

Language as sound, noise 2007-8-9

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In an earlier article I described language as essentially a system of sounds and noises that we use to express feelings, thinking and images.

When English speakers say "um" or "ah," they tell the listener they are searching for words or that they are hesitating to speak. Japanese speakers use "etto" or "anoo," with "etto" indicating the speaker is searching for words and "anoo" used when hesitating. Some Japanese, typically men, will suck air through their teeth when they feel they are in an awkward position either because they don't know an answer or can't tell it. "Saah," however, simply means the speaker doesn't know. Students of Japanese must become comfortable using Japanese hesitation noises—they are part of the language after all!

In English "filler noises" include: "well," "you know," "let's see," and so on, besides "um" and "ah." Other than "etto" and "anoo," Japanese equivalents include: "ne," "sa" and "chotto." Perhaps more so in Japanese than in English, these words are used to fill in the gaps during speaking, as silence can become somewhat unbearable.

There is a very real social difference between English and Japanese in the use and acceptance of silence. English speakers are generally comfortable keeping silent while listening to someone talk. Japanese, however, are highly likely to say something from time to time. Indeed, such inserted words have their own term and are called *aizuchi* in Japanese. *Ai* here means "counterpart" or "partner" while *zuchi* is a sound distortion from *tsuchi*, meaning "hammer." Together *aizuchi* refers to a mutual "hammering" action in which each "hammerer" utters certain words to keep the rhythm going.

Japanese speakers expect to hear *aizuchi* almost constantly while talking to each other and their absence generally leaves Japanese speakers frustrated or uneasy. I remember my days in London explaining business matters to British clients on the phone: I found myself frequently saying "Are you with me?" or "Do you hear me?" In typical English-native fashion they would simply be listening quietly to me while I was talking. If we had been Japanese the interaction would have been peppered with *aizuchi*, reassuring and informing me that they were following along. As it was, I found myself instinctively searching for indicators that they were participating in the discussion, so I prompted them for some feedback.

The other side to this psychology is that Japanese listeners are prone to inserting "yes" or "yes, yes" with the intention of encouraging English speakers. This might, however, be interpreted by English natives to mean they are being hurried along. This is a good example of an intercultural misunderstanding where the different expectations

about what "polite listening" is can lead to friction between people.

Aizuchi also function to convey certain things to the speaker about the listener. For instance, if the listener has learned or realized that things are as the speaker says, you might expect to hear "soo," "a soo," "soo desu ka" or "a soo desu ka," all meaning "Oh, is that right?" A different sound, "ho-oh" or "he-eh," with a peculiar intonation difficult to convey in writing, indicates the listener is somewhat impressed at hearing something. These *aizuchi* are close to "wow" in English.

To show reassurance to a speaker, a Japanese listener might say: "soo soo," "soo da yo nee," "eh-eh" or "un-un." If newly convinced of something you will hear natives say "naruhodo." When a listener wants to show eagerness to hear more, she might say: "sorede?" ("given that and...?") or "sorekara?" ("and after that...?"), although these can also be taken as a form of prompting, depending on use.

These days some English speakers insert "like" (not the verb meaning "prefer," but the adjective or prepositionlike word) into their sentences from time to time. This seems to indicate that the speaker is pausing to look for the right words. In an interesting parallel, younger Japanese seem to have acquired the habit of inserting the postfix "nanka" from time to time while talking. *X-nanka* blurs *X*, creating vagueness: "something like *X*" or "*X* for example." This is intriguing to me because the psychology seems similar between "like" in English and "nanka" in Japanese. I do not feel the parallel uses can be the result of any cross-pollination between the languages because it's not actually a word that's being borrowed. Instead youngsters seem to have a similar desire to be vague and non-committal in both societies, in spite of vast social and linguistic differences between the two. In my observation, most Japanese prone to using *nanka* this way are young Japanese who are a far cry from English speakers.

I remember seeing an American play in which the characters used "you-know-what" a lot, like: "You know, the guy told me you-know-what, and then asked me you-know-what." Japanese use "are," in such cases—"that thing (which both you and I know)." Similarly, "nani" (literally "what") is also employed. This may be comparable to "thingy" or "thingamabob" in English.

It looks as though such noises will play a greater role in Japan in future as the society is aging rapidly and people cannot locate the right word as easily as they did in their younger days, you know.

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