Fillers in Japanese: Uncertainty or Expressiveness? (Abstract)

Past studies of sex differentiation in language have often been based on the assumption that women's speech is less adequate for socially responsible tasks than men's speech—less assertive, more hesitant, too polite, etc.—and that this is a reflection of women's lower social status and resulting uncertainty about themselves (e.g., Robin Lakoff, 1975). Much of the study in the area has focused on women's speech, attempting to locate where it is inadequate. This paper is concerned with fillers, which have been construed as a hesitation phenomenon somewhat related to gender in Mahl, 1964, Ragsdale, 1976, and so forth. Specifically it examines the use of fillers by the speakers of Japanese, a language in which sex differentiation is far more exclusive than in languages like English, and will propose an alternative view of the hesitancy in women's speech.

First, I will provide some empirical data to show that women use the most noticeable filler ano(o) (which is probably related to a demonstrative at least in origin) with great frequency and in almost any communicative context, formal or informal while there are situations in which men seem to avoid the use of this filler (e.g., when they talk to a relatively large audience more or less formally).

Next, I will bring attention to the fact that there are certain fillers used exclusively by men although they easily escape our observation, for they are duplications of the vowels preceding the filler positions (see the attached sheet for samples of the vowel filler). The vowel filler and ano(o) are functionally almost identical but they differ in the degree of perceptibility: the vowel filler is not always discernible as such because it can be mistaken for prolongation of the preceding vowel even though it is slightly demarcated from the preceding vowel by a glottal stop and is often longer than preceding vowel by one or two more length. Inexperienced transcribers (my student helpers, for example) leave out all or most of the vowel fillers while they pick up ano(o) quite accurately with a little extra attention. I argue from this that it is because of this "inaudible" nature that the vowel fillers are chosen by male speakers in public speaking where they need to maintain authoritative appearance.

The conclusion to be drawn from the findings is that both female and male speakers are, perhaps equally, hesitant in their speech under the same circumstances—there should of course be differences in terms of personality variables, but male speakers are subject to the masculinity constraint that they should not allow the audience to detect their hesitancy. The fact that men tend to use less audible fillers in all circumstances, although they use ano(o) frequently in less formal situations, indicates that the constraint operates universally in Japanese male talk, making men sound less hesitant, less uncertain and more decisive. The greater frequency of ano(o) in female speech, on the other hand, contributes to the impression that female speakers are more hesitant, but in fact it may very well be an indication of their greater ability of expressiveness rather than of their internal uncertainty: Women, not men, are permitted to disclose themselves more authentically.

REFERENCES
SHORT ABSTRACT

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Title: Evidence for Masculinity Constraint--Fillers in Japanese

Language and gender

Areas of linguistics:

The argument that female speakers are under the pressure of the "femininity constraint" has already been accepted by many linguists studying the relationship between language and gender. Women are in most societies expected to use "expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it" (R. Lakoff 1975). More recently, however, it has been suggested that men are also under a pressure--the "masculinity constraint" (Sattel, 1983). This paper attempts to provide a piece of evidence for such constraint in Japanese. First, it presents examples of male and female uses of fillers gathered in Japan. Males in public discourse make a characteristic use of vowel fillers--vowels identical with the vowels preceding the filler positions (e.g. 'oo in motto 'oo takai 'more ..ah.. expensive')--while females in similar situations use an(o). Then, I will argue on the basis of the result of an experiment that vowel fillers are much less noticeable to the audience than an(o). Vowel fillers do not make the speaker sound hesitant as much as an(o) does. Thus, conclusions: The use of fillers is natural for human communication since in reality both sexes use fillers; the fact that male speakers choose less noticeable fillers, therefore, is nothing but an indication that male speakers are subject to a constraint which is not applicable for females--the masculinity constraint "Don't show human weaknesses."

