Japan has been perceived by many researchers as culturally unique, where people behave abiding by the principle of verticality (Nakane 1970), collectively and harmoniously. This view has been challenged in recent studies (e.g., Krauss, Rohlen and Steinhoff 1984 and Rosenberger 1992): There are many social phenomena that the harmony view cannot explain. Most of the existing studies of Japanese culture have been based on the personal observations and anecdotes from direct or indirect experiences of researchers or on the Japanese words and phrases seemingly expressing a uniquely Japanese way of thinking. In the present study I attempt to show that more empirically founded studies of culture are not only possible but also very useful and necessary particularly if we are to understand how the culture of harmony and hierarchy has been produced and reproduced and where in the Japanese life conflict exist: I will first summarize the points of my previous work, claiming that Japanese, unlike languages such as English, is a hyper-phatic language; Next, I will discuss some of the features of the phatic communication in more detail placing them in the perspective of recent theories of conversational and discourse analysis. The findings support the characterization of Japanese culture as a harmony culture and show exactly what kinds of linguistic strategies are utilized to maintain harmony. I will suggest in the conclusion that harmony is nevertheless only one dimension of the Japanese culture.

1. Backgrounds

1.1. Phatic communication

Bronislaw Malinowski (1923), who was inspired by his observations of the “primitive” people in the Trobriand Islands (off SE New Guinea), was convinced that people talk not only to convey reflected thoughts and ideas but also to create ties of union between speaker and hearer. He viewed this function of language as “an indispensable element of concerted human action” (316) and named the type of speech in which this function is maximally manifested “phatic communion.”

The term “phatic,” from Greek phatos ‘spoken’, has since then been referred to by a number of researchers in order to draw attention to the dynamic interaction between speaker and hearer in actual conversation: Firth (1957) included “phatic communion” as a social function of creating solidarity;
Jakobson (1960) used the term for one of the six functions of language in communication; Halliday (1978) viewed the phatic function as part of the social semiotic. Nowadays the function is mentioned in many studies of sociolinguistics (e.g., Ervin-Trip, 1972, Hymes 1964, Wardhaugh, 1986). Moreover, the nature of the phatic function in the studies of functional linguistics or sociolinguistics strikingly resembles what has been described as “involvement” in recent studies of discourse (e.g. Gumperz 1982, Chafe 1982, 1984, etc., Tannen 1989). It seems to me that this dimension of communication where the phatic and “involvement” overlap is one of the most interesting areas with potentially valuable agenda for studies of cultures.

Jakobson (1960), proposing a functional model language in communication consisting of referential, conative, emotive, poetic, metalingual and phatic functions, maintains that “one can hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function” (353). This statement of multi-functionality accommodates the observation that the phatic function operates throughout communicative activities even if it is not always the most salient function and it enables us with a slight stretch of imagination to make an interesting typological claim concerning cultures in terms of how the phatic function is coded in languages and to what degrees the function is considered important in cultures. It is in this vein that I propose to characterize Japanese as a hyper-phatic language: Japanese is remarkable in that it has a variety of linguistic forms and structures that are primarily —if not exclusively— used to acknowledge the communicative linkage between speaker and hearer.

I began to conduct a project of analyzing conversational material to support my claim in terms of quantitative and qualitative data (I reported some of my ideas and findings in Reynolds 1996 & 2000). The major resource of my studies is from the data gathered by a group of Japanese sociologists for the purpose of an ethnomethodological study in 1983[1]. I arbitrarily chose 21 (7 from each of M-M, F-F and F-M pairs) from the data and prepared a romanized data base for my examination, to which I refer as “my data” in this study. The participants in the conversations were all 3rd- or 4th-year students (20 or 21 in age) from three major (=prestigious) universities in Tokyo. Although many of them were from areas other than Tokyo, they talked in standard Japanese since the paired students met each other for the first time.

In order to make a linguistic analysis of the phatic function feasible, I have introduced the concept of “channeling” as the counterpart of what has been known as “backchanneling.” The speaker actively signal shis/her intention or desire to be connected with the hearer while the hearer expressing his/her intention to support the speaker by backchanneling, thus the speaker and the hearer together producing coherent discourse.

1.2. Channeling and Backchanneling

The phenomenon of backchanneling has been researched in various languages since it was first mentioned by Yngve (1970). There are several studies of backchannels in Japanese (Maynard 1986,
LoCastro 1987 and White 1989), all of which agree that backchanneling is particularly conspicuous in Japanese conversation. My proposal is that channeling as well as backchanneling is also an outstanding feature of Japanese conversation.

