as back-channel behaviour, turn-taking behaviour and so on. From this point of view, it seems unlikely that the way of structuring topics should be considered the same in English and Japanese conversation.

This research will re-examine whether the topic structure of English and Japanese conversation is similar or not, and investigate what is important in constructing conversation for speakers of each language.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data and subjects

Through data analysis, this study investigates and compares conversa-

tions between native English speakers and between native Japanese speakers. The data consist of the conversations of twenty pairs of female, native English speakers (total length = 100 minutes) and twenty pairs of female, native Japanese speakers (also 100 minutes).⁴

2. 2. Procedure

The procedure of this research was as follows:

(1) Record and transcribe the conversation

The subjects were instructed to talk for five minutes with their partners about what each of them was surprised at. All conversations were videotaped and transcribed.

(2) Divide the conversation into individual topics

The utterances in conversations were divided into individual topics based on certain criteria.⁵

(3) Classify the topics into two groups: subtopics and stray topics, referring, respectively, to those whose contents are related to the main topic (i.e., 'surprising events'), and those whose contents are not related to the main topic.

(4) Data Analysis

a. Quantitative Analysis

The subtopics and the stray topics were counted and the proportion of each type in English and Japanese conversations was compared.

b. Qualitative analysis

To investigate what is important to English and Japanese speakers engaging in conversation, I examined the features of the topic structures by focusing on the relationships among them. By analyzing the contents in this way, I uncovered the consciousness of speakers when connecting topics.

3. Findings and discussion

In this section, the findings of this research will be presented and discussed. They will reveal not only the features of topic structures, but also the degree to which speakers seem to make conscious choices when con-

necting topics.

3. 1. Quantitative analysis

Although the data of this study are limited, examining the overall number of topics, subtopics, and stray topics, and topics connected to previous topics reveals the features of English and Japanese conversation at the topic level. The numbers will be presented in this section.

3. 1. 1. The number of subtopics and stray topics

The examination of conversational data reveals a difference in the numbers of subtopics and stray topics, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 The number of subtopics and stray topics in English and Japanese conversation

	subtopics	stray topics	Total
English (20 pairs)	62 (68.1%)	29 (31.9%)	91 (100%)
Japanese (20 pairs)	65 (44.2%)	82 (55.8%)	147 (100%)

Table 1 shows the proportion of each type of topic to the total number of topics in each language. As illustrated, the number of stray topics in Japanese conversation far outnumbers that of those in English conversation; the proportion of stray topics is 31.9% in English, but 55.8% in Japanese. This means that more than half of all the topics in Japanese conversation are not connected to the main topic, in spite of the fact that participants were asked to talk about their surprising events.

3. 1. 2. The number of the topics connected to previous topics

As can be seen in Table 1, in Japanese conversation in particular, the number of stray topics exceeds that of subtopics. Examined in further detail, the contents of the most stray topics connect to those of the previous topics, while the contents of some subtopics also connect to those of the previous topics and the main topic. At present, it may prove useful to count the topics which are connected to their previous topics. This will reveal the relationships among topics and the reason why many more stray

topics can be observed in Japanese conversation. Table 2 shows both the number of topics that are and are not connected to previous topics.

Table 2 The number of the topics connected / not connected to previous topics in English and Japanese conversation

	connected to previous topics	not connected to previous topics	Total
English (20 pairs)	33 (36.3%)	58 (63.7%)	91 (100%)
Japanese (20 pairs)	98 (66.7%)	49 (33.3%)	147 (100%)

As can be seen in Table 2, the proportion of the topics connected to previous topics is 36.3% in English conversation and 66.7% in Japanese conversation. This shows that it seems important for Japanese speakers to connect their topics to the previous topics.

Before turning to the next section, it may be useful to look closely at features of the previous topics. Table 3 presents the number of previous topics which are the partner's topics.

