

"Will you stop that!"--Listening Miscues Between Cultures

[Or] Listening—the Secret of Japanese Success

Ray T. Donahue, PhD

"Will you stop that!" implored an American to her grandson fluent in Japanese and who had just returned from a sojourn in Japan.¹ He had unconsciously transferred Japanese listening behavior to his conversations in English. He could not help but provide the speaker the rapid fire of nonverbal cueing by a listener in Japanese of vocalizations and head nods. Such nonverbals contribute toward Japanese backchanneling (active listening cues) to be three to four times that found in the conversations of U.S. Americans. Without it, conversation in Japanese would cease. Phone conversations in Japanese attest to this by how quickly the speaker will utter, "*Mooshi, mooshi*" (Are you there?) even with the slightest silence by the listener. For Japanese conversation is unlike the seemingly paired soliloquies of English conversation but rather a "co-conversation," a cooperative interweaving of co-dependent communications. An English speaker who partners with a Japanese will typically find some mental fatigue when he or she realizes the obligatory nature of it as compared to their own native habit.

Backchanneling is primarily a listener behavior (e.g., *hmm, uh-huh, that's right*); however *aizuchi* (backchanneling) in Japanese is nearly as much a speaker behavior as well. The Japanese speaker will package the language in comparatively shorter utterances as well as emitting verbal, vocal, and nonverbal cues so as to elicit listener back-channeling. (Verbal herein refers to language, words; vocal, to sounds but not words. Nonverbal is "body language," neither a word nor sound.) The speaker entrains the listener and vice-versa. If English conversation were like Japanese, the listener would seem to hang onto every word of the speaker, and this is why the aforementioned grandmother was so exasperated with my friend. The closest parallel in English would probably be the counseling interview in which the distraught counselee depends so much on the close listening and affirmation by the counselor. This close listening however if transferred to everyday conversations in English would likely offend some people for seemingly being patronizing or condescending. U.S. Americans pride themselves for being independent; whereas Japanese seem to favor co-dependency² or cooperativeness in social relations. Japanese society is widely considered a "high-context" culture whereby much shared background is assumed leading to the emphasis of the implicit over the explicit. Ellipsis in language is comparatively more frequent, such that pronouns for *I* and *you* are often omitted in social speech. Overuse of such pronouns in Japanese typically suggest the speaker is a foreigner (Westerner). Perhaps the emphasis on implicitness and indirectness in Japanese social talk requires as compensation highly active backchanneling by the interlocutors. Japanese backchanneling (*aizuchi*) shows how listening is just as important, if not more so, as speaking. Although it cannot be said that Japanese are better listeners, they certainly are highly cooperative as conversational partners as the stretch of conversation presented in Display 1 appears.

Backchanneling—the Building Block of Japanese Society

Aizuchi, backchanneling, in Japanese conversation, is the veritable building block of Japanese society and their famed groupism. For Japanese conversation demands active cooperation between interlocutors to a degree unlikely found in other major languages. Even if silent, Japanese are still active listeners because nonverbal cueing is so frequent and important. With vocal and verbal behaviors added, the aggregate of these cues make Japanese backchanneling more frequent than that found in Chinese, English, and Korean. The single most distinguishing feature of Japanese conversation is probably head nodding as a backchanneling cue. Japanese children will consciously or unconsciously nod their head (even if but a nudge forward) as an aid for the segmenting or phrase-grouping of their speech, a habit that dissipates for many by their adulthood. In fact a Japanese neighbor of mine in Japan, an older woman, is a case in point. She not only nods her head at the end of many of her utterances but frequently segments her speech that way. Surprisingly, this obvious habit of hers seems to escape some people's notice, for I asked a Japanese woman who knows her about it. At first, she had no awareness of it, but only on second thought did it dawn on her how highly frequent the woman's head nodding is. Because we have been members of a neighborhood council, I have had many opportunities to observe her habit this past year. The second woman's response, a rather frank person, suggests how head nodding/aizuchi may be so second nature to Japanese that it goes unnoticed. This even applies to researchers of aizuchi, typically linguists, who tend to focus exclusively on verbal elements to the exclusion of the nonverbal, such as head nodding.

This head nodding is not random but specific with linguistic markers in Japanese, the same markers that Japanese use when reading passages into thought groups. Incredibly, the complex writing system of Japanese has a built-in orthographic characteristic that makes the making of thought groups simple compared to the long time required by U.S. American children to master oral reading of English. In Japanese conversation, head nodding takes on more a discourse function than linguistic function per se for people of any age. Head nodding simultaneously gains attention and affirmation for both speaker and listener, for most head nods receive a nod in return. Thus backchanneling in Japanese is not solely a listener behavior but a speaker's as well. This mutuality encourages and maintains cooperativeness, an attitude vital for living in a resource-poor, crowded country prone to natural disasters.

