

Complaint Sequences Reconsidered: A Consideration from “Crosstalk” Research Interviews¹

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This study examines and compares interview data by Japanese language learners in a U.S. institutional setting. Specifically, I reconsider “complaint sequences” (Roulston, 2000) in research interview settings from a conversation analytic perspective. Past studies indicate that complaining is a “category-generated” activity in which an informant and a researcher share a co-membership category and the researcher tends to become a recipient of complaints if s/he shares co-categorical incumbency. However, as a researcher, I found that I became a recipient of complaints even though the informants and I seemingly differ in terms of gender, “race” or ethnicity, and/or nationality. I argue that rather than assuming these larger “categories,” informants treat the researcher as a person (presumably) having extensive knowledge about the topics they are complaining about. Methodologically, follow-up interviews are found to be effective to reveal the ideologies of informants more clearly by prompting reformulations of “unsafe” complaints (Sacks, 1992).

1. Introduction

In the previous literature, the activity of complaining has been recognized as a “category-generated” activity (e.g., Turner, 1995) in which an informant and a researcher share a co-membership category and complaining accomplishes rapport between them. However, Roulston (2000) and Roulston, Baker and Liljestrom (2001) found that complaining does not necessarily accomplish rapport between the informant and the researcher in a research interview setting. Also, Roulston (2000) found that a researcher tends to become a recipient of complaints if s/he “knows too much” or has extensive knowledge about the topic(s) about which an informant is complaining. In this study, I support Roulston’s (2000) argument for the “interviewer-knowing-too-much” interpretation from a different research interview setting, i.e., “crosstalk” interviewing (cf. Gumperz, 1982). However, I problematize the traditionally accepted aspect of complaining as a

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“category-generated” activity by considering interview data from the pilot study phase of an on-going larger ethnographic project, “Discursive Practices of Othering: Images of Japanese/Asians.” For the purpose of the discussion, I define a “complaint sequence” as a discursive unit that depicts a third party’s behavior or conduct as morally reprehensible (Roulston, 2000, p. 310; Drew, 1998; Boxer, 1993), thus discursively constructing specific groups of people as “others.” Typically, the phenomenon of “othering” is linguistically realized as “they” as opposed to “we” in terms of pronominal usage. More specifically, in this study, the object of complaints, i.e., Japan/Japanese, is depicted as “others.” Finally, I discuss methodological implications for further studies on crosstalk in general and research interviewing in particular.

2. Research Questions with Reference to Management of Complaint Sequences

As defined in section 1, complaint sequences (henceforth, CSs) are depictions about the third party not present at the time of face-to-face interaction. In this connection, Sacks (1992, pp. 599-600) proposes “safe” and “unsafe” complaints as analytic concepts, and further developments by Roulston (2000) and Roulston et al. (2001) in research interview settings are a particularly useful starting point on the studies of CSs. According to Sacks, “safe” complaints are ones that are “formulated as such a thing as any member of that *category* could say about the *other*” (1992, pp. 599-600; *italics* mine). In the present context, however, interesting questions emerge: do participants who do *not* share the same *categories* with the Japanese male interviewer in terms of gender, ethnicity and/or nationality generate CSs about Japan/Japanese people? Alternatively, do participants who share the *category* of ‘Japanese’ with the interviewer produce CSs about Japan/Japanese people as *others*? If so, what are the conditions for the production of CSs, taking account of social complexities? Methodologically, to reveal their stances or attitudes toward Japan/Japanese more clearly, I ask for clarifications or even explicitly challenge their “unsafe” CSs from the researcher’s perspective when I interview them for the second time. I discuss the results of the reformulations in 4.3.

3. Methodology

The data were tape-recorded in informal open-ended interviews conducted in English with volunteer participants of previous and present Japanese language learners in a U.S. institutional setting. The questions centered around their experiences in Japan and their images of Japan/Japanese people. All of them were “advanced” learners of Japanese (as a foreign language), and all of them had from two months to three years (non-heritage learners) and up to eight years (heritage learners) of experience of living in Japan. Notably, two of them were heritage language learners (cf. He, 2003) or “native speakers” of Japanese in the traditional sense, which is apparently paradoxical if we assume “the essentialist symmetries between language, culture, and nation that we continue to take for granted” (Luke, 2002, p. 108), but may not be surprising if we only take a cursory look at the situations of (especially East Asian) foreign language programs in the U.S. context. In this study, I use the phrase “generation 1.5 Japanese” for these heritage language learners to specifically refer to speakers of the Japanese language by birth who have been losing it with the increasing or almost exclusive use of English, as a result of immigration to the United States at their early life stage (cf. Harklau, 1999).