Table 3 The number of previous topics which are the partner's topics in English and Japanese conversation

	partner's topics	not partner's topics	Total
English (20 pairs)	10 (30.3%)	23 (69.7%)	33 (100%)
Japanese (20 pairs)	50 (51.0%)	48 (49.0%)	98 (100%)

The results given in Table 3 show that 51.0% of the previous topics are the partner's topics for the Japanese speakers, compared to 30.3% for the English speakers.

The results given in Table 2 and Table 3 suggest that the speakers' attempts to connect the conversational topic to that of their partner's tend

to be stronger in Japanese than in English. This may lead to one explanation for the result in Table 1: The large number of stray topics in Japanese conversation derives from the fact that it is more important for Japanese speakers to connect their topics to previous topics, (half of which are the partner's topics), than to the main topic; alternatively, it appears that it is more important for English speakers to connect their topics to the main topic.

3. 2. Qualitative analysis

The differences of the topic structures in English and Japanese conversation has been revealed previously through quantitative analysis. In this section, the features of the topic structures of each language will be observed using concrete examples. Examining the expressions observed in the conversational data reveals the consciousness of the speakers.

3. 2. 1. The relationship between subtopics and their following subtopics

The relationship between subtopics and their following subtopics seems to differ between English and Japanese conversation. Example 1 shows a situation in which a subtopic is followed by another subtopic in English conversation. In this example, after the subtopic given by Speaker A, Speaker B starts to talk about her surprising event in line 1.6.

Example 1 (English)

[...]

[1.1] A: I think that was the most surprising thing because that was my school, like ... and I really didn't think that I could get in.
{laugh}

[1.2] B: Hmm.

[1.3] A: But I did, and I'm still there.

[1.4] B: Yeah! Congrats.

→[1.5] A: So, yeah. How about you?

→[1.6] B: Well, I'm trying to think, like it's, I'm trying to go back because there are so many things in my adult life, and a lot of surprising things, so I was trying to go back actually, oddly the thing that comes up is ... is really ...

[...]

As can be seen in Example 1, in line 1.6 Speaker B tries to introduce a new subtopic which has no connection to the content of the previous topic given by Speaker A. Additionally, as can be clearly seen in line 1.5, Speaker A also does not require Speaker B to talk about a topic that connects to her previous topic.

However, different features of the relationship between the topics were observed in Japanese conversation. Example 2 shows that a subtopic is followed by another subtopic whose content is clearly related to the previous subtopic.

Example 2 (Japanese)

[...]

[2.1] A: *Hai, sounandesuyone, shikamo Disneyland tte biroijanai desuka* {laugh}
 ‘Yes, I think so. In addition, Disneyland is big, isn’t it?’

[2.2] B: {laugh} *Soune, engaaruna tte kanji suruyone*
 ‘Yes, it is. It seems you and that person are linked by fate.’

[2.3] A: *Hai.*
 ‘Yes.’

→[2.4] B: *Nitakoto wa watabimo arimasune.*
 ‘I have a similar experience.’

[2.5] A: *A, honto desuka?*
 ‘Really?’

[...]

In Example 2, Speaker A has been saying that she was surprised because she happened to meet an old friend at Disneyland, and in line 2.4 Speaker B proceeds to talk about her surprising event. The expression of line 2.4 shows that by beginning to talk about her own surprising event, Speaker B is drawing a connection to the previous subtopic introduced by her partner.

While Example 2 shows that the listener herself tries to connect her topic to the previous one, Example 3 shows that the speaker of the previous topic required the topic that followed to connect to the previous topic.

Example 3 (Japanese)

[. . .]

[3.1] A: *Demo, nandesbon, futsuuni tatoeba nichijoutekina nakadene, shukudai wo yattekurunowo wasurete, demo toujitsu aterarete biekurisbita tokane*
 ‘Well, I have no ideas, but for example, some events in daily life. I was surprised that I was told to answer the question when I forgot to do my homework.’

[3.2] B: {laugh} *Arimasu yone.*
 ‘Such things often happen.’

→[3.3] A: *Souiu nichijoutekina kotode nanika naidesuka?*
 ‘Do you have such kinds of surprising events?’