Be sure the typescript is uniformly black (carbon ribbon reproduces best); corrections, diacritics, or graphs added by hand must be in black ink.
Evidence for Masculinity Constraint: Fillers in Japanese

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Baltimore, Maryland
December 28 - 30, 1984

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0. Sex differentiation is essentially a matter of the speaker's assumption about the world including the definition of the relationship of the speaker with the hearer and other people or objects. It is not accidental, therefore, that the areas of language that Bolinger (1964) has called "around the edge of language" have emerged with greater importance in the study of gender and language. Major features of women's language that have been discussed by Robin Lakoff (1975) and in the studies of many others concern intonation, particles, tag-questions and hedging expressions, which are all context-dependent and as a matter of fact very little understood. Thus, analyses of women's language involving these inherently difficult features are subject to criticisms such as "empirically not true" (Dubois and Crouch, 1975) and "with flaws/perhaps biased" (Spender 1980). What these criticisms point to, it seems to me, is that analysis of women's language (or men's language) need workable theories of language use enhancing these areas with socio-psychological perspectives, and to that end, lots of empirical data dealing with these features.

The purpose of the present paper on the use of fillers by Japanese speakers is to suggest that "hesitation" expressed by fillers is another aspect of language use that has been studied very little by linguists and yet seems to be of great relevance for sex-differentiation. First, I will discuss the fact that in certain kinds of Japanese discourse, ano is used most frequently in female speech, while a peculiar type of fillers, vowel fillers, are characteristic of male speech. Then, I will argue that male speakers' preference for vowel fillers over ano is attributable to the masculine constraint.

1. For the purposes of the present study I will define a filler, very
roughly, as an element that has at least the following characteristics:

(i) A filler occurs at the beginning or within a sentence but not at the end of it.
(ii) A filler has no grammatical relationship with any other constituent of the sentence in which it occurs.

There are quite a number of fillers in Japanese (Samuel Martin 1979 discusses them under the category of "interjections", which includes various elements other than fillers as well), but I limit myself in this study to two fillers, ano and what I name vowel fillers. It is clear that ano is an extended use of a demonstrative ano 'that over there' as I will discuss in more detail in Section 2. Vowel fillers, on the other hand, have no connection with any lexical item(s): They are mere vowels a, e, i, o, and u appearing in an interestingly regular fashion. The formal regularity of vowel fillers may be captured in our familiar transformational language by a rule such as the following:

\[
\text{FILLER} \rightarrow \text{C} \quad V \quad / \quad V
\]

That is, a vowel filler is a vowel with exactly the same articulatory features as the vowel preceding the filler position which is demarcated by a glottal stop placed in the initial position. A filler vowel can be extremely brief or it can be quite long. Let us look at a couple of speech samples with these fillers.

A. Sorekara ANOO dainibanmeni masukomi-no-naiyoo-ni-tuite then secondly about the content of the media
   ANOO deta-ki-ta-koto-wa ANO sikasi sono-naka-demo what has been shown nevertheless even in that
   ANO ryuudooka-no-kizasi-ga mi-rareru to-yuu-koto-nan-desu-ga indications of change are seen it is that
   tatoeba ANO sakuzitu-no-happyoo-no-naka-de-wa ANOO for example among yesterday's presentations
   kurowassan-no-bunseki-no-naka-nado-de ANOO in the analysis of the Croissant and the like

L.1
L.2
L.3
L.4
L.5
among the people who appear in magazines extremely

career person have become many such things as

'Now, secondly, what has been shown is that even in that (condition) nevertheless some indications of change are seen. For example, (there was) the fact that the number of career women has increased greatly among the women who appear in (women's) magazines as seen in the analysis of the Croissant (a women's magazine), which was presented yesterday . . .'

Both samples were taken from the transcriptions of the material that I taperecorded in Japan. I have chosen these samples partly because the two speakers are comparable to each other with respect to most variables except the sex. Both speakers are in their late thirties and are very experienced in public talk. Speaker A is a female university professor specializing in sociology and speaker B is a male government official. Both speakers were talking in similar settings—symposia with several panelists and a moderator on a high stage; Both of them were talking
to a large audience (300 - 500). Neither of them had drafts fully prepared in advance, i.e., planning and production of discourse were taking place simultaneously—typical cases of unprepared planned discourse (Keenan, 1979). Notice that in Example A ano(o) appears with a great frequency but no vowel filler occurs while Example B has only vowel fillers. (In both A and B, there is one instance of ma(a), which is excluded from our consideration.)