4. Participants and Data Analysis

4.1. *The Participants and Complaint Sequences (CSs)*

I summarize the profiles of the participants and the degree and relative amount of CSs recorded when I interviewed them for the first time (Table 1). Shoko and Mary could have been interviewed in Japanese, but both of them speak English much more fluently than Japanese, so the code was decided based on the relative ease of interviewing in English. As a frame of reference, I classify them in terms of gender, ethnicity and nationality as well as relative degree/amount of CSs.² I present and discuss part of the transcribed data from two “intense” complainers (Shoko and Mary), who were asked to reformulate their CSs or challenged by the interviewer in the follow-up interviews.

(1) Table 1: Profiles of the participants

Names of Participants	<i>Shoko</i>	<i>Mary</i>	<i>Marco</i>	<i>Sean</i>	<i>Erica</i>
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Female
Ethnicity	Asian	Anglo	Anglo-Asian	Anglo	Anglo
Nationality (Legal Status)	Japanese	American	Japanese	American	American
Degree/Amount of CSs	Intense/ Abundant	Intense/ Abundant	Intense/ Abundant	Mild/ A Few	Mild/ Very Little

As can be seen, intense complainers are cross-gender (Shoko and Mary), cross-national (Mary), and cross-ethnic (Marco and Mary) participants vis-à-vis the interviewer (male, Asian, Japanese), according to the categorization frame. Consequently, the generation of CSs vis-à-vis diverse configurations of crossings forces us to question the accepted explanation of CSs as a category-generated activity. To answer the first two research questions, Mary, who does not share any categories with the researcher, and Shoko, who does share the ethnic/national category of Japanese, both produced CSs, depicting Japanese as “others.” Now I examine their CSs in detail.

4.2. *Data Analysis*

First I turn to the data from Shoko, a generation 1.5 Japanese, who answers my question “What are your images of Japan or Japanese?” Her response follows her autobiographical narrative on her school experiences in Japan and the U.S. (Yamaguchi, 2001). The interview was conducted in the living room of her apartment, while one of her roommates was in the kitchen:

² The degree of CSs is judged based on whether each data set includes expressions that index strong epistemic/affective stances (Ochs, 1996), such as “no one,” “sick and tired” or “never ever” to describe Japan/Japanese people; the amount is qualitatively judged based on how much of the interview data is about negative depictions of Japan/Japanese as well as overall themes of the stories. Also, all the names are pseudonyms, though their names are represented “factually” with reference to the associated “origins” (e.g., Shoko retains a Japanese name).

- (2) Shoko: “*They just look on the ground and walk*”
1. Shoko: well uh I think Japanese people are all about getting education and like doing like doing everything in a certain way
 2. but here American people they just do what like go with the flow kind of thing and like if you someone’s behind in school then they like ah wait for them until they understand everything before they go on
 3. whereas in Japan uh they just if you don’t someone doesn’t understand something then they just leave them and like
 4. Masa: nobody cares?
 5. Shoko: no one cares that’s why I didn’t do well in school because I didn’t understand something then my the teacher really didn’t help me because you know whatever just a kid so who cares but here it is like ((*talking to her roommate?*)) extra help after school and yeah they are more caring I guess and uh I think here I think and then American people in general I guess like living here in in a southern state I think they have they are all really nice=
 6. Masa: =nice?
 7. Shoko: yeah supportive and like they all smile like if I go down the street then they say hey you know wave whatever but in Japan if you =
 8. Masa: = right nobody greets you?
 9. Shoko: [no one no one looks at you no one they just look on the ground and walk so I think () that’s a big difference
 10. Masa: [(heh heh heh) that’s true that’s true