[3.4] B: *Nichijoutekina koto desuka?*
 ‘Surprising events in daily life?’

[3.5] A: *Un.*
 ‘Yes.’

[3.6] B: *Nichijoutekina koto dato . . . sugoi nanka korewa chotto omoikamo shirenain desukedo . . .*
 ‘In daily life . . . , I think this event may be a little weightier, but . . .’

[. . .]

In line 3.3, Speaker A requires Speaker B to talk about an event which connects to the previous topic given by Speaker A.

There are additional examples that in Japanese more than in English conversation the content of the subtopic that follows connects to the previous subtopic. This reveals that Japanese speakers tend to connect their topics to not only the main topic but also the previous topic, while English speakers tend to connect their topic only to the main topic.

3. 2. 2. The relationship between subtopics and their following stray topics

In addition to the subtopics which connect to previous subtopics, many stray topics which connect to previous subtopics are evident in Japanese conversation. Example 4 (a)(b) show that the listener encourages the speaker to add some stray topics to her own current topic, which focuses on her surprise regarding an earthquake.

Example 4 (a) (Japanese)

[...]

[4a.1] A: *Mou yappari, ichiban bikkurishita tteiuwa wasurerarenai tteiuwa...*
 ‘That was the most surprising or the most unforgettable event...’

→[4a.2] B: *Huun. Sore wa kagutoka taoretetarishitan desuka?*
 ‘Was furniture damaged in the earthquake?’

[4a.3] A: *Un un. Ano taoretেকিতান desuyo, sono manshonde...*
 ‘The furniture was damaged in that apartment.’

[...]

Until line 4a.1, Speaker A has been talking about her surprise regarding a big earthquake. Soon after, in line 4a.2, Speaker B asks a question that creates an opening for a stray topic after Speaker A finishes talking about her surprising event. A possible interpretation is Speaker B asks this question in order to determine to what degree Speaker A was surprised by the earthquake, which means that her question was partly related to ‘surprise’. Alternatively, there is another example, (Example 4 [b]), in which Speaker B asks a question that is not related to ‘surprise’.

Example 4 (b) (Japanese)

[...]

[4b.1] A: *Konoko wa atashi no jugyou wa sabotte tabeni ittanda to omotte mou sore ga saikin no jugyou de ichiban bikkuri shita.*
 ‘I found out that that boy skipped my class to eat noodles. It is the most surprising event for me these days.’

[4b.2] B: *Hai.* {laugh}
 ‘Yes.’

[4b.3] A: *Watashi kara sakini shabechatte gomenne.*
 ‘I’m sorry that I started to talk first.’

→[4b.4] B: *Iyaa, e, sonoato, kou, shikattari wa shinakattan desuka?*
 ‘And did you scold the student for that afterward?’

[4b.5] A: *A, sono ato wane. Sono toki wa bottarakashitoite...*
 ‘I said nothing on that day, but afterwards...’

[...]

Speaker A, a university lecturer, has been saying that she was surprised by the behaviour of a male student in her class, who had left the classroom after attendance was checked. Upon completing her lesson and leaving the classroom, the lecturer then saw him coming out of the cafeteria. After Speaker A has finished discussing her surprising event, Speaker B, in line 4b.4, asks a question that leads to a stray topic. While the question seen in Example 4 (a) partly relates to ‘surprise’, the question in Example 4 (b) does not, but to whether Speaker A scolded the student or not.

In addition, it is not unusual in Japanese conversation for listeners themselves to add some further information, in the form of stray topics, to their partners’ topics.

English and Japanese conversations differ with respect to the number of stray topics in one sequence. The number of stray topics per one sequence is greater in Japanese conversation than in English. The largest observed sequence of stray topics in this study was eight in the Japanese conversations, while in English conversation it is unusual for even one stray topic to follow another. Example 5 provides some insight into why only smaller sequences of stray topics are observed in English conversation.

