慶應義塾大学学術情報リポジトリ
Keio Associated Repository of Academic resouces

Title	The meaning and place of linguistic utterance "um" in Japanese and English conversations
Sub Title	
Author	髙塚, 麻紀子(Takatsuka, Makiko)
Publisher	慶應義塾大学大学院文学研究科英米文学専攻『コロキア』同人
Publication year	2021
Jtitle	Colloquia (コロキア). No.42 (2021.) ,p.39- 50
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	英語学・言語学
Genre	Journal Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00341698-20211220-0039

慶應義塾大学学術情報リポジトリ(KOARA)に掲載されているコンテンツの著作権は、それぞれの著作者、学会または出版社/発行者に帰属し、その権利は著作権法によって保護されています。引用にあたっては、著作権法を遵守してご利用ください。

The copyrights of content available on the KeiO Associated Repository of Academic resources (KOARA) belong to the respective authors, academic societies, or publishers/issuers, and these rights are protected by the Japanese Copyright Act. When quoting the content, please follow the Japanese copyright act.

The Meaning and Place of Linguistic Utterance "Um" in Japanese and English Conversations*

Makiko TAKATSUKA

1. Introduction

The linguistic phonetic responses *un* in Japanese conversation and *hm* and *mm* in English conversation sound alike and maintain the same meanings in their respective languages. Although these responses can mean various things, they retain both similarities and differences in terms of the utterance place and functions of these response tokens. In this paper, I define patterns in a set of meanings and places in each language using previous research conducted on the response tokens *un* or *hm* and *mm* when spoken with a falling intonation or a rising-falling intonation. I then investigate the utterance of these response tokens by a Japanese woman living abroad with her British husband and children by observing her conversation with her children in Japanese and her English conversations with her husband. Finally, I consider the similarities and differences between the meanings and places of the two languages—for example, I examine which pattern in a set of meanings and places is used most often in each language and how those response tokens, uttered by a Japanese woman, are influenced by each other's languages.

2. Previous Research

The Japanese utterance *un* has a variety of meanings. Sadanobu (2002) states that it indicates a positive response to the speaker, confirms the speaker's information, acknowledges linguistic direction from the speaker, and expresses "aizuchi," which shows one's understanding of the speaker's utterance: "aizuchi" is not a direct response to the speaker's utterances. Moreover, *un*, which indicates that a linguistic direction was received, does not have an affirmative meaning. For example, if a son is told by his mother in the morning, "It's seven o'clock," and he answers *un,* the mother's utterance may actually mean, "Get up now, because it's already seven o'clock," and the son's *un* to the mother indicates that he has received the direction—not that he affirmed its content. In addition, according to Takagi et al. (2016), the meaning of *un* in an "aizuchi*"* is treated the same as a "continuer," since the

* I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Ippei Inoue and Professor Ryoko Suzuki, of Keio University, for their guidance and advice.

"aizuchi" is often considered to be equivalent to an English "continuer" in conversation analysis. The continuer, as advocated by Schegloff (1982), has a role in which the listener simply encourages the speaker to continue talking without taking a turn in the conversation. Clancy et al. (1996) state that the Japanese *un* and the English *hm* have three meanings: continuer, interest, and understanding.

Second, various studies have been conducted of the utterance places of the Japanese *un.* According to Takagi et al. (2016), *un* as both a continuer and an indication of understanding can occur where the turn of the speaker can be completed (a possible completion point) and cannot be completed (within the turn). Within the turn, the listener can predict that the turn has not yet ended through the grammar, prosody, etc., of the speech. Nishizaka (2008) explains that *un*—which could mean "I am listening to what you are saying," "I encourage you to continue talking," and/or "I affirm that there is no problem"—is uttered at a response-opportunity place. At a response-opportunity place, the speaker extends the sound of the end of the word, utters words accompanied by a sign representing a break (such as *sa* and *ne*), or raises the tone slightly by strengthening the last sound so that the listener can recognize it as an opportunity to utter a reactive token. These are features that mark the possible completion point or timing of the utterances within the turn for the listener. Other timing landmarks, according to Iwasaki (2009), are indicated by the speaker's pauses, nods, and glances at the other person. Takagi et al. (2016) also note that, while an utterance may sound like a possible completion point to the listener, there will be an overlap if the speaker continues to talk.

To summarize the above points, the Japanese *un* is uttered in three places: at the possible completion point, near the possible completion point, and within the turn. Features that mark the utterance place include a response-opportunity place or a speaker's use of pauses, nodding, and looking directly at the listener, and consideration of grammatical features.

