

**The Use of the Interlocutor's L1 Fillers in Foreigner Talk:
Evidence from English Conversations with Japanese EFL Learners**

フォリナー・トークに現れる対話者母語フィラー
—日本人英語学習者との会話資料に基づいて—

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要旨

2つ以上の言語体系または言語変種（方言を含む）を交えながら話をしたり、文章を書いたりすることは、「コードスイッチング」(code-switching) または「コードミキシング」(code-mixing) と呼ばれており、特に多言語・多文化社会の二言語使用者及び多言語使用者の間でよく見られる言語現象である。これらの現象について、多様な観点から学際的に研究されてきたが、フィラー (fillers) のコードスイッチングに関してはまだほとんど知られていない。本稿では、実際に行われた母語話者と非母語話者の会話資料に基づいて、フィラーの使用言語の切替がどのように行われているかを分析、考察してみる。本研究に取り上げるフィラーは、英語母語話者1名が日本人英語学習者81名と1対1の英語で対話する際に使用した日本語フィラーを対象とする。話者の英語発話中の日本語フィラーの出現位置や、韻律的な特徴、機能、使用動機などについて分析するほか、フィラーのコードスイッチングはフォリナー・トーク (foreigner talk) におけるコミュニケーション戦略 (communication strategy) として考察してみる。

Abstract

Code-mixing and -switching have long been recognized common phenomena when people who have knowledge of more than one language engage in discourse, whether it is spoken or written, particularly in sociolinguistically and culturally heterogeneous settings. While a substantial body of research has been accumulated on the formal characteristics of the phenomena across a variety of languages, relatively little is known about mixing first language (L1) fillers in second or foreign language (L2) discourse or vice versa. The purpose of the present study is to address this gap by examining the use of Japanese fillers (JFs) in English conversations between native and non-native speakers. The investigation is based on naturalistic speech data collected from a native English speaker during his interactions with Japanese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Discussion focuses specifically on the locations at which the JFs occur within the English utterances, their prosodic characteristics, functions, and interactional motivations. This paper illustrates the range of possibilities for mixing fillers in another language without jeopardizing the speaker's communicative intent and the structure of the discourse. In addition, it sheds light on the incorporation of the interlocutor's L1 fillers as a communication strategy in foreigner talk.

1. Introduction

Fillers, also known as “filled pauses” (Rose, 1998) and “vocal segregates” (Trager 1958), are audible vocalizations in spoken discourse. They may be lexical (e.g. *like* in English, *ano* ‘that’ in Japanese, *zhege* ‘this’ and *nage* ‘that’ in Mandarin) or non-lexical (e.g. *er*, *ah*, *um* in English, *eto* in Japanese, and *mm* in Mandarin). Fillers resemble the ways in which back-channels¹ are characterized phonologically, morphologically, and syntactically, but there are striking differences between the two.

One of the major differences is that back-channels are performed by the listener in reaction to the interlocutor's utterances whereas fillers are self-initiated by the speaker irrespective of the preceding talk by the interlocutor. Another difference is that while back-channels usually do not disrupt the interlocutor's talking turn, fillers are useful for holding the floor (Schegloff, 1982).

Fillers are pervasive in spoken discourse in all languages but they have no clear semantic content or grammatical relationship with any other word of the utterance in which they occur. Since fillers are often uttered when one is engaged in some kind of demanding cognitive activity or simply when one hesitates, stammers, or does not know what to say next, they are generally associated with speech dysfluencies and considered to be representative of speech production difficulties and anxiety (Christenfeld, 1995).

Research has shown that although people usually have negative opinions about speech that contains too many fillers, some listeners might think the uses of fillers can actually make the speakers sound more relaxed (Christenfeld, 1995). Some L1 studies found that fillers in spontaneous speech had positive effects on the listeners, such as shortening the time they took to recognize words in subsequent speech (Brennan and Williams, 1995; Fox-Tree 2001). As far as second language learning is concerned, Voss (1979) observed that fillers and other hesitation phenomena such as lengthening and silent pauses could create difficulties for L2 listeners. Blau (1991), on the other hand, demonstrated that they actually facilitated comprehension. Watanabe et al. (2008) showed that the conflicting results in previous studies may be due to the fact that high-proficiency listeners were able to use fillers as cues to the complexity of the speaker's upcoming phrases whereas low-proficiency listeners were not.