Example 5 (English)

- [. . .]
 [5.1] A: I . . . I’m a student.
 [5.2] B: Oh, you are, oh, okay, yeah, so . . .
 [5.3] A: Yeah. I study Japanese, so . . .
 [5.4] B: Oh, okay, {laugh} so you’re learn . . . yeah a student, that’s good.
 →[5.5] A: Yeah. Do we have to keep thinking about surprising things?
 [5.6] B: Surprising things, I guess, so . . .
 [. . .]

In Example 5, lines 5.1–5.4 are part of a stray topic, but in line 5.5 Speaker A tries to return to the topic connected to the main topic. In fact, the frequency of talking about what to discuss with respect to surprising events is higher in English conversation than in Japanese conversation. The participants’ consciousness of having to connect their topics to the main topic

may prevent English participants from exploring a larger sequence of stray topics.

However, the reason why Japanese speakers connect stray topics in succession or following subtopics may NOT be that they do not attempt to discuss surprising events. In fact, some expressions demonstrate how speakers try to return to the main topic.

Example 6 (Japanese)

[...]

[6.1] A: *Nande kenka shitennokamo yoku wakannai kedo*
‘I don’t know why we were quarrelling.’

[6.2] B: {laugh}

→[6.3] A: {laugh} *Tteiuwa bikkurishitakoto ja naishi ne zenzen*
‘Well, it is not a surprising event at all.’

→[6.4] B: *Un, tashikani* {laugh} *tyou soreteru hanashiga*
‘Yeah, I think so. Your story has gone off the subject.’

[6.5] A: {laugh} *Nanka naino?*
‘Do you have any surprising events?’

[6.6] B: {laugh} *Bikkurishita koto dayo ne...*
‘Surprising events...’

[...]

In Example 6, Speaker A and B have been talking about three different stray topics, and in line 6.1 the last part of the third stray topic surfaces. In lines 6.3 and 6.4, they attempt to bring their topics back to the main topic (i.e., surprising events). This shows that, despite remembering that they are expected to talk about surprising events, they develop many stray topics in conversation. This may mean that Japanese speakers give priority to connecting their discussion to the previous topic rather than connecting to the main topic. In other words, connecting to previous topics is more important than connecting to the main topic for Japanese participants, while connecting to the main topic appears to be more important for English participants.

3. 3. Further discussion

3. 3. 1. Topic-linking as relevance

The results of this study should be further investigated. More specifically, by using Grice's maxims of conversation, one might develop a pragmatic analysis of topic-linking in the two groups and consequently reveal the role of relevance in the way speakers co-construct conversation.

Grice (1975) suggests that there is a general agreement of co-operation between participants in conversation; each participant can expect the other to adhere to certain conversational conventions. He proposes that these principles of co-operation include: the maxim of quantity (or informativeness), quality (truthfulness), manner (clearness), and relevance of conversational contributions.

“‘Be relevant’ (Grice 1975: 46) to what’ might be different in Japanese conversation and English conversation. With regards to the problem of deciding ‘relevant to what?’, Brown (1983) suggests that one way of solving this problem is to translate the maxim “‘Be relevant” into a more practically useful form, such as “‘Make your contribution relevant in terms of the existing topic framework” (84). He adds that this could be succinctly restated as “‘speak topically” (84). However, what is regarded as ‘be relevant’ or ‘speak topically’ seems to differ from language to language. This research may help to explore possible reasons for the differences between languages such as Japanese and English. As shown by the analysis in this paper, native Japanese speakers attempt to discuss the topic that is relevant to previous topics, (specifically, to their partner’s topic), despite being given a separate, specific topic to talk about. On the other hand, it appears to be more important for native English speakers to talk about a topic that is relevant to the main topic — in this project, ‘surprising events’ —.

This is one of the examples that shows that talking about the topic which is relevant to previous topics (and, in this case, the partner’s topic) satisfies the maxim of relevance in Japanese conversation.

Example 7 (Japanese)

[. . .]