Japanese Backchanneling: Conversation is Co-Produced



Aizuchi 相槌 for “backchanneling,” is written in characters meaning literally, “mutual hammer[ing].” Metaphorically conversation is mutually wrought as if blacksmithing a sword in alternative strikes on the iron as depicted above (Fusuyuki, 2011, Vincent, 2010). Picture source: <https://n-story.jp/database/detail.php?cd=743>

In a country seventy percent mountainous, a suitable grain production took root—terraced, wet rice cultivation; however, this method demands much cooperation of its farmers for equitable and close management over the irrigation of their fields. The mountainous terrain impacted the Japanese additionally by making travel severely limited until the modern era. Natural land barriers kept people tied to their village communities. These conditions likely fostered Japanese collectivity and made strong in-group feelings and local traditions. The high cooperativeness that undoubtedly emerged from having to live and work on such inhospitable land through collective efforts may well explain the great economic success of ethnic Japanese in Brazil and Hawaii compared to other ethnic groups. Undoubtedly achievement motivation is primary, but for an immigrant group social networking and cooperative action would figure as well.

A common Japanese explanation goes something like this: Japanese one-on-one with a foreigner brings defeat; but in groups, Japanese become unbeatable. During the twentieth century, outside of the war years, Japan had the world's greatest or near-greatest economic growth. Despite wartime devastation, successive oil shocks in the 1970s, ravaging earthquakes and financial ruin, Japan has shown immense resourcefulness for overcoming adversity. If anything can explain it, again, I believe Japanese social cooperativeness that gives them an edge and becomes honed and reinforced through daily Japanese listening behavior. Far fetched? One might think so until it is realized what actually happens in a Japanese conversation. For that we consider a brief snatch of a Japanese discussion about a televised sports event.

An Illustrated Case of Japanese Listener Behavior

For a glimpse of Japanese listening behavior, see Display 1, a snatch of a conversation from a discussion on Japanese TV about a prior NBA basketball game. Here two veteran sports telecasters (A and C) and their guest (B) discuss the game they had just announced for NHK, the national public broadcaster of Japan. This translation tries to mimic the conversation as if in English and, though short, should suffice in showing the uniqueness of Japanese backchanneling. Display 1 intends to show the conversation in temporal order of behavior by the telecasters. Behaviors are limited to the verbal, vocal, and head nodding. They exclude, for example, facial and other bodily movements. Backchanneling, broadly defined, is in bold; see the legend at the bottom of the display. Notable aspects are as follows:

- 1 Head nodding appears relatively frequently and about half of it occurs in unison with the other members. Head nodding is probably more than that shown because member A is out of view of the camera from line 15 onward.
- 2 Speakers seek out listener backchanneling and happen to receive it each time in this stretch of conversation.
- 3 Japanese listener backchanneling is not random but occurs at speech junctures, often attended by grammatical structures such as Japanese particles and verbal forms.
- 4 Japanese backchanneling is not as mechanical as one might think: Some Japanese might overuse a certain backchannel or two but still others will use a variety of cues (e.g., *un*, *ah*, *e*, *naru hodo*, and of course, *ne*.)
- 5 Japanese listeners, being human, can “zone out” of a conversation as does member B in the stretch of lines 12 to 20. Being a singer but not a sports telecaster, B is a guest amateur and so sits back and allows A and C to have their say. Students of mine, both foreign and Japanese, find B's actions comical in the related video as he seems almost

Display 1: Translation of a Japanese discussion of an NBA basketball game (Donahue, 1999, 2016)

Here follows just the start of a random part of a Japanese post-game discussion about an NBA basketball game. Members A and C are veteran basketball telecasters in Japan; while B came as a guest on the show. This translation tries to mimic the conversation as if it were in English. Backchanneling cues are in bold.

