

## On Reaction Signals

Takami Hatanaka(Tohoku Gakuin University)

thatanaka@tscc.tohoku-gakuin.ac.jp

The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of reaction signals by Japanese and English speakers. After collecting data from Japanese and English speakers, American and British,

I checked them and decided to be concerned with five of them: ah, eh, oh,m, and o:m. At first I thought that the first three of them resembled in form and in their tones and meanings, while the others occur frequently only in English.

But as I was reading the data more in detail I found the reason for too frequent use of the signal eh by Japanese. It is also found that the signal eh is a kind of substitute for a real word, the similar linguistic phenomenon is seen in the use of m, and m seems to be different from o:m in its function, according to whether the speaker is talkative or not. And American students learning Japanese started their Japanese with an English reaction signal and the reverse phenomenon was found with Japanese students speaking in English, so much so that reaction signals are used spontaneously, though they have various tones and meanings.

### 1. Introduction

In spite of their high frequency in ordinary conversation, reaction signals have been less noticed, since they are not taken as important syntactic components. But in the Course of Study for senior high schools issued by the Ministry of Education to be effective from April 1st in 2003, for effective and continuative communication, such silence fillers as well, mm, uh-huh, etc., are encouraged to use. Reaction signals, though they may not be important components, play sociolinguistically and prosodically important part for communication.

Reaction signals positioned initially, which I would like to treat here, represent denial, agreement, disagreement, etc., to the utterances of others. The following are the signals used by English speakers(1) and by Japanese(2).

(1) ah, aha, ahem, alas, bah, boo, eh, mm, oh, oho, ouf, oops, ow, poof, pooh-pooh, ugh, uh-huh, wow, yep, nope, etc.

(2) a, ah, u, un, e, eh, o, oh, sa, sah, ha, hah, he, hoh, ma, mah, etc.

Among these I would like to identify and investigate five signals. They are ah, eh, and oh

which resemble in form and probably in their tones and implications between English and Japanese languages, and m and ɔ:m which frequently occur in English.

## 2. Background Knowledge on the Five Signals

### 2.1. ah

#### 2.1.1. In English

It is used as a cry of surprise, pity, pain, joy, dislike, etc. (*Webster's Third*); or satisfaction, recognition, etc. (*Quirk et al*)

#### 2.1.2. In Japanese

It expresses an affirmation (=Yes / Agree: fall tone), surprise, inquiry, excitement, remembering, pain, sorrow (=What? / It is true? / Yes, I remember / I'm sorry: rise or long flat), prompting others to go on, confirming surprisingly (=Yes, and then? / Is it?: fall-rise), and a bit indifferent reaction (=mm: flat). Except for remembering, pain and sorrow, the other ways of expression with ah may be less polite.

### 2.2. eh

#### 2.2.1. In English

It is used to invite confirmation or express inquiry or slight surprise (all with interrogatory intonation; *W*); impolite request for repetition, but impolite invariant tag question (*Q*).

#### 2.2.2. In Japanese

This is a kind of affirmative reply (=Yes / Agree: fall [polite]), rise [less polite]), a big surprise or doubt (=Oh, my! / Is it really true?: rise or fall-rise [less polite]), or as a bit indifferent reaction or just a filler with a short flat tone.

### 2.3. oh

#### 2.3.1. In English

It is used to express various emotions (as astonishment, pain, or desire: *W*, or surprise *Q*).

#### 2.3.2. In Japanese

It is used to express pain or sorrow (flat or long flat), and among comrades used to

express confirmative (sometimes indecisive) reply(=I see / mm: fall), question (=What?: rise), or as a hail (=Hey: rise).

#### **2.4. m (or mm) --- used by English speakers**

Unlike the above three, this may not be transcribed into an institutional word.

Its falling tone shows that the speaker “follow (and perhaps agree with) what” the other says; “the rising tone indicates surprise or a question or some challenge;” and “the fall-rise indicates understanding, but with only qualified assent.” (Quirk et al: 1443)

#### **2.5. ɔ:m --- also used by English speakers**

This is also represented in a phonetic symbol.

Unlike m, this usually does not have a tone.

### **3. Data**

Data for this research were collected from the followings.

- \* 6 Americans (by interviewing them)
- \* 6 Englishmen (from the Survey of English Usage)
- \* Japanese (Univ. students: 60 1st (-20), 30 3rd year and graduate students (+20), and 10 those over forty years old(+40))
- \* several American students learning Japanese

### **4. Findings**

#### **4.1. Classification**

Reaction signals can be classified into two groups:

- (1) (silent) fillers
- (2) signals; with a rise, fall, fall-rise or flat tone and with a separate implication according to each tone

#### **4.2. English Use**

The use of signals by Americans and English men and women is consistent with the explication by Quirk et al (1985) or Leech et al (1999), with the two exceptional aspects: a signal (*alas*) which is used by older Americans (over sixty); and idiolects or those which are not seen in the books are used, such as mmm (this may be a variant of m), ooh, yuk, hmmm,

humn, or umn. . .

