Participants' roles and floor management in Japanese-English Bilingual conversations

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Introduction*

Hayashi (1988:280 - 281) describes simultaneous talk or “sync talk” by more than one speaker as one of the typical devices in Japanese, which makes Japanese interactions apparently “floorless.”

A very typical aspect of Japanese speakers' conversational interaction is the extraordinary frequency of simultaneous talk. It is often difficult to judge who holds the floor in Japanese casual conversation even if the participants acknowledge that one particular person holds a floor, because the sync phenomenon makes the interaction 'floorless' on the surface.

In Japanese-English bilingual conversations under study, the Japanese participants often talked while others were still speaking, resulting in simultaneous talk of more than one speaker at a time. This sync talk, however, was not perceived as interruption by the Japanese, but rather perceived as an appropriate and supportive behavior for the interaction. What seems “floorless” on the surface has structured participants' roles, which help maintain the floor, and keep the conversation going. If participants are from different speech communities such as in the case of bilingual conversation where participants' native languages may be

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different, "appropriate" roles for speaker and hearer will also be different. The participants may use divergent devices to maintain the floor depending on culturally appropriate expectations.

In this paper, I will discuss some of the aspects of simultaneous talk and participants' roles in maintaining the floor in a Japanese-English bilingual conversation. The focus will be on Japanese ways of maintaining the floor, especially apparent merging of speaker/listener roles among the Japanese participants. Implications for cross-cultural communication including possible misinterpretation of participant role structure and different devices of participating the conversation are also discussed.

**Method of data collection and description of participants**

The conversation was audio-recorded in the suburb of Los Angeles, USA, during an informal potluck lunch at the author's house. The participants were four native speakers of Japanese who spoke English as a foreign language and one native speaker of English who spoke Japanese as a foreign language. The small cassette tape-recorder was placed on a low coffee table in the center of the room and the participants sat on the couch around the table. The atmosphere was very informal and friendly. The participants talked about various topics, using both Japanese and English, resulting in a frequent code switching.

The Japanese participants included one male (Takao) and three females (Eriko, Kaeko, and Shoko). All of them were born and raised in Japan. Takao and Eriko were studying English as a foreign language at a language school in the United States at the high-intermediate level. Kaeko also studied at the same school but she transferred to a community college a few months before the recording of the conversation. I (Shoko) was a graduate student in linguistics at a university. The Japanese participants (except for me) had been in the United States for less than a year. I had been in the U.S. for a year and three months at the time of recording.
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Steve was a native speaker of English and had been born and raised in California. Steve was a university student in linguistics. He had been studying Japanese for four years by taking classes at school, by conversing with his Japanese friends, and by watching Japanese TV programs. His Japanese proficiency was low intermediate.

All the participants were Shoko's friends, but it was the first time that Steve met Takao, Eriko, and Kaeko. Takao and Kaeko also met for the first time.

Some devices of floor management in Japanese

Erickson (1982:47) states that floors are “jointly maintained by speaker and audience participation.” Shultz, Florio and Erickson (1982) also claim that the floor is not maintained by one speaker only but by both speaker and hearer working together. To maintain the floor and develop the conversation successfully, participants in the conversation need to know what communicative norms and expectations are shared by the members of their speech community.

In my data, a Japanese-English bilingual conversation, the Japanese participants used several devices to maintain the floor. One of them is, as Hayashi (1988, 1996) states, simultaneous talk. This occurs frequently, not to compete over the floor but to support the floor holder and show interest in the talk given by the main speaker. Floor, as Edelsky (1981:405) defines it, is not just the right to take turns but it is the “acknowledged what's going-on within a psychological time/space.” Hayashi (1996: 32) explains floor as “a dynamic cognitive entity that links the interactants together socially and psychologically.” Thus, participants perceive who holds the floor psychologically, and acknowledge “what's going on” in the conversation. Iwasaki (1997) calls such mental aspect of floor as “conceptual floor.” According to Iwasaki (1997: 663-664), “conceptual floor assists and influences the participants' behavioral orientation in interaction and the process of information transmission. ... The social and psychological aspect of conceptual floor points to its strong cultural orientation and suggests the possibility that the
members of different cultures construct their conceptual floors differently."

