

Aizuchi

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Sources and notes for claims made.*

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Flag of Japan:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Japan.svg

Ōnin War scenes:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Onin_War_Scene_1.jpg

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Onin_War_Scene_6.jpg

Korean drumming:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Danwon-Mudong.jpg>

View of Mt Fuji, used as-is and as basis for my simpler rendition:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Fuji_reflects_in_Lake_Kawaguchi,_seen_from_the_Misaka_pass_in_the_Kai_province.jpg

Sources

General remarks

This is one of four linguistic tales I drafted the first week back from [my stepaway](#). I already had a very rough arc in mind as I approached the research, since it's a topic I've contemplated and read about before. The delivery was my biggest challenge here. One new thing I tried, at least more blatantly here, was the bullet-point tour of the research during the actual video. It's not an overall change I'm making, just something that felt like it applied with this topic, so I'm curious how it's received.

The literature I've read included those two papers by Laura Miller shown in video, "The acquisition of Japanese backchanneling behavior" by Miyata & Nisisawa, Hanzawa's "Listening behaviors in Japanese", Tsukahara & Ward on aizuchi cues, Oh & Park for Korean and Iwasaki on loops. My paragraph on Sheida White's older cross-cultural study didn't make it in, but that could be an interesting sidestory. I didn't get a hold of Yngve's work, but I skimmed pages from other authors for a broad view of the backchanneling research outside of Japanese linguistics. When authors not named in this paragraph are cited, I'm less familiar with their work. Well, let's get to points made in the video roughly following its timeline.

Specific claims by time

Impolite not to interrupt. Some feedback since video launch pushes against my use of the verb "interrupt" to introduce aizuchi. I was playing on remarks in the literature that aizuchi can feel like interruptions to those coming from another linguistic tradition. For example, the penultimate paragraph of Miller's "Verbal listening behavior" states that "American speakers" can feel like "Japanese interactants" are "interrupting their talk when they are merely demonstrating attentiveness". Along those lines, I suspected we'd bring a shared premise that this behavior can seem like interruptions to outsiders (beginning of the video), then reach the conclusion that it's building conversations together dynamically (end of the video). For a subset of you that raised concerns in comments and social feedback, my assumption missed the mark – you heard me taking aizuchi as *actually interrupting in Japanese*. As the video's conclusion shows, that's not where this journey led me, nor should lead the audience. I [ran a poll](#), where most participants found other words more suitable. I softened the title using "chime in" to help those who consider the initial premise misleading.

Kendō. The story is mine, but the choice of "rhythm" here was influenced by the Korean term for the phenomenon and the definition of aizuchi from Noma 1963, "to keep time or join in with the rhythm of another's talk", quoted page 9 of Miller's thesis, "Aizuchi: Japanese listening behavior".

Typical conversation in English vs Japanese. On page 116 of Miller's "Verbal listening behavior", the author contrasts English and Japanese listener responses: "In this segment we notice that the listener's responses usually occur in or near potential turn-transition places." vs "Listener tokens occur much more frequently and more often simultaneously with a speaker's talk."

Ōnin no Ran and mutual hammer. Though I don't claim this war was its origin, I did fix the ironworking use to this period as a storytelling choice. I hope it makes the linguistics more memorable, but I admit that I am not basing it on a relevant attestation during this exact period. Miller summarizes work on the word's etymology on page 9 of the thesis: "Most dictionary entries for the word aizuchi which provide an etymology give a similar outline (Nishio and Iwabuchi 1969, Kokugo Gakkai 1980)... of a word used to describe the action of alternative striking with a mallet by a blacksmith and his apprentice."

Translations of aizuchi (*remarks cut*). Originally I planned to meander through how the term was "written with various kanji compounds" (Miller thesis page 10), the meaning of its standardly written characters was "taken from ironworkers" (page 10 and note 7), that other linguists have likened it to "conversational 'seasoning'"

(page 11), and Google Translate rendered it in English as "sumo wrestling" (accessed 4 April 2019, screenshot in my project assets folder).