### 4.3. Reaction towards Reaction Signals

Americans were also shown examples of reaction signals and asked to tell which and when they use. So far as the three signals (ah, eh, oh) are concerned, males use a little more.

The items of reaction signals were shown to both Americans and Japanese interviewees in printed forms. Naturally they might have been doubtful of the usage of some items, which shows the distinction of our usage; actual, believed, and prescriptive.

On the contrary, the Survey Data recorded surreptitiously tell (or I might say, reveal) their natural and spontaneous way of use.

### 4.4. Data from the Survey of English Usage

I picked out the data of a dialogue among five persons (A, B, C, D, and E). The dialogue consists of 389 exchanges of utterances: 141 utterances by A who is most talkative as he is hearing his student's opinions about school matters; 93 by B; 85 by C; 16 by D; and 6 by E, with 48 of laughs, untranscribable sounds, or by unknown speakers.

A uses 30 initial signals including ah and others for his 141 utterances, which means that he uses the signals once every 4.7 utterances. B uses 14 signals for 93 utterances (once every 6.6), and C uses 21 for 85 (once every 4.0). D and E each use only one signal.

### 4.5. Japanese Use

About the use of the signals by Japanese, the younger they are the more signals they use, and so older people are apt to use less of them. The youth are likely not only to use more signals but to shift tones variously, according to their meanings.

### 4.6. Tones

As to their tones, each type of Japanese signals has its implications and attitude shown in the section 2 and in the diagrams 2, 4, and 5, which reveal the different tendencies of the use by each generation. The diagram 2 also shows the use of Americans and the diagram 3 reads the signals by English men and women.

After viewing the five diagrams, I would like to give a brief comment in the next section.

#### 4.7. L1 Signals in L2

American students learning Japanese and Japanese students learning English sometimes use L1 signals when speaking in L2.

### 5. Discussions

#### 5.1. Use in English

As American informants and coincidentally Survey Data suggest, English speakers use such signals as m, symbol 182 \f "Symbol" \s 10□:m, rather than ah, uhuh, etc., shown above (1.(1)), as initiator reaction signals. They use the signals, in a fall, rise, or flat tone.

So far as the Survey Data is concerned, more talkative people are likely to use more reaction signals. They use symbol 182 \f "Symbol" \s 10□:m or m, which corresponds to eh in Japanese (cf. Diagram 5). And of the three signals, only ah and oh are used as initial ones.

#### 5.2. Use in Japanese

With Japanese, young people use more signals, which seems to me to show their lack of vocabulary, or to try to substitute the signals for actual words, or they are too quick in reacting to give appropriate words. They use the signals in various tones: fall, rise, high rise, flat, or short fall, and long rise. This represents that they are less inhibited in and more enjoying various expressive ways of communication than older people.

To see this attitude of Japanese youth, we have only to read the diagram 2 in which we see a generation difference in the use of the signal eh.

The signal eh for disagreement shows the highest frequency in the use by young Japanese under and over twenty, both female and male (Diagram 4), while the highest frequency of the signal use by over 40-year-old Japanese women is for inquiry, which is followed by surprise (Diagram 2). The under and over 20-year-old young people utter eh in a rising type of tone for the most versatile meanings, which people over 40 have forgotten to use.

The use of eh by over 40-year-old Japanese people has a dual similarity to that by English speakers. First, both of them utter it in a short rise tone, with interrogatory intonation according to the *Webster's Third* (Diagram 5), to invite confirmation or to express inquiry or slight surprise, though in English the place of eh in an utterance is different. Second, this use is, Quirk et al(1985: 814) says, regarded as an impolite request for repetition, and Japanese also prefer other signals for politeness such as ha? or to-iimasuto? than eh?

### 5.3. Tones

Let me stick to the Japanese signal eh. Eh, *kandoshi* or interjection, is a word used “to express various emotions, responses, hail. It has no inflection, and functions as a sentence, but does not function as subject, predicate, or modifier, nor is modified by other words.”---*Kojien 5th*

Originally the signal eh is used to express confirmation (=Yes. / I agree. / or I see.) with a short falling intonation, or inquiry with a short rise tone, though a bit less polite (=What? / What did you say?), or surprise with a strong and rise tone, or just as a filler (=Well./ Let me see.) with a flat tone. Recently, however, it is used for disagreement, dissatisfaction, dislike and displeasure, especially among young generation, with a (long) rise or long flat tone. In English these four dis‘ will be expressed in booing.

And in English, eh is used as a tag, mostly placed at the end of an utterance. Its frequency is, according to Leech et al (1999: 1097), around 3,000 in British English and 250 in American usage out of a million words, and it is used as primarily response elicitors.