Shoko’s CSs are characterized by contrast structures in terms of *Japanese people vs. American people* (lines 1-2; 2-3; line 5; lines 7 and 9), Extreme Case Formulations (ECFs) (Pomerantz, 1986), such as *all*, *everything*, and *no one*, (lines 1, 2, 5, 7, 9), unqualified statements (Edwards, 2000) such as *Japanese people are ...* (lines 1 and 2), and repetition, *no one, no one* (line 9). More specifically, in lines 1 and 2, unqualified statements are contrasted: “Japanese people are” (line 1) is contrasted with “American people they just do ...” (line 2); in these statements, ECFs (*all* and *everything*) are embedded to highlight the contrast: “Japanese people are *all ... doing everything* in a certain way” (line 1) is contrasted with the statement about American schools, “they ... wait for them until they understand *everything...*” (line 2), which is contrasted again with line 3 (“whereas in Japan ...”). After a sentence-completion with an ECF by the interviewer (“*nobody cares?*”) in line 4, Shoko uses the synonymous ECF in line 5 (“*no one cares*”) and ends her turn with another ECF *all* (“they ... are *all nice*”) to characterize southern Americans. To the researcher’s clarification request in line 6 (“*nice?*”), Shoko uses the same ECF *all* to characterize southern Americans (“they *all smile*”), which is contrasted with Japanese people’s apathetic public behavior in line 9 with repetition of an ECF three times (“*no one no one looks at you no one they just look on the ground and walk*”), which functions as an intensifier.

It should be pointed out that the CSs generated by Shoko have emergent meanings in the situated context. For example, the ECFs (*everything, all*) to characterize Americans are used to describe them in a positive way, while the same ECFs to describe Japanese as “others” have negative evaluative overtones. In addition, the typical “othering” pronoun *they* is used to refer to both Americans and Japanese, which indicates her ambiguous national identity. Further, these conversational devices are used *in combination* to produce recurrent themes of her CSs. However, it should not be overlooked that I (the interviewer) co-construct the CSs and display complicity (Roulston, 2000, p. 327) with Shoko, as is explicitly displayed

in lines 4 (“nobody cares?”), 8 (“right nobody greets you?”) and 10 (“that’s true that’s true” while laughing). This co-construction is what indicates “emergence.”

Another participant, Mary, who is an Anglo female college student and has been to Japan five times, for three years in total, also counter-intuitively generated CSs about Japanese/Japan, which presents counter-evidence to the past studies on CSs as a category-generated activity. The interview was conducted in a local restaurant. To my question “Are there any things that surprised you when you were in Japan?” she provides the following:

- (3) Mary: “*I never wanted to go to Japan ever again*”
1. Mary: () here is another thing I was really surprised about like um how Japanese people communicate or don’t communicate
 2. Masa: oh I see
 3. Mary: but um like Japanese people kind of expect you to to understand how they feel () like they don’t really you know express their emotions

((several turns later))
 4. Mary: but um still it made me feel really bad to think that they had thought that I was really selfish the whole time and I didn’t know but um that after that I never wanted to go to Japan ever again (heh heh heh)

Mary recurrently tells of the “communication problems” she faced with Japanese people. Specifically, it was the ‘traditional’ Japanese families with whom she stayed, as opposed to ‘Americanized’ families,³ that caused the problems and made her indignant: “I never wanted to go to Japan ever again” (line 4), which can be characterized as an intense CS because of the ECF (*never ... ever again*). Excerpt (3) presented above is about ‘traditional’ families she stayed with when she visited Japan for the second time. Her unqualified description of Japanese in lines 1 and 3, as in “how Japanese people communicate or don’t communicate” and “Japanese people kind of expect you to understand how they feel,” respectively, logically implies “all the Japanese people” (Edwards, 2000), which is susceptible to easy refutation or challenge, like ECFs. Thus, in line 3, she mitigates or hedges her statement by using *kind of* and *really you know*. Here, again, I am complicit with Mary in her generation of CSs, as can be seen in line 2 (“Oh I see”), to which Mary responds by elaborating her complaint.

4.3. Reformulations and Management of “Unsafe” CSs

After the initial interviewing, I conducted follow-up interviews with three participants (Shoko, Mary and Marco) to have them clarify some significant points or challenge their “unsafe” CSs. Specifically, their ECFs, dichotomous contrast structures or unqualified generalizing statements can be easily challenged since the CSs formulated with these rhetorical strategies are quite unreasonable if taken “literally” (Edwards, 2000). Also, the subsequent examination of the data made it possible for me to go beyond some of the “limits of metapragmatic awareness” (Silverstein, 2001) during the speech event of the first-time

³ I use single quotation marks to indicate my bracketed or skeptical stance toward Mary’s distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘Americanized’ Japanese families, on which Mary elaborates in Excerpt (6) below.

interviewing with “reflexive capacity of language” (Lucy, 1993). The participants, who were not wholly conscious of their language use during the interviews, were also prompted to talk more explicitly about their previous statements. Thus, Shoko and I went over the Excerpt (2) together and started to discuss the story she had told in the previous interview. In Excerpt (4), I challenge her statement from the previous interview that “no one greets you” in Japan, by pointing out that people may greet her if she goes to a rural part of Japan and by using the ECF “no one greets you if you go to New York.” Shoko accepts my point by saying “oh yeah,” “right” or “true.” However, in Excerpt (4) below, Shoko expresses her emotional commitment toward (southern) Americans:

- (4) Shoko: “*I think I just feel more hospitality towards people born here*”
1. Masa: but do you still think this is true? I don’t mean to () (heh heh heh) challenge you or question you
 2. Shoko: well I do *think I feel* that way uh =
 3. Masa: = why
 4. Shoko: well I think I just feel more hospi- hospitality towards people born here when I am here rather than in Japan, I guess (.) I have been well I have been in the US longer than I have been in Japan

Shoko again sticks to the Japan-U.S. contrast structure (line 4) to express her emotional investment in or commitment to Americans while mitigating her argument by saying, “*I think I just feel more hospitality towards people born here*” (lines 2, 4), which indicates a weaker epistemic stance than the strong one in the last interview, characterized by ECFs. From this follow-up interview, we can see that her stance toward (southern) Americans and her critical attitude toward Japanese are expressed by ECFs, contrast structures and repetition in the previous interview, and her use of ECFs is not meant to be “factual” but indicative of her stances toward both Americans and Japanese (cf. Edwards, 2000).

Later in this follow-up interview, Shoko elaborates on her self-identification in terms of her perception of nationality:

- (5) Shoko: “*I never say that I am American because I am not*”
1. Masa: or how do you interpret your nationality like () speaking your Japanese right?
 2. Shoko: I always say that I am Japanese never American
 3. Masa: to your friends?
 4. Shoko: yes to anyone=
 5. Masa: =but or really? In the interview you said you see yourself as American
 6. Shoko: I may see myself as American but I never say that I am I don’t think I am
 7. I think myself as Japanese maybe I am (.) Americanized but I never say that I am American
 8. because I am not

In the previous interview, Shoko narrated that “I see myself as one of Americans” (Yamaguchi, 2001), which made me curious about her perception of national identity. So, in line 1, I asked Shoko for clarification in this respect. The argument is that her identity as American is something Shoko herself may perceive, but not something that she displays to other people with an ECF *anyone* (line 4). In lines 7-8, Shoko enacts herself as “Americanized” but “not American,” which is consonant with her pronominal use *they* to

refer to both Americans and Japanese in the previous interview. In this excerpt, however, her pronoun shifted to *I* in combination with ECFs *always* (line 2) and *never* (lines 6 and 7) to deny that she is a “real” American, which allows a more subtle construction of self and national identity, rather than generally talking about “Americans” or “Japanese people” by *they* (see Extract (2) above).

The meaning of “American” and “Japanese” is also one of the focuses in the follow-up interview with Mary. After talking about the Japanese families with whom she closely associated, as opposed to ‘traditional’ families, which caused “communication problems,” Mary answers my question “Are they more exceptional?”:

- (6) Mary: “*She is more American than I was*”
1. Mary: uh people that actually people that I became closer to weren’t traditional Japanese people
 2. it didn’t it didn’t seem like=
 3. Masa: =they don’t they don’t cause communication problems o.k.
 4. Mary: right right

After line 4, Mary starts to talk about her ‘non-traditional’ Japanese host mother and goes on, “She is strange for a Japanese woman. She could not eat sushi, she ate a lot of American food, she hated raw fish. She is really strange.” Mary’s argument is that the ‘Americanized’ host mother does not cause communication problems because she adopted ‘American’ practices, such as not eating raw fish. It is implicit in her argument that ‘traditional’ families cause communication problems because they still have a traditional Japanese lifestyle. To characterize her ‘non-traditional’ host mother, Mary says, “She is exceptional. I think she is more American than I was.”

In these follow-up interviews, I focused on indexical aspects of language use, not assuming that there is a one-to-one correspondence between an expression and its meaning (Duranti, 1997, p. 43). Thus, my questions focused on the meaning of indefinite pronouns such as “no one” or even apparently neutral terms such as “Japanese” or “Americans” used in their CSs. By prompting reformulations of these terms, I revealed the stances or attitudes of Shoko and Mary more clearly by engaging them in metalinguistic activities.