[7.1] A: *Tabechaundayone.*

- ‘I cannot stop eating.’
- [7.2] B: *Ima omottan dakedo*
‘I’ve just remembered . . .’
- [7.3] A: *Un.*
‘Yes.’
- [7.4] B: *Aaa, zenzen kankeinai kedo ii?*
‘Ah, but this has no relevance. Is it OK?’
- [7.5] A: *Un, iyo iyo.*
‘Yes, ok ok.’
- [7.6] B: *Nanka kyuumi*
‘Well, suddenly’
- [7.7] A: *Un*
‘Yes.’
- [7.8] B: *Nanteiuno, kado kara kyuumi detekite a bikkuri*
‘What can I say . . . I’m surprised when something comes out from the corner suddenly’
- [. . .]

In line 7.4, Speaker B says that what she is about to say has no relevance. However, in line 7.6 she begins to talk about her surprising event. Although she does say that this has no relevance before beginning her story, ultimately, her topic is relevant to the main topic (‘surprising events’). This shows that ‘the topic which has no relevance to its previous topic’ has no relevance for Japanese speakers. In other words, it seems that “‘Be relevant” (Grice 1975: 46) to the previous topic’ might be important for Japanese speakers or satisfies the maxim of relevance; on the other hand, “‘Be relevant” (ibid.: 46) to the main topic’ might be important for English speakers.

In fact, the number of the subtopics whose contents are related to not only the main topic but also to the previous topic is higher in Japanese conversation than in English conversation. Table 4 shows the number of such topics.

Table 4 The number of the subtopics whose contents are related to both the main topic and to the previous topic in English and Japanese conversation

	total subtopics	subtopics relating to both main and previous topic
English (20 pairs)	62	7 (11.3%)
Japanese (20 pairs)	65	18 (27.7%)

Although the conversation in this project differs from casual conversation (in that the specific topic was provided by a third party), differences in response between Japanese speakers and English speakers have shown that topic structure and the important factors in building conversation may very well not be the same for both these languages.

3.3.2. One possible factor influencing topic structure

As the previous sections' analysis makes clear, English speakers more often attempt to connect their topics back to the main topic, while Japanese speakers tend to attempt to connect their topics to the previous topics regardless of whether or not their topics connect to the main topic. One possible cause of these differences will be presented in this section.

Consider the differences in how the speakers describe a surprising event. English speakers tend to refer to the event itself in the first part of the subtopic, while Japanese speakers tend to contextualise the event before focusing on it. Examples 8 and 9 demonstrate this aspect of English conversation, while Example 10 illustrates the corresponding tendency of Japanese conversation.

Example 8 (English)

A: Um . . . It's hard . . . {laugh} I guess the time I was most surprised is when Dave called me and told me that, ahh, Tess had died, cuz, you know, she was supposed to be getting better, and she didn't get better.

Example 9 (English)

A: Hmm . . . I was really surprised in ninth grade, when we had the, ahh...the student awards ceremony, and I won, I don't know, nine awards or something like that, so making everyone in my class, of course, hate me from then on.

Example 10 (Japanese)

[. . .]

[10.1] A: *Anosa, atashine*
 'You know what? I . . .'

[10.2] B: *Un.*
 'Yeah.'

[10.3] A: *Ano, densha tsuugaku nandakedo*
 'Well, I go to school by train and'

[10.4] B: *Un.*
 'Yeah.'

[10.5] A: *Yuurakucho- sen de*
 'I use Yurakucho line.'

[10.6] B: *Un, un*
 'Yeah, yeah'

[10.7] A: *Sonobi baito de*
 'I had to go to part-time work on that day.'

[. . .]

→[10.39] A: *A, torarechatta to omotte nanka sugoi bikekurishita.*
 'I realized that my seat had been taken by the woman, so I was surprised.'

[. . .]