Japanese also have a tag-like eh. But this use, just as the initial use for inquiry, is less polite. And this often comes after a question. As a more polite tag-like signal, there is ne with a rise tone, which often comes after a statement to make the utterance turn into a question or as an elicitor of confirmation.

### 5.4. Types of Signal Users

As to the frequency of the reaction signals, the following can be said. Talkative persons try to take the initiative or turn, and so use more signals. But the reverse is not always true: those who use more signals are not always talkative. In other words, less talkative people use more signals, not to take the initiative but to try to substitute the signal for an actual word.

This may be a typical prosodic phenomenon of young people. It will be clearer to you when it is seen that 12 signals which are called fillers [symbol 182 f "Symbol" \s 10□:m] are used by A in the Survey Data, while no filler is used by C a less talkative person, who uses more signals which can be substituted by yes, right or I think so. And if signals possibly substituted by other actual words may be called as meaningful ones, then A uses only 7 of them, while C uses 19, more than two times as many as those by A. This means that C, before choosing suitable words, uses the signal m with a necessary tone.

This linguistic phenomenon is seen among Japanese teenagers who are rather enjoying so frequent use of the signal eh instead of lexical words. For more in-depth survey of the use of

eh I again interviewed six first year students, and what I discovered was that the reason why they do not use eh for “agreement” is that this use seems to them too formal and old-fashioned, that some feel the use for disagreement seems to them a little childish, though they themselves still use it, and that as to tones they utter it with a short fall and long rise for disagreement, and with high rise for surprise. The second fact tells me that those who said the use is a little childish are beginning to feel some hesitation in using eh for disagreement so that, as the diagram 2 shows, the number of the over 20-year-old users for this is decreasing.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Classification

Reaction signals can be classified into two types: fillers, and signals which can be distinguished their meanings by their prosodic differences so that they can be substituted by actual words.

Though I was unable to find out in my small data, there may be one more type of reaction signals. It is a hesitator, and by using it (presumably with a flat tone) the speaker expresses his or her reluctance or unwillingness to talk about anything (any more).

### 6.2. eh by Japanese

With Japanese speakers, the younger they are the more signals they are likely to use with the more various tones.

But this shows that there seems to be a border-line between those who enjoy using eh which is most popular among young Japanese, and those hesitating to use eh. It is around the age of 18 or 19.

### 6.3. Frequency

Of the five signals I first picked out, symbol 182 \f "Symbol" \s 10□:m and m are more used by English speakers, while eh by Japanese.

The more talkative people are apt to use more signals especially as fillers to take turns in their conversation.

### 6.4. Similarities between m and eh

Of the three signals ah, eh and oh, eh is used by English speakers and over 40-year-old Japanese for inquiry and surprise, though the place of eh in an utterance is different from each

other. The signals ah and oh seem to be less frequently used among English speakers than were expected.

In terms of prosody, m by English speakers corresponds in part to Japanese eh as Diagram 5 shows.

### 6.5. Reaction Signal Use in L2

And very recently I found an interesting fact that some American students when speaking in Japanese start with an English reaction signal, and the reverse happens among some Japanese students.

Amr. “symbol 182 \f "Symbol" \s 10□:m, Kutsu-uriba wa doko desuka?”

Jap. “eh/ ehto/ ano, I would like to ask several questions about...”

### 6.6. For English Education

In learning English, it may be helpful to know how to use reaction signals with appropriate tones and meanings, though it must also bear in mind that their too frequent use may be clumsy and misleading, just as L2 utterances started with an L1 reaction signal is funny.

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DIAGRAM 1 (The Meanings of Reaction Signal Tones)

1. $\bar{\downarrow}$	The speaker is assuring the addressee with his falling tone that he follows (and perhaps agree with) what the addressee is saying.
2. $\bar{\uparrow}$	The rising tone indicates surprise or a question or some form of challenge.
3. $\bar{\downarrow}\bar{\uparrow}$	The fall-rise indicates understanding, but with only qualified assent.
4. $\bar{\flat}$	The level, or flat, tone may be viewed as a variant of the rise, and it is used to suggest (often somewhat pompously) the predictability of what is to follow.
5. $\bar{\uparrow}\bar{\downarrow}$	The rise-fall is, on the other hand, is really a rather emotive variant of the falling tone, used to express, for example, a genuine or sarcastic warmth.