In English, there are utterances that sound similar to Japanese *un*. Clancy et al. (1996) introduce *hm* and Cooper-Kuhlen and Selting (2018) and Gardner (2001) introduce *mm* in English as auditory utterances similar to Japanese *un.* According to Gardner (1997), *mm* is rarer in American English than in Australian and British English. Clancy et al. (1996) state that *hm* indicates a continuer (i.e., it simply urges the speaker to keep talking) showing interest showing understanding. Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (2018) also concur with this meaning of *mm* as continuer. Gardner (1997) explains that *mm*, when pronounced with a falling intonation, indicates a weak acknowledgement, a positive assessment, or a response to a yes/no question. A weak acknowledgement means that the listener has no problem with the

speaker's utterance and has nothing to say about it. If the speaker does not have anything more to say about the topic, the topic change occurs later in the conversation through an action of the speaker or the listener. It is expressed as "weak" because there is no clear indication of either approval or disapproval. Meanwhile, a positive assessment has a rising-falling intonation, indicating a weak expression of "wow," "great," or "amazing," and shows sympathy and a commitment to involving oneself in the talk. The yes/no question response has the meaning of both agreement and negative agreement.

For these utterance places, Clancy et al. (1996) state that they are grammatically and intonationally possible completion points, and Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (2018) and Gardner (2001) state that they can also be close to the possible completion points. When stated near possible completion points, the utterances made near the end of the talk overlap with the *mm* utterance of the listener.

These previous studies show that the that Japanese *un* in any meaning is uttered at the possible completion point and its vicinity. *Un* is used within the turn only when it has the meaning of continuer. The combinations of the meaning and place of Japanese *un* are identified in Table 1.

Table 1

The combinations of meaning and place of Japanese "un"

Meaning	Place
Continuer	Possible completion point and its vicinity, within the turn
Positive response	Possible completion point and its vicinity
Confirmation	Possible completion point and its vicinity
Reception	Possible completion point and its vicinity

"Continuer" mainly encourages the speaker to continue talking and comes with one or more meanings: understanding, being interested, having no problem with what is being said, and listening. "Positive response" refers to *un* used to react the speaker's question. "Confirmation" occurs when the listener confirms information provided by the speaker. The use of *un* as "reception" indicates that the listener receives a linguistic direction from the speaker.

Next, the English "hm" or "mm" are also uttered at the possible completion point and its vicinity in all meanings. The combinations of meaning and place of *hm* or *mm* in English are grouped as Table 2.

Table 2

The combinations of meaning and place of English "hm" or "mm"

Meaning	Place
Continuer	Possible completion point and its vicinity
(Dis)agreement	Possible completion point and its vicinity
Sympathy	Possible completion point and its vicinity
No opinion	Possible completion point and its vicinity

The English term "continuer" retains its meaning in Japanese "aizuchi." "(Dis)agreement" is a response to the speaker's yes/no question. "Sympathy" indicates a similar expression of "wow," "great," or "amazing." "No opinion" shows that the listener expresses indifference on the topic.

When comparing the meanings of these words between the two languages, "continuer" has the same meaning, while the "positive response" of Japanese and "(dis)agreement" of English are slightly different in respect to the meaning of negative agreement responses in English. The others have a meaning particular to each language. As for place, the Japanese *un*, when used strictly as a continuer, is only uttered within the turn.

3. Analysis Method

In comparing the Japanese *un* with the English *hm* and *mm*, this paper finds that the three words are considerably similar to one another phonetically; thus, this paper is unified their notation to simply "*um*." The *um* is a notation of the pronunciation of the Japanese *un*, which in turn is a notation of the written word.

The conversation data to be analyzed are drawn from videos on the LiaLico Channel on YouTube from 2019 to 2021, in which a Japanese woman is a questioner and family members answer questions. I analyzed how the Japanese woman utters *um* in 72 minutes of Japanese conversation and 45 minutes of English conversation. Since this channel is primarily filmed and edited by a Japanese woman called Mama, she often stands behind the camera and does not appear on the screen. Therefore, in this study, only auditory *ums* were observed and analyzed, while gestures were excluded.

Mama was born in Japan and grew up in Japan until she graduated from high school. She then went to college in the United States, married a British man, and has lived with her family

in various countries since then. She now has six children. Mama speaks in English when she speaks to her British husband and in Japanese when she speaks with her children. In this study, I observed 100 total phonetic *ums* collected from Mama's conversations in Japanese with her children and in English with her British husband. I then examined their utterance places and meanings.

As for the methodology, I first investigate the pattern to which the *um* extracted from the conversation data belongs using patterns of meaning and the placement of *um* in both Japanese and English conversation, as categorized by previous studies. Then, I verify the features of *um* and the influence of each language on Mama's utterances.

4. Analysis Results

The distribution of different meanings of *um* in a Japanese conversation with children is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

The distribution of different meanings of "um" in Japanese

Meaning	Number of times
Continuer	72 (including 66 times within the turn)
Positive response	9
Confirmation	19
Reception	0

The utterances of *um* in Japanese conversation were mostly used as a continuer within the turn. An example is as follows.