2. Research Purpose

This paper is an attempt to address the issue of mixing fillers of one language in another—a phenomenon that has so far not received much attention. More specifically, it aims to explore the incorporation of the interlocutor's L1 fillers in interactions between native and non-native speakers (NS-NNS) as a communication strategy in foreigner talk².

3. Data Collection

Naturalistic (i.e., unscripted and unrehearsed) speech data were gathered from a native English-speaking teacher during his interactions with Japanese EFL learners. The interactions took place during an English oral exam, which was part of an individual face-to-face interview between a panel of three examiners and 81 Japanese students. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. It consisted of a Japanese interview and an English oral exam, both of which were carried out in a conversational style. The English oral exam, which took eight to ten minutes, was administered immediately after the Japanese interview by one of the three examiners who was a native speaker of

American English. The procedures for the English oral exam are described as follows:

E=Examiner; C=Candidate

- Step #1: E announces the beginning of the English oral exam.
- Step #2: E hands a reading passage over to C.
- Step #3: E instructs C to read the passage silently for 30 seconds.
- Step #4: E instructs C to read the passage aloud.
- Step #5: E asks C six questions regarding the passage.
- Step #6: E instructs C to give a self-introduction in English.
- Step #7: E announces the end of the English oral exam.

The data were hand-recorded by one of the other two examiners who were present during the entire course of the interview. Since the American English speaker was the only examiner who participated in the English oral exam, it is assumed that the presence of the other two examiners had no direct interactive effects on either the responses of the candidates or the speech production of the American examiner.

4. Forms, Distribution and Frequency

The collected data demonstrated extensive use of six Japanese sounds/words by the native English-speaking examiner, namely, *ja*, *chotto*, *ne*, *ano*, *hai*, and *eto*, all of which were treated in this paper as typical filler tokens in Japanese speech.³ Some of these fillers have variant forms with lengthened vowels or geminate consonants, such as *jaa*, *nee*, *anoo*, *eeto*, *etto*, and *etoo*. A total of fifty-five different utterances were found containing one of these fillers or more. Thirty-eight of the utterances contained one JF (69%), thirteen contained two (24%), and four contained three (7%). Most of these utterances occurred more than once in the corpus.

Table 1 shows that of the six fillers, *ja* (n=36) received the highest rate of frequency, followed by *ano* (19), *ne* (8), *chotto* (5), *hai* (3) and *eto* (1). They were embedded in various environments within the English utterances. *Ja* almost always took the utterance-initial position. There was only one exception where it occurred in the middle of an utterance. *Ano* occupied both the initial and internal positions. *Hai* was observed at the beginning or end of an utterance. Both *chotto* and *eto* appeared only at the beginning of an utterance. *Ne*, on the contrary, always took the utterance-final position.

Table 1. Distribution and Frequency of JFs in All Utterances

	<i>ja</i>	<i>chotto</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>ano</i>	<i>hai</i>	<i>eto</i>	Total	%
Utterance-initial	35	5	0	6	2	1	49	68
Utterance-internal	1	0	0	13	0	0	14	20
Utterance-final	0	0	8	0	1	0	9	12
Total	36	5	8	19	3	1	72	100

According to the syntactic structures of the utterances, sentence types (i.e., statements, commands or questions), and the positioning of the JFs, the utterances are divided into twenty-one groups, each representing a different pattern.

Ten patterns were identified from utterances that contained one Japanese filler. Four of the patterns showed the JF in the utterance-initial position, four in the internal position, and two in the final position. Table 2 reveals that the most frequently used JF in these utterances was *ja* (n=23), followed by *ano* (8), *chotto* (2), *ne* (2) and *hai* (2). While *ja* and *chotto* occupied the utterance-initial position predominantly, *ano* favored the internal position, and *ne* appeared only in the final position. Seventy percent of the JFs in this group occurred in the utterance-initial position.

Table 2. Distribution and Frequency of JFs in Single-JF Utterances

	<i>ja</i>	<i>chotto</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>ano</i>	<i>hai</i>	<i>eto</i>	Total	%
Utterance-initial	22	2	0	1	1	0	26	70
Utterance-internal	1	0	0	7	0	0	8	22
Utterance-final	0	0	2	0	1	0	3	8
Total	23	2	2	8	2	0	37	100

Eight patterns were observed in utterances with two Japanese fillers. Two of the patterns showed both JFs in the utterance-initial position, four patterns showed one JF in the initial position and the other in the internal position, and two patterns showed one JF in the initial position and the other in the final position. There was no instance that showed one JF taking the internal position and the other the final position within the same utterance. As demonstrated in Table 3, *ja* (n=10) was the most frequently used JF in the double-JF utterances, followed by *ano* (8), *ne* (4), *chotto* (1), and *hai* (1). *Ja*, *chotto* and *hai* appeared only in the utterance-initial position, whereas *ne* was only found in the final position. More than 60% of the JFs in this group occupied the utterance-initial position.