Even though the interaction seems "floorless" on the surface, the participants who are familiar with the Japanese way of conceptual floor management will be able to follow the topic development and recognize the floor holder. As a result, they can join the simultaneous talk and maintain the floor collaboratively, conceptually recognizing their roles as either a floor holder or floor supporters. In the following section, some of the strategies used by the Japanese participants for maintaining the floor will be examined.

**Supporting the floor among the Japanese participants**

In the Japanese-English bilingual conversation under study, the Japanese speakers were successful in maintaining simultaneous talk by understanding and responding to comments from other participants while they were still talking.

The listeners revealed their interest by making brief comments or asking questions about the topic. Even though their utterances overlapped with others' utterances, these overlaps were not perceived as interruptions but as supportive and appropriate behavior to maintain the floor. In this section, I will discuss some of the devices listeners employ in seemingly "floorless" conversations with extensive overlap.

**Supportive acknowledgement**

Many researchers such as Mizutani (1982), Kunihiro (1977) and Maynard (1986, 1989) suggested that the Japanese speakers use verbal responses frequently to indicate that listeners understood the conversation and to show their interest in the conversation. Kunihiro (1977:13) stated that the frequency and timing of acknowledgement are different in English and in Japanese. The Japanese have a tendency of using acknowledgement more frequently and quickly than Americans do, not because listeners want to hurry a speaker, but because they want to create a supportive atmosphere in a conversation.
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Hinds (1982:324) also pointed out that the Japanese are more sensitive to subtle clues in utterances to communicate with each other:

conversational interactants require fewer overt clues in the form of spoken words to carry on successful communication. ... the high incidence of elliptical utterances forces the addressee to be much more receptive to subtle and transitory clues. ... the typical Japanese interactant is sensitive to conversational interaction to a greater degree than the American counterpart.

In the present study of Japanese-English bilingual interaction, one of the floor supporters' roles is to give supportive comments to the floor holder, and show their interest in the conversation by giving frequent backchannels, asking brief questions and/or making brief comments, overlapping with main speakers' utterances. In this way, they acknowledge who is holding the floor. However, to make their comments supportive and effective in simultaneous talk, the floor supporters need to be sensitive to the point of argument the speaker is trying to make, as well as the overall direction of the conversation. Iwasaki (1997) also suggests the importance of recognizing the “units” of floor, which could be much longer than each speaking turn. Thus, looking at floor from the immediate structural context is not enough. As Iwasaki (1997:665) points out, floor should be recognized as a unit which has a coherent speech activity such as topic development.

In her study of business meetings in Japanese and in English, Yamada (1989, 1992) suggested that Japanese and Americans have different interactional needs. As she writes (Yamada 1989: 387-388):

In addition to the general need to communicate, Americans were seen as responding to the interactional need of maintaining independence within the
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interacting group, and Japanese were seen as responding to the interactional need of maintaining nonconfrontation.

In order to achieve the communicative needs of nonconfrontation, the content of the listeners' brief comments need to be in accordance with the apparent direction of arguments that the main speakers are putting forth. The comments which are not in accordance with the floor holders' points of view may be interpreted as interruptions because they do not meet the interactional need of nonconfrontation.

For example, in the conversation about eating habits of Kaeko's American host family and gaining weight as a result, Kaeko (the main speaker) tells other participants that her host family eat meat frequently. Takao mentions that the American food is also sweet, containing a lot of sugar, which could also be a cause of gaining weight. But he changes the content of his comments from the sweetness of the food to chicken and turkey as he realizes that Kaeko's point is on meat.

1  Kaeko: I'm staying with an American family.
2  Steve: Uhuh.
3  Takao: Uhuh
4  Kaeko: Yeah, and beef, you know.
5  Takao: \[ Soreni amai-desu-yone. \]
   (And [the food] is sweet, right?)
6  Kaeko: Chicken, beef, chicken, sometimes turkey,
7  Takao: \[ Chicken, turkey \]
8  Kaeko: and chicken, beef.