One may be surprised at the frequency of the use of fillers: In the case of A, the total number of the occurrences of ano in a 120 second length range of discourse including Example A is 33. That is, one ano in every 3 or 4 seconds. In B, vowel fillers totaled 43 within the 120 second discourse range—one vowel filler in every 2 - 3 seconds. In my impression, Speaker A seems to use ano(o) in public speech slightly more frequently than average Japanese female speakers with the same background and in the same discourse context, but nevertheless she does not sound particularly aberrant. It seems quite normal for a Japanese speaker to use fillers to this degree in an unprepared planned discourse. It strikes me that Japanese speakers use fillers with more freedom than English speakers in comparable discourse. However, my present concern is not the frequency itself but the fact that there is an unignorable discrepancy between female and male speech in the choice of fillers: ano(o) is characteristic of female speech and vowel fillers of male speech. There are some males who use ano(o) (Speaker B used it a couple of times in the 120 second sample), but they not only use it sparingly but also use it along with vowel fillers while women use ano(o) more than any other fillers and they generally don't use vowel fillers. I observed various public talks of both sexes, attending symposiums, conferences, conventions and workshops, and listening to TV programs. I came across only two female speakers who used vowel fillers as consistently and frequently as Speaker B's. Both of them were officials of high rankings from Labor Ministry, who were responding, in behalf of the government, to the questions raised by parliamentary members of the opposition parties in regard to the inequity in work conditions between women and men. Their speech remarkably resembled that of Speaker B's.
One might argue that vowel fillers are a register feature of government officials' public speech rather than a characteristic of male speech in general. Such an argument, however, would not account for the fact that the use of vowel fillers is not limited to government officials among male members—vowel fillers can be used by any man in any public discourse—while it is limited to an extremely small number of government officials and to limited contexts among female members. The more speakers I observe, the more strongly I am convinced that *ano* is a feminine filler and vowel fillers are masculine.

We might ask then: Why is there such a discrepancy as this? Does it have anything to do with what has been said about sex differentiation in language in recent studies? My answer to the latter question is "yes"; and I think that the reason for this particular differentiation will be reasonably explained in the light of general characteristics of female and male speech, especially the fact about men's language that has recently come into focus.

The majority of the past studies of language and sex have assumed the characteristics of women's language, such as, nonassertiveness and excessive politeness to be negative factors that might hinder the advancement of women. But with the increase of the empirical study of various interaction types, especially, single-sex conversations, it has become clear that there are different aspects of the sex differentiating phenomenon. Whereas nonassertive behaviour patterns are imposed on women, the reverse case is with men: Men are under the stricture that they should not express their personal feelings, that they should not reveal human weaknesses, and that they should be forceful and dominant. It has been pointed out (e.g. Lakoff 1975) that women tend to use tag-questions or question intonations where they may be quite certain about the proposition content of what they are saying just to undermine the assertive force and to comply with the femininity constraint. By the same token, then, it is likely that men tend to talk more assertively than they actually mean.

The discrepancy in the use of fillers between female and male speakers bears witness more certainly to the masculinity constraint than to the femininity constraint. Men choose vowel fillers and avoid *ano* to make
themselves sound decisive/forceful/dominant and not hesitant/polite.

2. Although there is very little study by linguists on fillers, we can gain some insight into the nature of fillers from the studies in related fields. Some psychologists (e.g., Mahl 1964 and Ragadale 1976) have included fillers in their study of hesitation and they have found that English ah-fillers do not correlate with anxiety. Japanese fillers under discussion are like ah-fillers in that sense: They are quite commonly used by speakers who have much experience in public talk and therefore should not be overly anxious or nervous.

Assuming that this is the case, one can entertain the view that fillers fulfill a function to which von Raffler-Engel (1983) refers to as "regulatory" in his study of nonverbal communication. Fillers signal to the hearer that the speaker has not finished talking yet or that he/she intends to begin or continue to talk. In unprepared planned discourse it is rather natural for a speaker, regardless of the sex, to hesitate (e.g., to attempt to earn extra time while signaling that more message will follow) to plan the discourse structure or to search for appropriate forms for the ideas to be expressed.