As shown in Example 8 and 9, English speakers usually state what they were surprised at in the first part of the subtopic, while Japanese speakers begin with an explanation of the general background of surprising events. For example, in Example 10, the listener cannot know whether the speaker is talking about a surprising event or not until the latter arrives at line 10.39. This shows that Japanese listeners can follow the speaker's train of

thought without considering whether or not what the speaker is saying has anything to do with the main topic. In terms of understanding the content of the current topic, Japanese listeners appear to track it word by word. On the other hand, English listeners appear to grasp the big picture of what the speakers are talking about, and then to fill in the details as the speaker provides them.

Fox, Hayashi and Jaspersen (1996) examine differences between English and Japanese with respect to the organisation of self-repair in conversation. They point out that the beginnings of English clauses tend to project what will be required to bring them to completion, while Japanese clauses tend to be built in a more piecemeal manner, with projection accreting over the course of the clauses. Although Fox, Hayashi and Jaspersen (*ibid.*) refer to this feature in clauses alone, these features can be observed at the discourse level as well, as evidenced in Examples 8–10.

These features may help to explain the large number of stray topics in Japanese conversation: For Japanese participants, the connecting of each topic or utterance to another is more important than connecting it to the main topic. On the other hand, it is easier for English participants to remain focused on the main topic because they appear to have an easier time of determining the overall picture of what they are talking about.

3. 3. 3. Links to other studies

The features of topic structure found in this research corroborate and are corroborated by the findings of previous studies.

For example, Maynard (1986) and Ellis (1991) report that the frequency of back-channels is much higher in Japanese conversation than in English. In addition, Uchida (2001) points out that the percentage of turn-taking in the middle of the current speaker's utterance is less frequent in English than in Japanese. Both of these points connect to the findings of this study: Japanese listeners focus on a word-by-word understanding of what their partners are talking about, while English listeners focus on understanding the topic as a whole. Scollon and Scollon (1995) explain "the inductive [topic-delayed] and the deductive [topic-first] patterns of discourse" (75). They suggest that both patterns are used for the same main purpose, *i.e.*, to reduce the overall ambiguity of the discourse. For example,

in the deductive patterns this can be observed when the topic is introduced initially to clarify what the relevance of the supporting arguments will be.

This research and its findings also support the work of Tajima (2000), who suggests that Japanese listeners tend to employ back-channels to speakers themselves, while English listeners tend to use back-channels to topics. This research has demonstrated that it is generally more important for Japanese speakers to connect their topics back to previous ones (half of which are their partners' topics) rather than to the main topic. Alternatively, it is generally more important for English speakers to connect their topics back to the main topic. These phenomena may show that Tajima's (*ibid.*) suggestion is valid for not only back-channel behaviours, but also for the features of topic structure.

In addition, Hinds's (1987) suggestion that English speakers tend to talk based on "speaker responsibility", while Japanese speakers tend to talk based on "listener responsibility" also seems to relate to features of topic structure. This means that English speakers have more responsibility than Japanese speakers to ensure that their listeners understand them. On the other hand, listeners in Japanese conversation also have a responsibility to understand what the speakers are talking about.

As can be seen in Section 3.1.1., stray topics are more common in Japanese conversations. Many of these stray topics are introduced in order to comment on or ask questions about the topic that the speaker has been discussing. In many cases, the listener introduces such stray topics in order to show that she understands what the speaker has said and to express interest in it. Therefore, one possible reason for the large number of stray topics in Japanese conversation is the influence of listener responsibility.

From a cultural point of view, Hall (1976) points out that Japanese high-context culture is responsible for Japanese students' heavy dependence on emotional appeals, softening devices in diction and focus on empathy. Okabe (1987) also points out that in Japanese high-context culture any message is fraught with shared assumptions and human relationships among conversational participants. On the other hand, American students' preference originates from their American low-context culture, in which a message is transmitted in a clear, verbal code with social ties among individuals

having little, if any, influence (Okabe 1987). These intrinsic features of each culture may affect the listener-responsibility in Japanese and the speaker-responsibility in English.

In terms of the roles of interlocutors, Yabuuchi (2004) has claimed that conversational participants are thinking what to say next while listening to their interlocutors' speech; he has also suggested that the information presented by the interlocutor activates various memories in the listener's mind. Although such features might be observed in both English and Japanese conversation, the interlocutor in Japanese conversation seems to have more influence with respect to what participants say next.

