The prosodic features of the interactional particle yo in student-professor conversation

Kyoko Masuda
Georgia Institute of Technology / J.F. Oberlin University
Kyoko1230@hotmail.com

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Japanese interactional particles (IPs) like ne and yo play a significant role in establishing interpersonal relationships between interlocutors, and are also indispensable in social contexts (Cook 1992; Morita 2005; Maynard 1993; McGlone 1990; Saigo 2011). Although they have been hardly studied except for Eda (2000), Hiramoto-Sanders (2002) and Shimotani (2006), the prosodic features of IPs crucially signal speakers’ affective attitudes. The present case study investigates the discourse functions and prosodic features of yo in student-professor conversation from the perspective of social constructivist discourse theory (Ochs 1993, 1996). It especially examines how speakers’ use of yo constructs social identity which covers “a range of social personae that include social status roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life” (Ochs 1993: 288). Six one-to-one informal conversations (i.e., a total of 2.5 hours) between a university student and a professor were examined. The intonation of yo was analyzed using Praat software. Following Shimotani (2006), unmarked yo was identified in information-oriented discourse (i.e., whether or not mutual understanding between interlocutors exists), and marked yo was identified in affect-oriented discourse (i.e., whether or not a differing viewpoint between interlocutors exists).

The findings demonstrate that the use of yo by professors and students exhibits different patterns. While students tended to use yo with a falling pitch [+fall] in performing pre-story telling with most cases unmarked information-oriented discourse (Excerpt 1), the professor often used yo with a rising pitch [-fall] providing an opinion or advice with most cases unmarked information-oriented discourse. Excerpt (2) shows that the professor’s utterance indexes her professional stance as an advisor. The marked yo in more affect-oriented discourse, on the other hand, was very rather rare and appeared, for instance, in one of the professor’s utterances as shown in Excerpt (3). Here, the professor urged her student through the use of yo who had a ‘dream’ of working at an airport to have travel experience so that she could understand what it really means to work there. Overall, the findings from this study underscore the importance of mutual understanding between interlocutors which motivates the use of yo [+fall], and indicate that the prosodic feature in IPs is an essential linguistic resource used to construct speakers’ social personae such as story-teller or advisor.

Table 1: Frequency of yo [+fall] and [-fall] in student-professor conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>+Fall</th>
<th>-Fall</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Not clear</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>36 (60%)</td>
<td>5 (8.3%)</td>
<td>15 (25%)</td>
<td>4 (6.7%)</td>
<td>60 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>22 (34%)</td>
<td>35 (56%)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>63 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) teate-ga aru-n-desu-yo [+fall] / ’(those who go to school using a bullet train) get some allowance.’

(2) bakuzen-to-shita ukemi-de shigoto kimecha-ikenai-yo [-fall] / ‘you mustn’t passively decide your carrier with such a vague motivation.’

(3) icchae-ba ii-n-da-yo [+fall] / ‘you should really go.’

Selected References