- 1Ⓐ Right there the Rockets chance for winning / indeed [they] had [it], surely **huh**.
- 2Ⓑ [They] really did. **hmm**
- 3Ⓒ **huh** **huh** **huh**
- 4Ⓐ **yep**
- 5Ⓑ Especially {Rajyan}, **huh**, still, **huh** As far as [his] all-out offense, **huh** Because of [his]
- 6Ⓐ **hm** **hmm** **⊗** **hmm** **right**.
- 7Ⓒ **huh** **huh**
- 8Ⓑ extra stamina [he could do it].
- 9Ⓐ **for sure**.
- 10Ⓒ AND, [he] wasn't fouling at all **right** [They] had great chance
- 11Ⓑ **hmm**
- 12Ⓐ **yea**
- 13Ⓒ / surely / right up to that point in the game, **right** ALSO, between New York and Houston
- 14Ⓐ I see.
- 15Ⓒ / eventually / that Thorpe / number 33 Thorpe **huh** / while having a great first half / [he] couldn't do
- 16Ⓐ **yea**
- 17Ⓒ well in the last half, **right**. **Yes**
- 18Ⓐ **surely** **ah**
- 19Ⓒ [They] tried having a go at it but / nothing went in for them, **right**
- 20Ⓑ **huh**
- 21Ⓐ **hmm**

backchannel

● head nod

⊗ head turn toward audience (by moderator)

[] ellipsis

{ } direct transliteration of Japanese

/ juncture or pause

asleep during this stretch, yet manages to backchannel at the right moment, his silent head nod in line 20.

- 6 Speakers “package” their utterances into chunks or breath groups as an aid for back-channeling such as in line 15, although not the best example because the speaker here seeks listener comprehension as much as listener affirmation. Note that A is out of view of the camera, and B voluntarily zoned out. Also linguistic differences make difficult the showing of thought groups in the original Japanese though I have tried.
- 7 Silence can be golden but does not relieve Japanese listeners of their dutiful, active listening as by B. Paradoxically, the culture allows inactive listener behavior in large group informational meetings ranging from silent response to apparent sleep, the latter occasionally seen for a few, the sight of which elicits shock by the Westerner in an international business conference or in a school faculty meeting. Fellow Japanese ignore it, as if personal privacy is sacrosanct.

About Display 1: “Right” as a tag question in English would typically be rendered with a question mark but avoided here. To do so with the frequency here would likely misrepresent the speakers as overly cautious or anxious. Even in English, tag-questions are not necessarily de facto questions. They can have other rhetorical functions.

Dash Stereotypical Notions

Despite the popular stereotype of the robotic Japanese, for social conformity is high, idiosyncratic or individualistic behavior is not rare to find. For example, the Japanese bow: In the same situation, various Japanese will vary in frequency, degree of rigidity, and depth; thus Japanese companies typically train their new employees how to bow to their customers. Another example is my recent sighting of a morning outdoor exercise for workers at an NGK spark plug factory in Nagoya City (the port from which many of Toyota cars are shipped). The workers exercised not strictly in lock-step, for some did their “own thing.” From the outside, it is easy for observers to fix on the notion of Japanese “groupism” but be blind to the internal variability. As a result the mindless or robotic notions about Japanese emerge. And so in the case with Japanese backchanneling.

Contrary to first impression, Japanese backchanneling cues will usually evince variability. The speech extract in Display 1 shows that the verbal or vocal back-channeling is not merely copied in most instances. Even if copied, it might not be done mindlessly: Borrowing words of another in any language can show solidarity or mutual understanding. For Japan solidarity or cooperativeness of its people is primary and seems reinforced daily through Japanese aizuchi listening behavior.

If still not sold that Japanese are highly cooperative or coordinated people among themselves and this likely requires frequent reinforcement, possibly daily or more while noting that Japan is a democracy not a police state with relatively full political and civil freedoms, consider these several intriguing observations about Japanese behavior:

1 Japanese fans at rock concerts: Popular recording artist Avril Lavigne, a singer of pop punk and post-grunge, reflected about how Japanese fans at her concerts differ: Japanese fans are “orderly while Chinese “more boisterous.” ...“In Japan, the audience is always in sync together. If you ask them to clap, they all clap. If I start fist pumping, they all fist pump with me. It’s pretty cool. In between every song, they stop and they’re quiet because they’re so respectful. Then if you play a fast song, they all start rocking out, and the minute you’re done, they stop. In China, the show starts, and everyone in the

bleachers comes running down to the front and everyone's tripping over each other and it's rowdy, mayhem. It's craziness."⁴

Presumably the essential difference for Lavigne was that she could have the Japanese fans cooperate as a unified group behind her; whereas the Chinese (and probably other nationalities) are too boisterous and individuated to do the same. What Lavigne says here echoes similar impressions from rock concert aficionados heard over the decades about the Japanese; what is striking is that their relative self-control appears unabated in such venues over generations despite the emergence of young Japanese who supposedly are rewriting the cultural codes of Japan toward more individualism.