Mallet vs hammer. Miller translates the second character of "aizuchi" as "mallet" in the quote above. I went back and forth on using "mallet" vs "hammer" – from my experience I suspect the latter would be typical in ironworking and other sources read 槌 as the kanji for "hammer". While I'd probably go with "hammer" today, at the time of recording I used the word from my initial source.

Most tokens repeated and reused frequently. As Miyata & Nisisawa report on Clancy et al. 1996, "Most Japanese reactive tokens (68%) were non-lexical items like *un*". Maggie-sensei's [helpful language blog](#) has a list of many aizuchi tokens including information about contextual choices. The choice of "tokens" here is deliberate. While some linguists still refer to these as "backchannels", others like Clancy argue for "reactive tokens".

Overlapping. Miller's word appears in the abstract of "Verbal listening behavior", while Mizutani's 1988 restriction of aizuchi to overlapping intra-turn tokens is quoted in translation by Hanzawa in section 2.3.3 when discussing the "[p]roblems in defining *aizuchi*" (more on that below). Miyata & Nisisawa 2007 contrast "utterance-internal" vs "utterance-external" tokens in section 2 of their paper.

More often than not. The second paragraph of Miyata & Nisisawa's second section compares English, Japanese and Mandarin "backchanneling behavior": "while most English and Mandarin reactive tokens appeared at points of grammatical completion ... more than half of all Japanese reactive tokens (53%) were inserted in the middle of the primary speaker's utterance, a placement 'extremely rare' (Clancy et al., 1996) in the English and Mandarin data."

For some by definition. Hanzawa 2.3.2 states that Maynard and Horiguchi produced frequently leaned-on definitions, and that both take aizuchi to be "produced by listeners" and "used during the speaker's turn". In 2.3.3, the same author admits that "there is yet no consensus on the definition of *aizuchi*". For an image of what does and does not count as "aizuchi" across different studies, see table 2.1 in Hanzawa 2.3.3.1.

Memorized keywords. Hanzawa does give us a list of repeated tokens divided into 14 categories on page 203 of "Listening behaviors in Japanese". I divided them into "keywords" (fixed words) vs open tokens. Iwasaki 1997 further sees a division between closed "non-lexical" interjections, closed "phrasal" lexical items, and "substantive" open expressions (section 4).

Last month yes, family really. This bit of admittedly hyperbolic play was inspired by Nisisawa & Miyata section 2, where internal aizuchi tokens are distinguished from final ones, which can be "rather long utterances like repetitions or echoing

questions (*aa_biiru ne...* 'yeah, a beer...') and by table 1 of the same section which lists forms for final aizuchi including "Repetition of the parts of the speaker's utterance" and "Check-back questions".

Dorai. This term and the definition I used come from Miller's "Verbal listening behavior". I inverted the two conversations; Gary appears second there. Gary "was never thought of as cold", and the conversation is reformatted and excerpted from "data segment 6" near the end of the paper.

Not-Gary. The disagreeing "hai" conversation is excerpted and formatted from "data segment 5" within Miller's "Verbal listening behavior". Not-Gary is my label; the author gives the name "Pat".

Never agreement or empathy. This quote is another one from Nisisawa & Miyata's "The acquisition of Japanese backchanneling behavior: Observing the emergence of aizuchi in a Japanese boy". Near the start of the abstract: "utterance-internal aizuchi signal only continuation and understanding ('I listen'), but never agreement or empathy."

Backchannel. This bit of jargon comes from Yngve, who in 1970 defined "the back channel, over which the person who has the turn receives short messages such as 'yes' and 'uh-huh' without relinquishing the turn." I did not read Yngve; this is quoted in Donna Fujimoto's "Listener responses in interaction: a case for abandoning the term, backchannel". Note that while I used "backchannel" in this section, I earlier used "token" following Fujimoto's proposal, picked up from other authors (including Oh & Park). I hope this gives hints of nuance and arguments in the literature for anyone taking a deeper look.