When Takao heard Kaeko saying "beef," he makes a comment on the sweetness of some food in the United States. His comment was meant to be supportive to Kaeko's statement about different eating habits between Japan and the United
states, and gaining weight as a result. However, Kaeko's focus was on meat, and not on the sweetness of food. She signals this by repeatedly mentioning the kinds of meat. Takao realizes the difference in their focus by listening to her response, and swiftly changes the content of his comments, moving closer to the line of argument Kaeko was trying to draw. Thus, Takao's utterance in line 7 functions as a show of Takao's supportive attitude to Kaeko's talk as well as his recognition of Kaeko as the floor holder. On Kaeko's part, she signals her line of argument by dismissing an irrelevant comment from the audience, but by incorporating related issue as in lines 4 and 6.

**Tempo of utterances to maintain the floor**

By referring to Goffman (1981) and Kendon's (1988) work, Couper-Kuhlen (2001: 16) states that “prosodic contextualization cues help interactants make inferences about turn-taking and floor management, on the one hand, and about what actions or activities are being carried out, how they are being carried out, and how this might impinge upon participants’ face, on the other.” Prosodic cues play an important role in floor management. Hayashi (1988, 1996) observes the rhythmic synchronicity when the conversation is going smoothly while disturbance of rhythm is found at the uncomfortable moments. In this section, I will discuss the change of tempo in overlapped speech found in the bilingual conversation, in relation to the notion of “sasshi” competence; the ability to guess the speaker’s message before the speaker actually articulates it verbally.

Anticipation of the topic development by being sensitive to speakers' communicative needs of nonconfrontation is considered to be one of the important aspects of communicative competence for members of the Japanese speech community. Ishii (1984) uses the Japanese term “sasshi” to explain such culturally preferred communicative competence. Sasshi is the ability to intuitively understand what the speaker is trying to communicate without letting the speaker say everything verbally. In other words, it is the competence to read between the
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lines by being sensitive to subtle clues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, cultural and social norms of behavior in a given situation and so on. Sasshi competence is sometimes paired with the notion of "enryo," the avoidance of direct request on the speaker's side in order to show modesty and reluctance to cause trouble for others. Ishii (1984) claims that sasshi and enryo play essential roles in Japanese communication.

In simultaneous talk, in order for the participants to maintain the conversation collaboratively, they need to use sasshi competence fully so that overlapped speech will not end up in interruption for the floor holder. As Mizutani (1982:38) states, "the Japanese listener responds with a certain frequency without interrupting the flow of speech. ... In addition, responses are very often made before the last part of a phrase is completed, that is the last part and the response often overlap." One of the reasons why Japanese listeners can respond without interrupting the flow of speech even though their utterances overlap with others would be because of the communicative competence of anticipating the speaker's message. When listeners are competent in anticipating the point of the message from subtle and indirect clues, they do not need to listen until the speakers complete utterances. In addition, the syntactic structure of the speakers' utterances tend to be ambiguous and fragmentary anyway. Therefore the floor supporters can join the conversation by overlapping with the tail of the previous speaker's utterance.

In addition, the listeners make comments without interrupting the flow of speech because the listeners' short comments start before the last part of speakers' phrase and ends approximately at the same time as or not much later than the main speaker's utterance. Therefore, the main speaker can continue to talk, incorporating the comments from others into their next utterances. For example, when Takao was speaking about his part-time job at the Japan Travel Bureau, Kaeko's comments and question overlapped without interrupting the flow of Takao's speech.
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1 Takao: *Boku-ne, kotsukosha-de arubaito-shite-ne,*
   [I worked for the Japan Travel Bureau as a part time job]

2 Kaeko: *Kotsukosha-ni itano?*
   [(You worked) for the Japan Travel Bureau?]

In the above interaction, Kaeko starts talking as soon as she hears the name of the Japan Travel Bureau without waiting for Takao to complete the utterance. Since the fact that Takao worked for the JTB is the focus of his statement, whether it was a part-time job or not is not so important here. Kaeko’s utterance “Kotsukosha-ni itano? [(You worked) for the Japan Travel Bureau?]” overlaps completely with Takao’s utterance “arubaito-shite-ne [worked as a part-time job],” which is a syntactic boundary of his utterance. Since Kaeko’s question ends at almost the same time as Takao completes his phrase, Kaeko’s utterance does not disturb the tempo of Takao’s speaking.

In the next exchange between Takao and Kaeko, Kaeko’s overlapped question, again, does not impede Takao’s utterance.