In Japanese at least two particles, *ne* and *sa*, specialize in the function of signaling the channeling intention on the part of the speaker. These particles have traditionally been called *shuujoshi* or ‘sentence final particles’ (I myself used the term in Reynolds 1985) and explained them by reference to some vague speech act type of meanings, such as assertion, attitude or sentiment. My analysis, however, contradicts this traditional characterization: *ne* is more frequently used in sentence internal positions and *sa* ONLY in non-final positions. Table-1 below is what I provided in Reynolds (2000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><em>ne</em></th>
<th><em>sa</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final Position</td>
<td>1,469</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-final Positions</td>
<td>1,764</td>
<td>648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>3,309</td>
<td>648</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To avoid the pitfall of identifying *ne* and *sa* occurring in final position “final particles” and leaving the same particles occurring in non-final positions unexplained, I consider the primary function of these particles is to signal the phatic intention on the part of speaker regardless of the position they occur, that is, they indicate speaker’s gesture of checking whether the channel of communication is at work. Various meanings that these particles allegedly take on would then be explained as inferred meanings based on the linguistic or pragmatic context where they are used in actual discourse. Since speaking itself is already signaling the speaker’s intention to be linked with the hearer, uttering a particle just for the sake of channeling may sound redundant and one may wonder, “Why would anyone do such a thing?” This is exactly my point. It is the rule of Japanese communication that speakers channel and backchannel within conversation if they appear to be harmonious. There is no doubt that the phatic behavior is part of “Japanese-ness” developed in the long history of “harmony” culture.

Let us observe the frequency of channeling particles *ne* and *sa* in some examples. (Channeling particles are typed in bold face. The forms in angular brackets <> are backchannels given by the hearer, M2 in this segment. The underlined forms are pause fillers, which will be discussed shortly.) Notice that this passage includes numerous instances of phatic markers, channeling particles (*ne* and *sa*) and filler-type of phatic markers (*yappari, ano, koo, nanka, ma*). (The functions and meanings of these markers are not represented in the English translations).
1. Phatic Communion in Women's Talk

Ne sometimes occurs independently, neither attached to a sentence nor placed somewhere in a sentence as nee (a phonologically prolonged and semantically loaded version of ne), creating a sense of great intimacy, especially, between female speakers [3]. The nee in in line 4 in (2) below is a good example in point: F2 sounds as if she is in complete agreement with F1. Here we see an excellent example of what
Malinowski has called "phatic communion."

2. Fillers and Phatic Function

Another category that may be important in making Japanese conversation particularly harmonious is pause fillers, which are like particles in the sense that they are not in syntactic construction with other elements of the utterance and their meanings are extremely difficult to explain to nonnative speakers of Japanese. Table-2 shows the frequency of four types of pause fillers in my data.
Reynolds

Table-2: Frequency of Fillers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yappari</th>
<th>nanka</th>
<th>koo/ano</th>
<th>ma/maa</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>623</td>
<td>919</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>3,442</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total number of these fillers in the 21 sets of conversations is 3,442, averaging approximately 165 per pair. A filler is used every 11 seconds. Example (3) shows how frequently these fillers are used in conversation. (The square bracket [ indicates the onset of an overlap.)

(3)

1  F2: demo aru teido soo da na tte omowa-nai? sono tokaku
2       nee [onna tte tsuyoi mon kekkoo
3  F1: [soo da yo nee nanka nanka.. soo da yo ne/ demo nanka soo
da naa/ nan-te-yuu-ka yappari sono o tokonoko to hanashite-ru -to sa
<un> yappari sono sugoku koo nanka boobowaaru ga ne sono "josei
tte no wa josei toshite umarete-kuru n ja-nakute josei toshite
sodaterareru n da" tte na koto o "dai-ni no sei " <nn> de ite-ru n
datte// demo yappari seibutsugakuteki ni wa yappa akirakani chigau
9      wake desho

[Translation]

F2: But don't you think that that's true to a certain degree? Anyway
women are strong, pretty strong
F1: [That's true.. (somehow, somehow ..)that's true. But (somehow ..
let me see? How should I say? (as we understand) (that) when talking
with a boy <ummm> (as we understand) (that) terribly (this way)
(somehow)... Beauvoir has said in the Second Sex (that) something
like "Women are not born as women but they become women as they
are raised as women,"they say. But (as we understand) we are apparently
biologically (as we understand) different, aren't we?

I have inserted 'somehow' for nanka, 'as we understand' for yappari/ yappa, 'that' for sono, and 'this
way' for koo. The ma in Line 5 of (5) is an example of ma. Obviously these words don't make sense
when they are literally translated into English. But they constitute an essential part of Japanese
conversation.