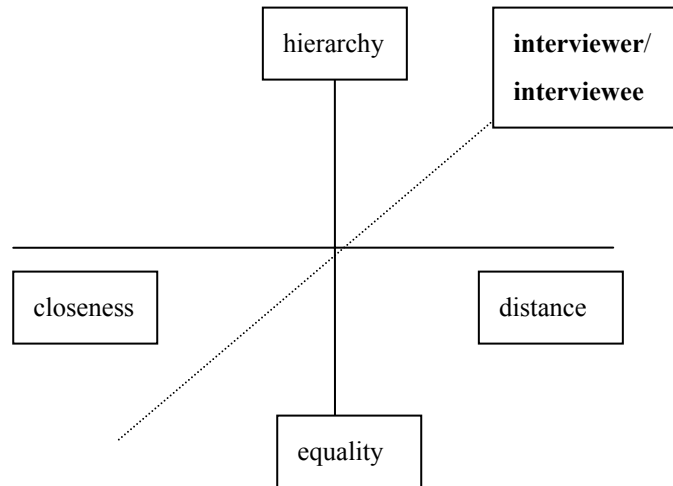
4.4. Discussion

Based on the data analysis, I discuss one of the research questions, “What are the conditions for the production of CSs?” I argue that the underlying conditions in this research setting are that an interviewee produces CSs if s/he perceives that the interviewer knows about the topics of complaint. The CSs are marked by the use of “othering” conversational strategies such as ECFs, rather than requiring that interviewer and interviewee share a co-categorical incumbency. How then can we explain the past studies on CSs (e.g., Turner, 1995; Roulston, 2000; Boxer, 1993) as well as the present data if complaining is not a category-generated activity?

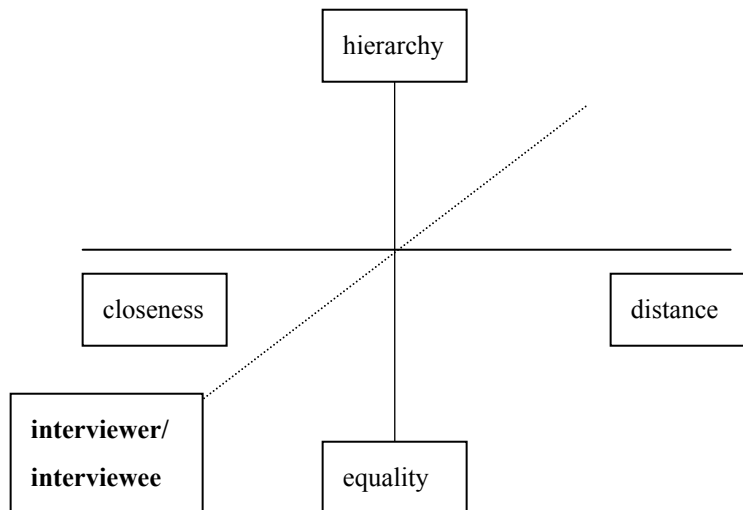
In this respect, Tannen’s (1999) multidimensional model explains the present data as well as past studies by providing a more dynamic view. Tannen represents power-solidarity relationships with a quadrant chart: the power or status (hierarchy vs. equality) and the solidarity or connection (closeness vs. distance) dimensions. From this perspective, research interviewing is framed as a hierarchy- and distance-oriented speech event with the researcher having more power because of the asymmetrical interaction norms (Figure 1.1),

which are observed in Excerpts (4) and (5). However, the speech event can be turned into an equality- and closeness-generating one with the use of “othering” CSs if the interviewer aligns himself with the interviewee (figure 1.2), as we saw in Excerpts (2), (3) and (6). Thus, I support Tannen’s argument that “linguistic strategies are both ambiguous and polysemous in exhibiting status and connection in interaction” (1999, p. 228), which can be subsumed under the Indexicality Principle (Ochs, 1996, p. 411). In sum, the act of complaining with the strategy of “othering” in the present context is seen as either a “category-generating” activity to invite the interviewer to align himself with the interviewee, or a “category-generated” one if the interviewer does not align himself with the interviewee in interaction.

- (7) Figure 1.1: Interviewing as a Category-Generated Activity (adopted and adapted from Tannen (1999))



- (8) Figure 1.2: Interviewing as a Category-Generating Activity (adopted and adapted from Tannen (1999))



5. Concluding Remarks and Implications for Further Studies

I tentatively conclude, because of the limited amount of data at present, that complaining is not necessarily a “category-generated” activity in a “crosstalk” research interview setting but is an activity of an interviewee talking about the problems to an interviewer presumably knowing well about their problematic experiences in an on-going interactional negotiation. The linguistic strategy of “othering” in CSs is both ambiguous and polysemous in interaction (Tannen, 1999), and Tannen’s multidimensional model provides a dynamic view of the phenomenon. This conclusion resonates with some linguistic anthropologists, who argue that identities are co-constructed, that some aspects of identities become relevant and emergent in unfolding interaction (Rymes, 2001) and that the role of an interviewer is crucial in that s/he actively works as “co-author” (Duranti, 1986).