1 Takao: *Ano, gaijin-ryoko-no assen-shite-ne,*
   [Well, I rendered assistance to foreign tourists]

2 Kaeko: *Tenjo-mo yarimashi-ta?*
   [Did you conduct a tour also?]

3 Takao: *Assen-gyomu dattanda-kedo,*
   [It was service work but,]

4 Kaeko: *Aa, hontoni.*
   [Oh, really]

5 Takao: *De, assen-gyomu-no baai-ni, sono, tenjo-no shigoto-no herupu-ni tsuku-wake-desuyo*
   [And in the service work, I helped tour conductors’ jobs.]
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Here Kaeko’s utterances in line 2 and 4 both overlap with Takao’s utterances but since Kaeko’s utterances end before Takao starts new sentence, they do not disturb Takao’s comments. In line 3, Takao ends his utterance with *kedo* [but] as in “*assen-gyomu dattanda-keko* [it was service work but].” Takao may appear annoyed by Kaeko’s simultaneous talk, but in Japanese, as Mizutani and Mizutani (1987:29 state, “words such as *kara* [because], *node* [because], *kedo* [but], and *ga* [but] are used to imply that a statement is going to be continued or to ask the listener to continue.” Thus, the use of *kedo* [but] here does not signify Takao’s being disturbed by Kaeko, but it is used to imply that Takao is still holding the floor, and has more to say.

In addition, in line 4, when Kaeko acknowledges Takao’s response by saying “*Aa, hontoni* [Oh, really],” she says this very quickly so as not to cross the sentence boundary. That is, she tries to finish her utterance while Takao is articulating *dattanda-kedo* [copula + but], because she anticipates the sentence boundary, which is after *kedo*. This shows that it is Kaeko, the listener, not Takao, the main speaker, who adjusts the tempo of utterance. The participants who are playing the role of listeners respect the tempo set by the floor holders, and when necessary, the listeners, but not the floor holders, adjust their tempo of utterance so as not to interrupt the speakers’ speech in simultaneous talk.

Concerning the tempo of conversation, Scollon (1982:340) claims:

As in music, it is the tempo that keeps the participants in touch with each other. It is through tempo that the performers integrate their ensemble. ... Process of acceleration and retardation is central to the integration of the rhythmic ensemble of two or more speakers. Speakers time their entrances according to the tempo set by preceding speakers.

Adjustment of the tempo, then, may be considered as the listeners’ show of respect to the main speaker’s tempo, who is psychologically acknowledged as the floor
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holder. Change of tempo also reveals participants’ communicative competence of
anticipating the sentence or phrase boundary before the speaker actually reaches.

The speakers also need to understand comments from other participants
while talking. This requires the speakers of perceiving transitory and subtle clues
without stopping talking. As Mizutani (1982:38) describes, “the speaker is
constantly listening to the listener while speaking and that, in this mode of
conversing, the roles of the speaker and the listener are not completely
separated.” The floor in simultaneous talk, then, is maintained by both speaker and
listener, utilizing their competence of being sensitive to and anticipating others’
utterances to the full.

Implications for cross-cultural communication

In my data, the native speakers of Japanese participated in simultaneous
talk using their communicative competence of anticipating other’s message
successfully, and created a supportive atmosphere. The only American participant,
Steve, also participated in the conversation using English and Japanese. However,
Steve seems to use different ways of maintaining the floor, and his utterances were
sometimes perceived as “interruption” by the Japanese participants. In this section,
I will examine these differences in floor management and possible reasons why
Steve's utterances were perceived as “interruption.”

As has been mentioned above, by making one's statement ambiguous and
by anticipating the message through subtle clues, the Japanese participants try to
avoid damaging harmony. Even though the interaction seems “floorless” on the
surface, the participants psychologically acknowledge who is the main speaker and
who is supposed to play a role of supportive listener. Making comments with
frequent overlap is not interpreted as interruption as along as those comments are
in accordance with the floor holder's line of argument. The comments from the
listeners support the main speaker to develop the conversation in the direction the
floor holder wants to put forth. On the other hand, Steve tends to summarize what
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seems "floorless" or "ambiguous" conversation, and switch the topic slightly. He
does this especially when the topics are related to linguistics and his favorite
Japanese TV programs in order to show his expertise in these fields and to
participate in the Japanese conversation.