Three times more. Japanese does it three times more according to Maynard 1989, cited on Hanzawa page 1. At the start of Miyata & Nisisawa section 2, we learn that "Maynard (1986) compared English and Japanese dyadic conversations and found significant differences in the frequency of backchannels: Japanese speakers used three times as many turn-internal backchannels as American anglophones."

Korean mutual drum. Ok-Sim Kim gives the transliteration "maccangkwa lul chita" on page 34 of "Pause fillers and gender in Japanese and Korean", where we're told, "This expression is from the image of two people facing each other to beat the *cangkwa*, a double-headed Korean drum."

Korean backchannels (*remarks cut*). Oh & Park list example backchannels ("e a um ung"), all of which are "used to signal being receptive, or agreeing, or being sympathetic" (in "Interactional uses of Korean acknowledgment tokens" on page 146 of Raymond et al., *Enabling Human Conduct*).

Korean between turns. Oh & Park summarize results showing that "Korean recipients place their reactive tokens not only at [transition relevant places] but at intra-turn unit boundaries as well... [T]he speaker solicits a reactive token from the listener by means of continuing or slightly rising intonation and sound stretch" (also on pages 146-7).

Wide gap not unbridgeable (*remarks cut*). Here I'm very quickly summarizing Sheida White's "Backchannels across cultures". Despite expectations that English speakers would see Japanese as "impatient" (Lebra) or that Japanese speakers would find English silence disturbing (Mizutani), it turned out speakers from the Midwest were more likely to view Japanese listeners as polite and attentive. They even started backchanneling more when listening to someone from Japan. Also, curiously, these Midwesterners started dropping their backchannel "yeah". Yeah!

Pitch. Working with "messy, uncontrolled data", Ward & Tsukahara find in "Prosodic features which cue back-channel responses in English and Japanese" that "110 millisecond regions of low pitch ... are a fairly good predictor, and that more obvious factors, such as utterance end, rising intonation, and specific lexical items, account for less than they intuitively seem to" (from their ending summary). Looking back on the results, Nisisawa & Miyata agree on pitch but not necessarily on the sensed frequency (high vs low): "Similarly, Tsukahara and Ward (1997) found that *aizuchi* occurred with high probability after a low pitch. Their result may be influenced by the fact that their subjects were male, but nevertheless it is clear that a strong change of the pitch, be it low or high, seems to invite *aizuchi*".

Active listeners and active speakers building conversations. This is the closest we get to further research on backchanneling. Instead of "elicit" or "draw out", Nisisawa & Miyata use "invite" as in "speakers seem to actively give signals that invite listeners to offer an *aizuchi*". Other research, like Lala et al. from Kyoto University, focuses on how speakers are themselves guided by backchanneling.

Loops. Iwasaki's "Northridge earthquake conversations" fleshes out the "loop", where a back-channel and back-back-channel build to turn-taking. In the language of the paper, it's actually about opening and then developing a "floor".

Aizuchi that really meant "keep going". Thank you for watching and staying a little longer to go over the sources with me!

Music

I scored the outro theme. Credit for the rest of the music is owed to these creators:

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Josh Woodward (joshwoodward.com)

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SFX

I recorded the writing/chalk sounds and the shooshes/hushes. The rest of the sound effects come from soundbible, pdsounds (backup) and soundeffect-lab.

(from www.soundbible.com or www.pdsounds.org)

Woosh, Mark DiAngelo

Swoosh 1, man

Swooshing, man

Blop, Mark DiAngelo

Mouth pop, Cori Samuel

Wind Storm, Mark DiAngelo

Dragon Wheeze, Gregory Weir

Dull thud, Gregory Weir

Light wood piece, Stephan, pdsounds.org

Turning a page, John Rose

Page turn, planish

Old book noises, Cori, pdsounds.org

Metal pot hits, Stilgar, pdsounds.org

Flapping wings 3, Mike Koenig

(from <http://en.soundeffect-lab.info>)

head-stroke1

head-write1,

magic-cap-write1,

page1, page2

gong-played1