Table 3. Distribution and Frequency of JFs in Double-JF Utterances

	<i>ja</i>	<i>chotto</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>ano</i>	<i>hai</i>	<i>eto</i>	Total	%
Utterance-initial	10	1	0	3	1	0	15	62
Utterance-internal	0	0	0	5	0	0	5	21
Utterance-final	0	0	4	0	0	0	4	17
Total	10	1	4	8	1	0	24	100

Three patterns emerged from utterances with three Japanese fillers. One of these patterns showed all the three JFs in the utterance-initial position, another pattern showed the first two JFs in the initial position and the third in the internal position, and the other pattern showed the first two JFs in the initial position and the third in the final position. No instances were found showing either all the three JFs in the internal position or the final position within the same utterance or one JF in the utterance-initial position and the other two either the internal or final position. As shown in Table 4, the most frequently used JFs were *ja* (3) and *ano* (3), followed by *chotto* (2), *ne* (2), and *eto* (1). Seventy-

three percent of the JFs in this group occurred utterance-initially.

Table 4. Distribution and Frequency of JFs in Triple-JF Utterances

	<i>ja</i>	<i>chotto</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>ano</i>	<i>hai</i>	<i>eto</i>	Total	%
Utterance-initial	3	2	0	2	0	1	8	73
Utterance-internal	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	9
Utterance-final	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	18
Total	3	2	2	3	0	1	11	100

The switch points of these JFs were not random. They occurred before a verb phrase (VP) or a noun phrase (NP) and at junctures of a larger syntactic unit, i.e., the beginning or end of a sentence (S) or a question (Q), as illustrated in the following examples:

Before a verb phrase

Example #1. Let's, *anoo*, [_{VP} switch into English].

JF

Example #2. Could you, *anoo*, [_{VP} read this, please, to yourself]? For 30 seconds.

JF

Example #3. Could you please, *anoo*, [_{VP} read this for 30 seconds]?

JF

Before a noun phrase

Example #4. *Ja*, [_{NP} one more question].

JF

Example #5. *Ano*, Mr. Tamaki, do you have, *anoo*, [_{NP} an English self-introduction]?

JF

JF

At the beginning of a sentence or question

Example #6. *Hai*, [_S thank you very much].

JF

Example #7. *Anoo*, [_Q can we switch into English]?

JF

Example #8. *Chotto*, [_S let's switch into English], OK?.

JF

Example #9. *Jaa*, [_Q could you please read this to yourself]?

JF

Example #10. *Ja*, [_Q why don't you give us your English self-introduction]?

JF

Example #11. *Ja*, [_Q can you give us your English self-introduction]?

JF

Example #12. OK. *Ja*, [_Q why don't you do that]?

JF

At the end of a sentence or question

Example #13. [_S Let's switch into English], *ne*.

JF

Example #14. [_Q Could you please answer some questions], *hai*?

JF

Example #15. [_Q Shall we switch into English], *ne*?

JF

5. Prosodic Characteristics

JFs such as *chotto* (lit. 'a little'), *hai* ('yes'), *ano* ('that') and *ne* (particle) are often used as mitigating devices in making a request, softening a command or refusal, or expressing "phatic communion" with the interlocutors (Kita and Ide, 2007). Quimbo et al. (1998) found that in Japanese speech, JFs have longer duration than ordinary words, tend to be followed by longer pauses, and have a relatively flat pitch. The JFs in this study, however, exhibited slightly different characteristics. Compared with the preceding or subsequent talk in English, they definitely sounded more prominent with vowel lengthening, raised pitch, marked inhalation, slower speech rate, increased volume, and silent pauses that succeeded them. The intonation patterns of the JFs varied according to the locations at which they occurred. At the beginning or in the middle of an utterance, they retained a level (→) tone. When they appeared in utterance-final position, they might have either a falling (↘) or rising (↗) tone.