The use of fillers, however, has a further dimension: The speaker may use fillers for regulatory purposes but the hearer may interpret them not only as a regulatory device but as a manifestation of the speaker's attitude towards the proposition of the statement that the speaker is making and/or towards the hearer. Excessive hesitation, whatever its purpose may be, tends to be associated with negative human qualities, such as, uncertainty, lack of confidence and incapability of precise thinking. And in most cultures men are expected not to reveal such qualities. In a situation in which careful planning of discourse is required without preparation in advance, therefore, a man would run into trouble: He should not show hesitation and at the same time he should be able to present his idea in a well-organized manner. One way of getting out of this male dilemma keeping the damage minimal is to use a hesitation strategy that would allow
the speaker to hesitate in the least conspicuous way—using vowel fillers and avoiding ano-fillers, for example. Vowel fillers are perceptually less prominent than ano at least in two respects.

First, vowel fillers assume various phonological forms, e, o, i, o and u, and they can be reduced to such an extent that they easily escape the hearer's attention. Also, the sequence of [Vowel - Glottal Stop - Vowel] can be mistaken for a single vowel retained somewhat longer than normal since glottal stops are extremely low in audibility. In this case, the vowel fillers are not recognized as such. Ano, on the other hand, is phonologically constant, i.e., more easily memorable, and it can be reduced only to a limited extent.

Second, as I mentioned earlier, ano as a filler is related to demonstrative ano and carries an attitudinal meaning similar to you know in English, which is an abstraction of the meaning of demonstrative ano. Demonstrative ano is always used as a nominal modifier like the that in that house (over there) in English and it semantically contrasts with kono 'this X' and sono 'that X near you': kono refers to an object closer to the speaker, sono to an object closer to the hearer and ano to an object removed from both the speaker and the hearer. When used referring to objects/ideas which are not within sight of the speaker/hearer, kono and sono mean 'this X that I mentioned earlier' and the X that I mentioned earlier', respectively. They have the function of relating the nominals that they modify to the nominals mentioned earlier in the discourse, which correspond, directly or indirectly, with the objects/ideas in the real world, but not with those in the hearer's world. Ano differs from kono and sono in this sense: It involves the presupposition that the hearer shares the empirical knowledge of the referent with the speaker. It means 'the X that both I and you know'. It seems that filler ano retains this sense of sharing an experience. It has, in addition to the regulartory function, the function of signaling that the hearer intends to involve the hearer in discourse process. This additional function is most apparent in the ano used in the opening of an interaction, such as, the following.
a. ANOO Tookyoo-ski-e iki-tai-n-desu-ga dotira-e it-tara
   to Tokyo Station (I) want to go which way if (I) went
   ii-desyoo ka.
   will be good
   (Speaking to a stranger) '(Excuse me.) I would like to go
to Tokyo Station. Which way should I go?'

b. ANOO Yamada-to-yuu-mono-desu-ga Hayasi-san irassayai-masu ka.
   a person called Yamada (I) am Mr. Hayashi is in
   (Speaking to a receptionist of the company where Mr. Yamada
   works.) '(Excuse me.) I am called Yamada. Is Mr. Hayashi in?'

In a context like these, the use of *ano* is almost necessary for
the utterance to be acceptable but a vowel filler would make the
utterance very inappropriate. In a one-way talk (e.g. example A),
of course, the speaker does not seriously mean to request the audience
to actually participate in the discourse by taking over the floor.
What she means is that she has the feeling of sharing, rather than
impacting, the information that she is talking about with the audience,
and by doing so, she intends to convey her friendly and polite (vis-
a-vis distant and aloof) attitude towards the audience. This attitudinal
meaning of *ano* just ties in with the patterns that have been claimed
to be characteristic of women-to-women talks—mutuality and collabora-
tion (Thorne, Kramarae and Henley 1983). This communicative function
as well as the relatively constant nature of the phonological form
makes *ano* more memorable and more perceptually prominent than a vowel
filler, which is not related to any lexical item(s) and is semantical-
lly null. It is no wonder that male speakers tend to avoid *ano*-fillers
wherever possible.

In order to give an empirical support to the contention that
vowel fillers are not as noticeable as *ano*-fillers, I did the follow-
ing experiment with 31 Japanese speakers.