In the following example, Eriko is the main speaker and Takao gives verbal
responses supporting Eriko's statement. Steve also makes a comment, which
changes the topic, and as a result, steers the conversation to a different direction
from what Eriko expected.

(Eriko is talking that people in Yaeyama area, the southern part of
Japan, speak the standard Japanese dialect without any accent even though
Yaeyama is separated from the central part of Japan. Eriko is from Okinawa
area, close to Yaeyama.)

1 Eriko:  *Un, namari-ga naitte iuka, un,*
[yeah, there is no accent, or, yeah]

2 Takao:  *Sore-wa ieru-ne*
[You're right]

3 Eriko:  *Un, de, fushiginano-yone.*
[Yeah, and it's strange, you know.]

4 Steve:  U::m

5 Eriko:  *Hanarete-iru-nimo-kakawara-zu, ...*
[Even though (Yaeyama) is separated, ...]

6 Steve:  But because, [cough] Hokkaido,
Honshu, Kyushu, Shikoku? All mixed now, so it's hard
to separate, betsubetsu
[separate]

7 Takao:  *Betsubetsu.*
[separate]

8 Steve:  But are there still separate dialects?

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9 Eriko: To which point? U, ... what, I'm not quite with you.

Eriko mentions in 1 that people in Yaeyama have no accent, and Takao agrees with her. Eriko continues to make comments that it is strange that Yaeyama people speak the standard dialect even though they are separated from the central part of Japan. When Eriko says in line 5, “Hanarete-iru-nimo-kakawara-zu, [Even though (Yaeyama is) separated,]” she does not complete her utterance, but leaves the last half of the sentence to other participants so that the listeners can fill in the part implied. Eriko probably expected others to continue the sentence saying something like “But people in Yaeyama speak the standard Japanese with no accent, and that's really interesting,” confirming Eriko's point. Since Eriko is the main speaker in this interaction, other participants are expected to show their interest in the topic by giving supportive comments which are in accordance with Eriko's argument.

In 6, Steve tries to conclude the conversation about Yaeyama which seems somewhat fragmentary to him by filling in the latter half of Eriko's utterance, “But because, [cough] Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, Shikoku? All mixed now, so it's hard to separate.” Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu and Shikoku are names of major islands in Japan. What Steve meant here seems that “people in Yaeyama speak the standard dialect even though they are away from the central part of Japan. This is probably because the standardization of dialects are going on in Japan, and the dialects in major islands in Japan are all mixed now, and it is hard to separate the dialects.” This is Steve's independent opinion to explain why people in Yaeyama speak the standard dialect. Eriko's expectation to the other participants here is, however, to express that they also think it is strange that Yaeyama people speak the standard dialect, but not to explain explicitly the reason for that phenomenon.

Steve further raises a question in 8, “But are there still separate dialects?” shifting the topic of the conversation from Yaeyama to Japanese dialects in general.
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This is again an unexpected behavior for Eriko because the content of the question is now very different from Yaeyama. This change of topics can be seen as Steve's failure to recognize the unit of floor from the Japanese perspective. Eriko is probably still thinking how Steve's statement in 6 relates to her argument concerning Yaeyama, so when Steve asked a question about Japanese dialects in general, she cannot understand the point of Steve's question. And she deliberately expresses her confusion in 9, "To which point? U, ... what, I'm not quite with you." Her low voice on "To which point?" also signals her annoyance at Steve's sudden change of the topic.

To state one's opinion explicitly, and to change the topic of the conversation frequently are appropriate behavior for some native speakers of English especially in an informal conversation between friends like this potluck party. Tannen (1984:94) states that, for some participants at Thanksgiving dinner, to raise different topics at the same time is:

a necessary outgrowth of the assumption that it is appropriate for speakers to introduce new topics just because they thought of them, and that a topic should not necessarily be dropped simply because it was not picked up on the first few tries.

Steve states his opinion directly and raises a question which changes the topic slightly. These communicative strategies help Steve participate in the conversation actively and reveal his interest in the on-going interaction. His behavior seems to be in accordance with Hayashi's (1996) findings in which American English speakers tend to value the foci of topic - conveying message - rather than the creation of emphatic ensemble among participants, which is often seen in the Japanese groups. But, from Japanese point of view, Steve's behavior could be interpreted as a threat to the floor territory. It is also a threat to what Yamada (1989) calls "interactional need of nonconfrontation." That is, Steve's
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comments are considered as non-supportive for Japanese speakers because his comments are based on Steve's independent reasoning which are different from the main speaker's line of argument. Thus Steve's utterances have possibility of damaging the rapport that other participants are trying to create. Similar exchanges between Steve and the Japanese participants in which Steve's comments and change of topic were interpreted as "interruption" were found several times during the conversation.