2 At a World Cup soccer match: Japanese fans spontaneously cleaned up the stadium afterwards. "There's always stories of angry fans rioting and trashing cities and stadiums after major game losses. But not all fans are the same. After Japan's loss in their first World Cup match against the Ivory Coast, instead of throwing a fit, the Japanese fans decided to clean up the stadium instead."⁵ Presumably many of these Japanese fans were strangers to each other; yet they were able to unify themselves spontaneously in short order for a common good.

3 After the Fukushima power plant/tsunami disaster (2011): People turned in more than \$48 million dollars worth of lost cash in the disaster, some of it such as \$20,000 (in yen) in a purse or \$40,000 (in yen) in an envelope, while waving their rights if the cash were unclaimed. Some of these people were victims of the disaster who surely could have used the money as a windfall, such as the person who found the envelope with the \$40,000 floating in his flooded home.⁶ Moreover people abroad were astonished to see how little looting by the Japanese occurred and their overall orderly conduct.

How do we account for a people who apparently so easily unify themselves for selfless purposes? Only a powerful and consistent pressure would seem applicable. Typically political repression is considered a likely unifier as how Cold War regimes in eastern Europe could maintain strong order as in the former Yugoslavia. Another well-known unifier is religion, the deep passion for which has led to a long history of religious wars. As previously noted, Japan's democracy affords Japanese people a full range of rights and freedoms; relatively little political repression exists. As for a religious explanation, that too seems weak when many Japanese self-report having no religion. For example, Japan has scored highest for secularism (less emphasis on religion) compared to over 50 countries in the World Values Survey over the last several decades.⁷ The next best factor for explaining Japanese group behavior seems to be the physical environment as previously discussed—the shortage of space likely felt daily together with natural catastrophes that happen almost on a regular basis. Such likely raises discomfort, if not anxiety, enough to seek affiliation or cooperation with others, which is realized in heightened listener backchanneling (*aizuchi*)—a sociable behavior that affirms and encourages others with whom one converses. So Japanese listening behavior is not the sole mechanism involved but seems the linchpin central to the mix.

Conclusion

Listener backchanneling likely differs between cultures; for certainly it is so between English and Japanese. Adult learners of either language can have trouble with backchanneling because not only of the linguistic differences, but also backchanneling

receives little attention in school curriculums. The latter likely comes from the false assumption that speech merits primary attention, and that listening will take care of itself. And when listening is targeted, typically instruction focuses on linguistic elements not discourse or communicative competence. Even if totally competent, one can slip into mistakenly mismatching the language systems as with my friend with his grandmother.

Backchanneling in Japanese deserves attention for another reason: It helps make unique Japanese communication style. Listener backchanneling in Japanese is known as highly frequent, more so than that in English and in other East Asian languages. Because of its high frequency, purposefulness, and social necessity, Japanese *aizuchi* requires relatively much cooperation between interlocutors. It may be the veritable building block of Japanese society, for social cooperation is vital in dealing with the environmental conditions of Japan being resource poor, sparse of arable land, and prone to earthquake and other natural disasters. At least in former times, the type of rice cultivation of Japan has required close cooperation among community members for the water irrigation of their fields.

Close cooperation may have been also aided by the restriction of inter-regional travel in former times by the country's mountainous terrain, helping to maintain their village communities and in-group associations. The high cooperativeness that undoubtedly would emerge from having to live and work on such inhospitable land through collective efforts may well explain the great success of ethnic Japanese in Brazil and Hawaii compared to other ethnicities, as well as Japan's remarkable resilience to near-annihilation in war and other natural and economic challenges over the past century or more. It's famed "group-culture" could not exist without social cooperation, which likely becomes reinforced continually through listener backchanneling in conversations everyday.

The script for the Japanese discussion, albeit an English translation, shows that *aizuchi* is patterned not random; and consists of multiple elements, vocal, verbal and nonverbal emitted usually at speech junctures often coincident with grammatical particles and other structures in the utterance of the speaker (evident in the original Japanese language script). A second important feature is the relative frequency of Japanese head nodding, often done like other backchanneling cues in unison with other conversational partners. A third important feature is that Japanese backchanneling includes elicitation by the speaker for listener backchanneling. Speakers seek to elicit cues from the listener mainly by shortening utterances, by head nodding, and by sentence final particles, especially *ne* (*right*, as glossed in the script).