Excerpt 1

Mama says *um* as "continuer" to encourage the child to continue talking.

```
01    Child: nihon to [::.]
                      Japan and
02 → Mama:            [u::m]
03    Child: supein to::.
                      Spain and
```

In the above example, the child extends the sound of the end of the utterance *to* within the turn to create a response-opportunity place, after which Mama utters *um*.

When the roles were reversed and Mama acted as the questioner while the child was the listener/answerer, it seems that the frequency of positive responses was lowered. The following is an example of a positive response.

Excerpt 2

Mama says *um* as a "positive response" to the child.

```
01    Mama: kakin maitsuki donogurai?
                How much do you charge each month?
02    Child:(.) kakin?
                    Charge?
03 → Mama: um
```

As in Excerpt 2, a positive response occurred when the child returned the question to confirm the question's content in response to Mama's asking.

When the end of the speaker's utterance was *jan*, Mama's response token *um* unquestionably showed the meaning of *um* when used for confirmation. Moreover, there were some cases in which the comment from Mama was added following the *um* for confirmation. The following example is an example.

Excerpt 3

Mama says *um* as "confirmation" after the child utters *jan*.

```
01    Child: kenzo toka (.) ikkaimo chanto eigo mana (.) manande naikedo
02           hobo neitybu jan
                 Kenzo has never learned English properly, but he is almost a native, right?
03 → Mama:   um, nande?
                 Um. Why?
```

Because the observed conversation took place in the form of questions and answers, no instances of *um* in the meaning of reception were found in this study.

Additionally, there was no pattern of *um* in English in Japanese conversation. However, the *um* at a possible completion point and its vicinity for continuer may then lead on to the next question, which could be equivalent to "no opinion" in English. On the other hand, it

could have been spoken as a continuer, but could have moved on to the next question because the speaker did not continue. This is why it cannot be clearly determined whether it expresses "no opinion." The *um* at a possible completion point and its vicinity at the turn may have influence in English; at the same time, it is possible that *un* in Japanese itself has the same meaning and role.

Table 4 details the results of the analysis on the use of *um* in Mama's English conversation with her British husband.

Table 4

The distribution of different meanings of "um" in English

Meaning	Number of times
Continuer (at the possible completion point and its vicinity)	90
Continuer (within the turn)	2
Agreement	2
Sympathy	0
No opinion	6

In English conversation, *um* was mostly used as a continuer, which has a direct equivalent to meaning of *um* as a continuer in Japanese. There were few examples of *um* as an agreement, likely because Mama was the questioner this time, as in the Japanese conversation. There seem to be two reasons for the absence of the use of *um* as sympathy. One is that all questions about her family are from the viewer, so Mama could predict the family's answer to some extent, and there was no emotional scene that would evoke sympathy. The other is because of the influence of her mother language Japanese, where *um* is not used in this meaning. Examples of conversations with the use of *um* as a continuer and as agreement are as follows:

Excerpt 4

Mama says *um* as a "continuer" to encourage her husband to continue talking at the possible completion point.

```
01    Husband: life has always been too busy
02 →  Mama:    u::m
03    Husband: and (.) and sometimes i (.) do not have (.) enough time to
04             do things i want to do
```

Excerpt 5

Mama uses *um* in "agreement" to her husband's question when he tries to confirm her initial question.

```
01    Mama:    …which city is (.) sumiyasui (.) u::m like more if you're
                                        Nice to live in
02             more comfortable with
03    Husband: where (.) in the world
04 →  Mama:    um
```

The English *um*, used when topic was later changed, was classified as "no opinion." The following is an example that indicates how Mama moves on to another question after the utterance of *um*:

Excerpt 6

Mama says *um* as "no opinion" and changes the topic by herself.

```
01    Husband: i'm glad we got both
02    Mama:    yeah
03    Husband: and all healthy and (.) doing ok
04 →  Mama:    um (.) do you think you'll be (.) sad they (.) they get
05             married
```

This study found that there were two *ums* used as continuers within the turn that were not seen in the English patterns examined in previous studies. One of these uses is shown in the following conversation:

Excerpt 7

Mama says *um* as "continuer" to encourage her husband to continue talking within the turn.

```
01    Husband: or (.) let's go (.) on a trip to
02 →  Mama:    um
03    Husband: (.) cardona (.) and
```

In English continuers, the *um* must be uttered after or near the end of *Cardona*. However, in this example, the *um* is uttered between *to* and *Cardona*, which is within the turn. The word *to* is a preposition in English; however, when this is translated into Japanese, it becomes a particle. In Japanese, it is natural that a pause occurs afterwards and the listener utters *um*. *Um*

was muttered within the turn was only twice out of 100 recorded uses of *um*. This constitutes an insufficient amount of data; presently, it is not possible to determine this as being due to the influence of Mama's mother tongue, Japanese. It is necessary to verify whether it is commonplace for a native English speaker to utter *um* within the speaker's turn.