Level and Rising

Example #16. *Jaa*, → *chotto*, → English *ne*. ↗

JF JF JF

Level

Example #17. *Jaa*, → let's *anoo*, → switch into English. ↘

JF JF

Example #18. *Hai*, → *jaa*, → please read it to us now. ↘

JF JF

Falling

Example #19. Could you please answer some questions, *hai*. ✎

JF

Interestingly, the yes-no question in Example #19, which is normally spoken with a rising intonation in English, received a falling intonation with *hai* as a closing filler.

6. Functions

As the examples from the corpus indicate, JFs were used recurrently by the English-speaking examiner when he was giving instructions and posing questions to the candidates. The use of JFs in the English utterances seemed to serve multiple functions. One of the functions was to produce minor delays in the process of the interview so that the speaker (i.e., the examiner) could fill a lexical gap and/or buy time to think and collect his thoughts. As shown in Example #20, this was rather obvious when the examiner was getting tired after repeating the same interview questions with several candidates and beginning to lose his ability to concentrate.

Delay

Example #20. [The examiner handed a reading passage to the candidate and instructed her to read it silently for 30 seconds.]

Jaa, anoo, etoo, could you please read this to yourself? For 30 seconds.

JF JF JF

At the discourse and interactional levels, the fillers played other roles. As shown in Table 1, more than two-thirds of the JFs in the corpus were observed in the utterance-initial position. In cases where the JFs were not merely functioning as a way to allow the examiner more time to think before he could come up with what to say next, they were used as discourse markers to signal a transition from one part of the interview to another, a turn exchange, or a change of topics, as demonstrated in Examples #21-23:

Transition

Example #21. [After the Japanese interview was finished, the English-speaking examiner announced to the candidate that the English oral exam was about to begin.]

Chotto, let's switch into English, OK?

JF

Turn Exchange

Example #22. [The examiner asked the candidate a question about the reading passage but the candidate failed to respond immediately. After waiting for a while, there was still no response from the candidate. The examiner then took the turn by moving on to the next question.]

Jaa, let me ask you a different question.

JF

Topic Change

Example #23. [After the candidate finished reading the passage aloud, the examiner thanked the candidate and told her that he would now start asking questions about the passage.]

Thank you very much. *Ja*, please answer the questions.

JF

In other cases, the examiner inserted JFs in his English speech as a way to break a long utterance into smaller chunks and to slow down his speech so that his listener would have more time to process them. He might also use JFs to cue the candidate to be more attentive to the subsequent words that might be particularly important or difficult for the candidate to understand. Examples #24 and #25 show that fillers that served these functions often took the utterance-initial or -internal position:

Chunking

Example #24. [After questions about the reading passage, the examiner instructed the candidate to give a self-introduction in English.]

Ano, Ms. Nakamura, do you have, *anoo*, an English self-introduction?

JF

JF

Cueing

Example #25. [The examiner instructed the candidate to read an English passage silently for 30 seconds.]

Could you please, *ano*, read this for 30 seconds? Silently, to yourself.

JF

7. Interactional Motivations

As described above, the use of fillers may be self-directed or other-directed. Just as some people talk loud and fast and some people talk softly and slowly, one can assume that whether a person uses

fillers or silent pauses and how often he or she uses them would reflect personal style or habit, and the context in which the speech takes place. But why would a person, when speaking in his/her native language, use the interlocutor's L1 fillers instead of those of his/her own language? One naturally thinks that it would be much easier for a speaker to utter filler words of his/her native language, which in the case of NS-NNS interactions, would mean the interlocutor's L2.

This study has found that JFs were widely used by the English-speaking examiner in his English utterances when interacting with Japanese-speaking candidates. Surprisingly enough, there was not a single occurrence of English fillers such as *ums* or *uhs* in the entire corpus. One way to look at this phenomenon is that the speaker's seemingly dysfluent speech production was premeditated and that his fillers, except perhaps for the ones used as delay tactics, were directed specifically at his non-native listeners. As we have seen in Examples #21-25, many of the JFs seemed to be intended for the listeners as markers of discourse boundaries or cues for subsequent utterances. To fulfill such functions, however, as previous research has suggested, there is no need for the speaker to switch from one language to another because it will suffice to use fillers in his L1.

There is also the possibility that the use of the interlocutor's L1 fillers reflected the unique speaking style of the English-speaking examiner and characteristics of his idiolect. But even if it is the case, the question remains: why is it so? What is it that the speaker tried to communicate by employing this particular way of speaking? And what could he possibly gain from it?