Finally, as a caveat the observer must avoid stereotyped notions that Japanese listening behavior is done mindlessly or mechanically. Close observation reveals that there is much variability within Japanese social behaviors including backchanneling. The original Japanese script (and its translated version) shows that listener verbalizations vary; one does not continually repeat the same utterance. And when speaker and listener give identical cues, it may very well be for the purpose of being in solidarity, an important Japanese cultural value but, I dare say, a universal one as well. Nor should one, as I should note also, valorize Japanese listening backchanneling either. Within the Japanese context, *aizuchi* fits but in others, less so. In my own experience, I would not say that Japanese individuals are any more empathic or astute than another people. In some cases *aizuchi* skill can aid one in the human relations field as a Japanese woman I once met working as a counselor in the U.S. and who seemed so surprised that she could do so. She was a skilled conversationalist and quite friendly. For that reason I supposed that students could find her easy to talk with. Her surprise with her success gave me the

idea that Japanese aizuchi could be used with good effect in another language. I believe that is true if done mindfully.

Japanese listening behavior (JLB) presents an ideal subject of study. Aizuchi involves both attitude and skill that could foster positive and effective intercultural/global communications: The attitude for cooperativeness and accommodation with others; the skill for active listening. The latter of course has long been taught in communication studies, but attitude is more an elusive instructional aim. It might not be through JLB study, for attitudes can develop as the result of behavior: "I like chocolate because I eat it."³ Attitude formation must not necessarily occur prior to related behavior. The reverse can happen. So just as trainees may develop aesthetic attitudes by performing the Japanese tea ceremony, practice performing JLB, though extremely felt by English speakers, could not only enhance their active listening skill, but also heighten social attitudes conducive for effective intercultural relations. Japanese collectivity or groupism could hold benefit even for the most highly individualistic among us.

Notes

¹This case comes from Donahue (1998). For what will be said about Japanese listening and conversational behavior, I rely on my own observations and those drawn from Akasu & Asao (1993), Clancy (1982, 1985), Maynard (1989), and Yamada (1992). Also see Ward (2010) for related cross-linguistic information.

²"Co-dependency" is used here and throughout cautiously, for it should not be equated with that in pop psychology circles connoting some kind of malfunction. Rather the term is used akin to *amae*, a social indulgency, widely recognized in Japanese studies.

³From a publication by social psychologist, Daryl Bem; a detail long remembered from my youthful study of the subject but unfortunately not the title.

⁴Newman (2014).

⁵Nguyen (2014).

⁶Coulton & Glionna (2011).

⁷World Values Survey (2015).

References

- Akasu, K., & Asao, K. (1993). Sociolinguistic factors influencing communication in Japan and the United States. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Communication in Japan and the United States*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Clancy, P. M. (1982). Written and spoken style in Japanese narratives. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Spoken and written language*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Clancy, P. M. (1985). The acquisition of Japanese. In D. I. Slobin (Ed.), *The crosslinguistic study of language acquisition (Vol. 1)*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Coulton, T. M. & Glionna, J. M. (2011, September 22). Japanese return cash recovered after tsunami. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from: <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/sep/22/world/la-fg-japan-returned-money-20110923>
- Donahue, R. T. (1998) *Japanese Culture and Communication: Critical Cultural Analysis*.

- Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Donahue, R. T. (1999) "Bridging Cultures: On the Japanese Communication Style," East Asian Center, University of Virginia. February 9.
- Fusuyuki. (2011). Aizuchi o utsutte. [The expression, "Giving backchannels"]. Retrieved from: <http://blog.swordsmith-fusayuki.com/?eid=8>
- Maynard, S. K. (1989). *Japanese conversation*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Newman, M. (2014, January 28). Avril Lavigne on touring Asia: China is 'mayhem' (Q&A). *Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/avril-lavigne-touring-asia-china-673893>
- Nguyen, A. (2014, June 16). Japanese World Cup fans clean up stadium after loss. Retrieved from: <http://www.absolutelyfobulous.com/2014/06/16/japanese-world-cup-fans-clean-up-stadium-after-loss/>
- Vincent, L. (2010). Japanese proverbs. Retrieved from: <http://nihonshock.com/2010/03/japanese-proverbs-february-2010/>
- Ward, N. (2010). Backchannel facts. Retrieved from: <http://www.cs.utep.edu/nigel/bc/>
- World Values Survey. (2015). Retrieved from: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>
- Yamada, H. (1992). *American and Japanese business discourse: A comparison of interactional styles*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Revised 4-01-16

Published by the Global Listening Centre
<http://www.globallisteningcentre.org>