STEP-1. I gave the transcription of the above mentioned 120
second length samples with fillers omitted to the
subjects (meeting at most two subjects at one time)
to have them read.

STEP - II. I then had the subjects listen to the tapes and insert a slash every time when they heard a filler.

STEP - III. I totalled and averaged the correct perceptions of ano and vowel fillers.

The following table summarizes the total.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>total number of fillers in the samples</th>
<th>total number of fillers missed by subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ano</td>
<td>1054</td>
<td>229 (21.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vowel filler</td>
<td>1333</td>
<td>663 (50%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sample A contained 33 instances of ano and no vowel filler. Sample B had 43 instances of vowel fillers and one ano.

The result is sufficiently positive: More than 50% of vowel fillers were missed while only 21.6% of ano-fillers were missed. Also worth mentioning is that after STEP - II some subjects commented that they had often wondered whether they were hearing vowel fillers or retained vowels.

3. The vowel fillers are a conventionalized strategy of camouflaging hesitation used only by adult male speakers who have come to occupy positions which require public talking — a relatively small portion of the entire male population. However, the strategy is a manifestation of the masculinity constraint that the male members of the society as a group experience. There are indications that younger males who are still inferior to others in most interactions and have few opportunities of public discourse are constantly under the masculinity constraint. A male student, when asked if he would use ano-fillers, responded negatively with little hesitation, but he did use ano just one or two minutes later. This shows that ano would not appear in the
stereotype of male language. Another student (male, 22 years old), who had talked fluently and dominantly in the interactions with his peers (casual conversations including him were taped and transcribed by a student assistant) talked with me, a woman teacher who is superior to him, with many hesitations, half of which were ano-fillers (hesitant/polite) and the other half were vowels—not the conventionalized vowel fillers but indescribable snarling vowels which may be viewed as embrionic forms of vowel fillers. Apparently he was facing a two-fold conflict: He had to plan and organize the structure of the discourse but he did not want to sound hesitant and excessively polite, and at the same time vowel fillers were not appropriate since he was talking to his superior in private discourse. Younger male speakers all experience the dilemma in similar situations although the degree of the difficulty may vary from individual to individual depending on how much value is assigned to the traditional masculine image.

The conclusion to be drawn is that both female and male speakers are, perhaps equally, hesitant in their speech under the same circumstances—there should of course be differences in terms of personality variables, but male speakers as a group are subject to the masculinity constraint that they should not allow the audience to detect their hesitancy. The fact that men tend to use less audible fillers in all circumstances, although they use ano frequently in less formal situations, indicates that the constraint operates universally in Japanese male talk, making men sound less hesitant, less uncertain and more decisive. The greater frequency of ano in female speech, on the other hand, contributes to the impression that female speakers are more hesitant. But in fact it may very well be an indication of their greater ability of expressiveness rather than of their internal uncertainty: Women, not men, are permitted to disclose themselves more authentically.
NOTES

1. The University of Hawaii Research & Training Revolving Fund supported the field research in the summer of the year of 1983 on which part of this paper is based on. I also would like to thank many of the Japanese speakers on the campus of the University of Hawaii, teachers and teaching assistants of Japanese, students of various departments and students in the NICE program and the HELP program, who kindly participated in the experiment, an important part of this study.

2. Choosing samples for a comparative study of female and male speech is extremely difficult, as has been noted by others. For example, a male university professor and a female university professor may appear to be more symmetric but actually they are not. The position that university professors occupy in the male world does not exactly corresponds with that of women professors in the women's world.

3. Recording is not permitted for the observers of parliamentary sessions. Hence no recorded samples of female speech of this exceptional type.

4. The same function is signaled nonverbally by "filling a pause with um or well and/or by directing eye gaze away from the hearer . . . and/or by increasing one's gesticulation" (Raffler-Engel 1983:3).

5. There were 40 Japanese speakers participated in the experiment. However, I had to exclude 9 of them from the total either because they had only a few slashes or because they had many slashes in the wrong places. I interpreted such responses as due to the fact that the subjects had not quite understood what they were supposed to do. Normally native speakers pay no attention to fillers.

REFERENCES