(cf. Quirk et al (1985:1443 & 1600))

DIAGRAM 2 (USE OF SIGNALS BY JAPANESE &amp; AMERICANS)

	a[ə], ah[ə:]		eh[e:]		oh[o:]		others
	female	male	female	male	female	male	
Agreement							
-20	23.4	20.8	2.1	4.2	0	0	
Jap +20	18.4	20.8	0	0	0	0	
c30	45.5	38.5	18.2	0.8	0	0	
Amr +40		(1)			(1)		uuu, mm
Disagree							
-20	0	0	83.0	62.5	0	0	
Jap +20	0	0	81.6	54.2	0	0	
c30	0.9	15.4	54.5	46.2	0	0	
Amr +40	(1)		(1)		(1)?		
Satisfact							
-20	17.0	8.3	0	0	2.1	8.3	
Jap +20	22.4	8.3	0	0	0	0	
c30	0.9	0.8	0	18.2	0	0	
Amr +40		(2)					
Dissatis							
-20	4.3	12.5	66.0	50.0	0	0	
Jap +20	0	0	67.3	45.8	0	0	
c40	27.3	0.8	27.3	53.8	0	0	
Amr +40							ooh
Pleasure							
-20	6.4	4.2	0	4.2	4.2	25.0	
Jap +20	0	0	0	0	4.0	25.0	
c30	0.8	0.9	0	0.8	0.9	0.8	
Amr +40		(2)					
Displeas							
-20	10.6	25.0	34.0	25.0	0	0	
Jap +20	8.2	20.8	34.7	20.8	0	0	

c30	18.2	23.1	36.4	30.8	0	0	
Amr +40							ooh
Like -20	2.1	8.3	0	12.5	4.2	4.3	
Jap +20	0	0	0	0	0	0	
c40	0.9	15.4	0	0	0	0	
Amr +40		(1)					
Dislike							
-20	2.1	16.7	42.6	33.3	0	0	
Jap +20	0	0	40.8	33.3	0	0	
c40	0	15.4	27.3	15.4	0	0	
Amr +40							yuk
Impatien							
-20	48.9	54.2	0	8.3	0	0	
Jap +20	50.0	41.7	0	0	0	0	
c40	36.4	0.8	0.9	15.4	0	0	
Amr +40							tsk
Doubt-20	2.1	20.8	36.2	33.3	0	0	
Jap +20	0	0	22.4	45.8	0	0	
c40	0	15.4	45.5	76.9	(1)	0	
Amr +40						(1)	hum
Inquiry							
-20	0	16.7	74.5	50.0	0	0	
Jap +20	0	0	65.3	33.3	0	0	
c40	0	15.4	72.8	23.1	0	(1)	
Amr +40		(1)		(1)	(1)		huuu?
Surprise							
-20	21.3	8.3	60.0	50.0	23.4	25.0	
Jap +20	12.2	4.1	49.0	41.7	22.4	25.0	
c40	27.3	0.8	63.6	46.2	27.3	53.8	
Amr +40		(1)				(4)	
Disnay							
-20	6.4	12.5	44.7	8.3	0	0	
Jap +20	0	0					
c40	36.4	30.8	27.3	23.1	0	0	
Amr +40						(1)	oh dear (f)
Pain -20	14.9	33.3	0	8.3	0	0	
Jap +20	16.3	29.1	28.6	4.2	0	0	
c40	0.9	15.4	0	0	0	0	
Amr +40							
Pity -20	17.0	37.5	6.4	0	0	0	
Jap +20	14.3	33.3	0	0	0	0	
c40	0	23.1	0.9	0	0	0	
Amr +40						(2)	uuu

\* The number in ( ) indicates signal users.

DIAGRAM 3 (Survey Data---S. 3. 3)

	A	B	C	D	E	?	VAR	Tot.
ə		1	1	1				3
ə:ə	12	4						16
ə	7	6	18		1	4	7	43
ah	3							3
ə:		3						3
ə	1							1
əh	1		1			1		3
ah	3							3
oh	3		1					4
Tot.	30	14	21	1	1	5	7	79

DIAGRAM 4 ([eh] by Japanese: average)

	f	n	tone
Disagreement	73.0	54.3	(short fall-)long rise or long flat
Inquiry	70.9	35.5	short rise
Surprise	57.5	46.0	high rise or short fall-long rise
Dissatisfaction	53.5	49.9	long rise or long flat
Dislike	36.9	27.3	long rise or long flat
Displeasure	35.0	25.5	long rise or long flat
Doubt	34.7	52.0	short fall-(long) rise
Dismay (-20)	44.7	8.3	long flat

DIAGRAM 5 Use of English ə and Japanese eh

Tone	Eng	Jap	Implications	Attituded
↘	ə	eh	Yes/ Right/True	Jap: polite
↗	ə	eh	What?/True? (elicit confirmation)	Jap: not polite Eng: tag
↗ high rise	eh	eh	Oh, no!	
→	ə	eh	(filler)	
→		ah		Jap: often used in an utterance
	ə:ə	eh		used when take turns
↔	ə	eh	Yes(No), but...	indecisive or conditional response
↗	ə	eh		expresses a slight surprise
↗↘ or →		eh		expresses disagreement, used very often among Japanese young people