5. Discussion

The conversation data used was gathered from videos of a questioner, Mama, asking her family some viewer-submitted questions. The number of times *um* was uttered in both English and Japanese was recorded and subsequently classified in terms of how the term was used. In this specific conversational situation, the use of *um* as a continuer was found to be consistent across both languages. In Japanese, this use of *um* often appears within the turn.

From the observed utterances of *um* in Japanese, the use of *um* as confirmation was found to be the second most common use of *um* after its use as a continuer. In Japanese, the word *jan* at the end of the utterance of the speaker encourages the listener's confirmation. In Japanese, the use of *um* at the possible completion point and in its vicinity may then encourage the speaker or the listener move on to the next question. While it was considered to be equivalent to "no opinion" in English, it was very difficult to distinguish between the meaning of "continuer" and "no opinion" in Japanese.

I have found *um* twice in English conversations within the turn, a finding not discussed in previous studies. However, due to the low number of recorded instances, it is difficult to determine whether this is due to the influence of Mama's mother language, Japanese.

In addition, the use of *um* as a positive response, reception, agreement, and sympathy scarcely appeared in this conversational situation; thus, these patterns could not be sufficiently verified. However, it is posited that the absence of the *um* as sympathy may have been due to the influence of Mama's native tongue, Japanese.

6. Conclusion

This study found that native Japanese language speakers who are questioners in Japanese and English conversations mainly utter *um* as a continuer. Additionally, it was found that *um* was mainly spoken within the turn in Japanese. In contrast, for English conversations it was found that *um* was uttered most at the possible completion point and in its vicinity. Furthermore, the results from analysis of the Japanese conversation indicate that the second most uttered use pattern of *um* was that of confirmation. The use of the other meanings of *um* was observed fewer than 10 times each out of 100 total observations.

While it was determined that it was possible for the questioner's languages to have influenced the way she speaks both English and Japanese, the degree of their respective influences could not be determined due to insufficient data. It would be helpful to investigate data in both languages in other conversational situations, collect data that record the use of *um* as sympathy, and collect data from conversations of native English speakers concerning with the use of *um* as a continuer falling within the turn.

Appendix: Symbols for discourse transcription

[ ]	Speech overlap	...	Omission
(.)	Short pause	,	Final pitch rising a little
::	Lengthening	.	Final pitch falling a little
?	Final pitch rising	→	Transcript relevant in the argument

Note. Adapted from 1) Atkinson, M. J., & Heritage, J. (1985). *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis.* Cambridge University Press.
2) Takagi, T., Hosoda, Y., & Morita, E. (2016). *Kaiwabunseki no kiso* [Basics of conversation analysis]. Hitsuji Shobo.

References

Atkinson, M. J., & Heritage, J. (1985). *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis.* Cambridge University Press.

Clancy, P. M., Thompson, S. A., Suzuki, R., & Tao, H. (1996). The conversational use of reactive tokens in English, Japanese, and Mandarin. *Journal of Pragmatics, 26*(3), 355–387. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(95)00036-4

Couper-Kuhlen, E., & Selting, M. (2018). *Interactional linguistics: Studying language in social interaction*. Cambridge University Press

Gardner, R. (1997). The conversation object mm: A weak and variable acknowledging token. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 30*(2), 131–156. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327973rlsi3002_2

Gardner, R. (2001). When listeners talk: Response tokens and listener stance. *John Benjamins*. https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.92

Iwasaki, S. (2009). Initiating interactive turn spaces in Japanese conversation: Local projection and collaborative action. *Discourse Processes, 46*(2-3)*,* 226–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/01638530902728918

LiaLico Channel. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYM-cw09IpFMnqsNSGAu2rA

Nishizaka, A. (2008). A sentence dispersed within a turn-at-talk: Response-opportunity places as an international focus. *The Japanese Journal of Language in Society, 10*(2), 83–95.

Sadanobu, T. (2002). *"Un" to "sou" no gengogaku: "un" to "sou" ni imi wa aruka* [Linguistics of "un" and "sou": Are there any meaning in "un" and "sou"]. Hitsuji Shobo.

Schegloff, E. A. (1982). Discourse as an interactional achievement: Some uses of *uh huh* and other things that come between sentences. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk* (pp.71–93). Georgetown University Press.

Takagi, T., Hosoda, Y., & Morita, E. (2016). *Kaiwabunseki no kiso* [Basics of conversation analysis]. Hitsuji Shobo.