Moreover, the features of topic structure observed in this study can also serve as evidence for the concept of "*taiwa* (dialogue)" and "*kyowa* (co-constructed conversation)" proposed by Mizutani (1993). Using these terms, she suggests that English participants construct their conversation by talking individually, while Japanese participants make conversation together as if they were one person. Although Mizutani (ibid.) suggests the concept only, various features of topic structure which have been observed in this research show that these concepts may be reasonable and appropriate.

4. Conclusion

Using conversational data, this research has investigated and compared how topics are structured in English and Japanese conversation. The quantitative analysis has revealed that the number of stray topics in Japanese conversation is far greater than in English conversation. In addition, this research has found that the number of the topics connecting to previous topics, and of topics connecting to the partner's topics, is much higher in Japanese conversation than in English. Moreover, the qualitative analysis has revealed possible causes of these differences: the difference with respect to the degree of consciousness when constructing a conversation showed that English speakers tend to try to connect their topics to the main topic, while Japanese speakers try to connect their topics to the previous topics regardless of whether their topics connect to the main topic or not.

This research has identified not only the difference in topic structure,

which Maynard (1993) did not, but also the difference in the degree of consciousness with which a conversation is constructed. One possible reason for Maynard's (*ibid.*) failure to identify the difference in topic structure is the fact that she did not reveal the degree to which speakers seem to make conscious choices about connecting topics; she was only able to view the superficial structure of topics. However, by setting a specific topic as the main topic, this research led to a more detailed understanding of topic structure and the consciousness of speakers.

In addition, this research showed the close connections among the features of topic structure and other pragmatic features. These findings may be useful for language learners, specifically with a view to avoiding miscommunication when they talk with native speakers of the target language. They can do so by understanding the differences in the pragmatic features of the two languages. Furthermore, it might be useful for native English speakers to understand that the features of topic structure are different between languages because 'English as an international language', which might be influenced by the mother tongue of each speaker, is not the same as the English spoken among native English speakers at present.

Although this research, through conversational data, has attempted to investigate, at the topic level, the pragmatic features of English and Japanese, it is possible that there are more features of topic structure and other connections among other pragmatic or grammatical features in English and Japanese conversation that still remain undiscovered. However, due to the limitations of this study, they cannot be discussed at present and must be left for future consideration and research.

Notes

1 Pragmatic transfer is defined as "the use of the rules of speaking of one's own speech community or cultural group when interacting with members of another community or group" (Chick 1996: 332)

2 This research focuses on topic structure, where 'topic' refers to what is being talked about in a conversation, also referred to as a "discourse topic" (Brown and Yule 1983: 71). Chafe (2002) suggests that a topic is "a coherent aggregate of thoughts introduced by some participant in a conversation developed either by

that participant or another or by several participants jointly, and then either explicitly closed or allowed to peter out" (674).

3 Hinds (1982) describes topic development in Japanese conversational interaction by using the expression "most likely universally" (310). Maynard (1993) compares the structure of English and Japanese conversation at the topic level. She analyzes her data and concludes that the topic structures of the two languages are virtually identical.

4 The data collection was conducted as part of a Grant-in-Aid project for scientific research ('Practical and Theoretical Studies on Culture, Interaction, and Languages in Eastern Asia.' Director: Sachiko IDE).

5 Largely following, yet modifying, the criteria proposed by Reichman (1978) and Maynard (1993) to determine the boundaries between topics, I used the following criteria:

- 1) Whether the topic is about surprising events or not
- 2) Whether the time, place, or character being focused on is changed
- 3) Whether the main speaker is changed (i.e., who is leading the discussion, who is using back-channels, asking questions, or giving brief comments)
- 4) Whether there are pauses or fillers in the conversation or whether the conversation becomes static
- 5) Whether expressions or questions provided by a participant prompt her interlocutor to move on to the next topic

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