Concerning Steve's utterance, Tannen (p.c.) points out that although Steve's comment could be seen on the topic, a finding about male style is tendency to speak generally: that is to move to abstract, impersonal level. So, Steve's slight change of the topic in the above exchange might also be influenced by his male communicative style.

Steve's utterance in the previous example also changes the language code in the conversation. By code-switching from Japanese to English, Steve is able to gain more power in expressing his opinion freely as a native speaker of English. Steve's apparent "interruption" may have been caused by Steve's lower proficiency in Japanese; Steve may not have understood the Japanese conversation between Eriko and Takao completely. What is interesting here is that Steve still tried to participate in the conversation by making his opinion explicit. Since the topic is about dialect which is related to Steve's major, linguistics, Steve seems to think it is his responsibility to provide some explanation for the lack of accent on the standard dialect spoken by Yaeyama people. He also identifies four major islands in Japan at the beginning of his statement. It helps reveal his knowledge about Japan so that the Japanese participants would recognize that he knows what he is talking about.

Conclusion

In the Japanese-English bilingual conversation under study, the Japanese participants worked together as a speaker and a hearer to maintain the floor in
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simultaneous talk. The listeners created supportive atmosphere by making brief comments and asking questions which were in accordance with the main speaker's brief argument. The listeners used sashki competence to anticipate what the main speaker is trying to say, and gave supportive comments without disturbing the flow of the speech. The main speakers were constantly listening to the comments from other participants while talking so that the main speakers could acknowledge the comments which were closely related to their point. In this way, participants maintained the simultaneous talk. What seemed "floorless" because of the apparent merging of speaker/listener roles had structured ways of maintaining the floor and the participants acknowledged "what's going on" in their interaction.

In cross-cultural communication where Steve, an American participant, used different devices of participating in the conversation, Steve's utterances were sometimes considered as "interruption" because Steve tended to state his opinion explicitly and change the topic frequently so that he could finish the seemingly fragmentary conversation among the Japanese participants. When Steve's opinion differed from the main speaker's point, she felt "interrupted," even though, from Steve's perspective, it was appropriate behavior.

These differences in maintaining the floor may cause misunderstandings between Japanese and Americans in cross-cultural situations. What is appropriate in Japanese culture may seem "floorless" for Americans and therefore the conversation seems to be going no where. On the other hand, what is supposed to make interaction pleasing and exciting for Americans may be considered as "interruption" by Japanese. Tannen (1989) finds that participants with culturally different conversational styles may interpret what was meant to be "supportive overlap" as "interruption." In a comparative study of the floor management between the Japanese and Americans, Hayashi (1996:202 - 203) points out that "American English speakers tend to direct simultaneous talk into negotiation and competition, whereas Japanese speakers often convert simultaneous talk into rhythmic sync talk to create ensemble." Differences in understanding what Iwasaki
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(1997) calls conceptual floor could also be a cause of misunderstandings since conceptions of how floors are structured might be different from one culture to another. This study confirms the ethnic differences in managing floor between the Japanese speakers and an American English speaker. Such differences can be extended to other aspects of discourse, such as how thesis points should be presented (Okazaki 1993). In cross-cultural setting, such differences may have serious effects on the interpersonal relationships. As Tannen (1989:279) claims, “when people who are identified as culturally different have different conversational styles, their ways of speaking becomes the basis for negative stereotyping.” In fact, after the potluck party, Takao stated that he often felt the Americans said whatever they want to say and dominated the conversation without considering about other participants. For the successful communication and maintenance of the floor, then, participants need to know culturally expected participant roles and appropriate ways of responding to and interpreting others' message in the speech community.

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Appendix

Transcription devices

In this paper, I use the following devices to represent the spoken utterances in the written form:

Italics: Japanese utterances are represented in italics.
[ ]: English translation is given in parenthesis.
...: short pausing
?: rising intonation

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