From a methodological point of view, follow-up interviews are found to be effective to reveal the ideologies of participants. Following linguistic anthropological traditions (Lucy, 1993; Briggs, 1986; Silverstein, 2001), I argue that an interview as a speech event foregrounds “unavoidably referential, surface segmentable, and relatively presupposing” aspects of language use (Silverstein, 2001, p. 385ff.), which are readily accessible to our consciousness, in spite of the highly indexical nature of interview discourse (Briggs, 1986, pp. 42, 115ff.). However, by engaging in metalinguistic interviewing, we can get closer access to some of the limits of metapragmatic awareness that are not accessible at the time of first-time interviewing. The ideologies of participants are made clearer by asking about the indexical, rather than the purely referential, aspects of language use, such as the meanings of *Japanese*, *Americans*, or ECFs such as *no one* in the situated context of research interviewing (cf. Briggs, 1986, pp. 42-43).

Another implication is the necessity to recognize both the advantages and limits of researcher identity for data collection because of the unavoidable co-construction of interview data. In other words, my relatively fixed identity is both facilitating and constraining to produce certain kinds of CSs in the research interview settings. Certain aspects of my identity are facilitating in that I successfully co-produced CSs from the particular groups of people: the participants seem to expect that I had the “same” experiences, or at least that I understand what they are complaining about. However, my other aspects of identity are constraining. Specifically, the relatively fixed aspects of my identity, such as the fact that I am male, that I speak English with an ‘accent’ or that I am a language crosser (Rampton, 1995) may have prohibited the participants from producing other kinds of data to investigate discursive practices of othering. Thus, it is unlikely that, for example, an interviewee complains about people speaking English with a Japanese accent, which would directly index the interviewer, rather than indirectly complaining about a third party (cf. Boxer, 1993).

More generally, by focusing on perhaps rather spectacular cases, such as generation 1.5 Japanese (and a fluent Anglo-American speaker of Japanese, Mary), I question one of the fundamental methodological assumptions of *a priori* assigning given and static identities of participants in social scientific research (cf. Ochs, 1993). Am I misled by exceptional cases? Should I only focus on rather unproblematic American learners of Japanese as a foreign language such as Mary? The answer depends on our research goals and theoretical assumptions. However, for this ongoing project, generation 1.5 participants are not only an “interesting” type of people because of their ambivalent national identity or their “diasporic” status, but convincingly show evidence of “globalization” or dynamic forces of the contemporary world in which there is no necessary correlation between our places of

birth, places of residence and socio-cultural affiliations (Yamaguchi, In review), with particular reference to educational institutions (Wortham, 2003). Furthermore it cannot be denied that we are encountering an increasing number of people who are more like the generation 1.5 participants, such that we can no longer assume who is “American” or “Japanese” in late modernity. Thus, it is not too radical a proposal to argue that we need a new epistemology for “crosstalk” research, which does not assume *a priori* identities as given independent variables, while acknowledging the social identities and affiliations of participants to get access to an emic perspective at the same time. I hope to have demonstrated that one of the promising approaches to rethinking and revising “crosstalk” research is to combine ethnomethodological analytic concepts (e.g., Sacks, 1992; Pomerantz, 1986; Edwards, 2000) with linguistic anthropological insights (e.g., Duranti, 1986; Ochs, 1993; Silverstein, 2001; Rymes, 2001) grounded in ethnographic methods (e.g., Briggs, 1986; Duranti, 1997), which involve “prolonged and direct participation in the social life of a community” (Duranti, 1997, p. 85). In the present study, I have had relatively long-term relationships with the participants who were members of a community engaged in the practice of studying Japanese as a foreign language. My roles have changed in relation to the participants: teacher, friend or acquaintance, and interviewer and researcher during the course of time. Taking into account these factors, it is quite reasonable to assume that my relationships with the participants significantly affected the quality of data in general, and the production of CSSs in particular, in the ethnographic interviews.

Transcription Conventions

()	words spoken, not audible
(())	transcriber’s description
[two speakers’ talk overlaps at this point
=	no interval between turns
?	interrogative intonation
(.)	small untimed pause
heh heh heh	laughter

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