Given the nature of NS-NNS interactions, we have reason to believe that the use of JFs (i.e., NNS's L1) in the English utterances (i.e., NS's L1) may have been socio-psychologically motivated. In other words, the speaker was using code-switching deliberately as a device to establish solidarity and rapport with his listeners, albeit temporarily. This is characteristic of what Poplack (2009) calls "emblematic" code-switching, which involves switches of tags, interjections, idiomatic expressions, and individual nouns. Using the interlocutor's L1 fillers is as simple as making a tag switch or saying an interjection in another language as it does not require the speaker to have a high command of the language and yet it is easily recognizable to the ears of native speakers, i.e., the interlocutor. Making emblematic switches is a way to show that the speaker shares the interlocutor's words, i.e., "convergence" in the Accommodation Theory (Giles, Coupland and Coupland, 1991), which helps to establish an affective bond between the speaker and his interlocutor. Putting aside the issue of appropriateness for an examiner to practice this in an oral exam, there is a general belief that having a good rapport with the interlocutors makes interaction easier and communication more effective.

Indeed, it would only make sense for the native English speaker in this study to code-switch from English to Japanese at the points where the fillers were used if he was certain that the fillers given in the listeners' native language would be heard and understood by the listeners. The fact that his JFs were often produced with a stressed, lengthened vowel and accompanied by a short pause suggests that the fillers were meant to be "noticed" by the listeners. As the corpus reveals, given

the unconventional way in which they were used by the examiner, many of the JFs in the English utterances did stand out as “signposts.” This contrasts with fillers in L1 speech which are generally considered to be so ordinary that they often go unnoticed by listeners (Christenfeld, 1995; Lickley, 1995).

8. Conclusion

The present study, though exploratory in nature, has demonstrated that mixing the interlocutor’s L1 fillers can be employed as a communication strategy in foreigner talk. It has also provided a linguistic analysis of this unconventional use of fillers and described the various roles it plays at the discourse and interactional levels. The results and discussion of the study, however, need to be interpreted with caution because the study suffers from at least three limitations. First, the corpus examined here is small. Second, the speech samples were produced by only one speaker whose idiolect may carry idiosyncrasies that are not shared by other bilingual speakers. Third, the speech samples were taken from conversations that took place in an interview setting where the NS was an examiner (“expert”) and the NNSs were candidates (“novices”). Given the fact that style-shifting may vary in terms of the speaker’s role and status in relation to his/her interlocutor(s), it is quite possible that the inherent unequal relationship between the participants in an interview setting could affect the style and amount of talk of individual speakers. On the other hand, informal observation and anecdotal evidence suggest that the native English speaker in this study tends to insert JFs in his English speech in a variety of contexts. In addition, he does it more often when interacting with non-native speakers than with other native speakers, regardless of their age, gender, and status. This could mean that he has developed the habit of code-switching of fillers in his L1 spoken discourse, perhaps as a result of overuse of English foreigner talk with L1 Japanese speakers.

In conjunction with the findings of this study, I conducted an informal survey with other Japanese learners of English about their perceptions of the use of Japanese fillers by a native English speaker in his English conversations. The learners expressed diverse opinions. While some learners thought the speaker sounded cute, friendly and informal, some thought he sounded odd, unnatural, and condescending. Future research should address whether using the non-native interlocutor’s L1 fillers as a communication strategy in NS-NNS interactions has any beneficial effect on the speaker and the listener.

Notes

1. Back-channels are short utterances such as *uh huh* and *yeah* in English. They are also referred to by various researchers as “reactive tokens,” “listener responses,” “continuers,” and in Japanese “*aizuchi*” (Clancy et al., 1996; Maynard, 1990; Schegloff, 1982; Yngve, 1970).
2. The term “foreigner talk” was coined by Ferguson (1971: 143) to refer the “simplified speech ...

used by speakers of a language to outsiders who are felt to have a very limited command of the language or no knowledge at all.” It was later redefined by Hatch (1979) as “aspects of input which promote comprehension and/or language learning,” such as slower and louder speech with exaggerated pronunciation, simpler vocabulary and grammar, frequent use of yes/no and or-choice questions, tag questions and error correction. In the present study, Hatch’s definition is used.

3. Japanese fillers addressed in previous studies include other forms such as *de, ma, desune, nanka, sono* and final vowel lengthening (e.g. Nakajima, 2008; Reynolds, 1984; Watanabe, 2002).

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