Yappari (yappari is perhaps the standard form, yahari the most formal, and yappashi or yappa
sound slightly more colloquial than yappari [5]) seems to have a discourse function of suggesting that
what is being said is a general assumption shared not only between speaker and hearer but by the whole world the two belong to. (This concept of ‘world the speaker and the hearer belong to’ has been discussed as an important concept for understanding Japanese ‘self’ in Lebra, 1992). The fact that this form occurs very frequently in Japanese conversation is, as Lebra argues, related to one of the salient traits of the Japanese, i.e., the tendency to act and think collectively. In most situations, however, speakers are not aware of this meaning while using them as pause fillers.

As for the demonstrative fillers, they are extended uses of regular demonstratives, and their connotations can be inferred from the meanings of demonstratives. (See Hinds 1975 and Reynolds 1984). What is relevant here is that demonstrative fillers koo and anoo occur with great frequency in ordinary conversation as well as in more formal spoken discourses, such as, public lectures. I counted only the instances of ano(o) and koo, which are the most frequent in the data. If instances of sono are counted, the total number of demonstrative fillers will be even greater.

Nanka has been studied in great detail and has been given an interesting explanation in terms of discourse functions by Murayama (1999). My data contains quite a large number of instances of this filler, particularly, in female speech. In some instances it is used as a pro-form meaning ‘something,’ or ‘somehow,’ but mostly it occurs as an empty word just to signal that the speaker is still on the line of communication.

Ma or maa ‘anyway?’ occurs quite frequently, and even connective dakara ‘therefore’ occurs where there is no logical connection between the statement of the sentence in which it is inserted and the statement of the preceding discourse. If all these forms are included, therefore, the number of the phatic markers will be high to an extent which is inconceivable in normal conversation from English-speaking people’s point of view. The series of phatic markers such as the following, which convey no cognitive meanings, are found here and there in my data.

(4) (a) ano ne nanka koo sa (b) nanka sa yappari kono ne

3. Co-constructions

The Japanese speakers’ effort to perform cooperative conversation goes far beyond this, as Mizutani and Mizutani (1987) suggest; it is very common that two speakers produce a single conversational text, each contributing parts of a sentence/utterance as seen in (5).

(5)

1 F2: aa de mondai ga
2 F1: aru n desu ka/ iroiro to
3 F2: tekitai-shin ga atta wake de mo nai kedo (LAUGH TOGETHER)
4 betsu ni nai
F1: *naï ne*

[Translation]

F2: Aaha. So, problems...
F1: There are (problems)? Of variety?
F2: It is not that we had a hostile feeling towards them (Laugh together)
    Not particularly
F1: You did not..

F2 utters *mondai ga* the subject of a sentence which could have taken the form of a complete sentence with the predicate meaning 'so, there are various problems,' but F2 let F1 take over the floor at the point. F1 utters the predicate part 'aru' (there are there) as if she could guess how F2 wanted to complete the sentence. Of not particularly she puts it in a question construction indicating that the subject of the discourse is still F2. In line 5 F1 repeats the predicate of F2's utterance and adds the phatic marker *ne*, thus F1 shows her complete support to F2. It seems that F2 is somewhat hesitant to talk about the problems between a group of female students, to which she belonged, and another group of female students from a women's college. F1 makes it easier for F2 by becoming a co-producer of the discourse.

In reality it is not always easy for the hearer to guess what the speaker is about to say. The hearer (Speaker 2) may in fact be mistaken and say something that is different from what the speaker (Speaker 1) intends to say. What is interesting, however, Speaker 1 usually does not point out Speaker 2's mistake. She may continue the conversation as if the Speaker 2 has said exactly what she was about to utter. The example below is taken from a conversation between female students talking about other female students whose major interest is to find a marriage partner rather than studying.

(6)

1 F1: chotto shigoto shite ["moo=
2 F2: [="moo kekkon shiyou" toka
3 F1: " kekkon shiyou" tte kanji de kangaete-iru kara/
4 "moo yappari aite wa gakusei jidai ni" toka=
5 F2: ="mitsukeyoo" toka
6 F1: un soor
[Translation]

F1: after working a little bit, ["now
F2: ["now I will get married"
F1: "I will get married," they think like that. "now a partner, while in school"
F2: " I will find (a partner)..."
F1: That's right.
This portion of conversation was initiated by F1 but F2 guesses what F1 wants to say (Line 2), which may not be exactly what F1 intended to say, but she continues the discourse by repeating most of F2’s utterance as if what was said by F2 is really what she planned to say, and then she utters what she probably originally meant to say “they think ‘I will anyway find a marriage partner while in school’.” But again F2 is the one who completes the quotation started by F1 (Line 5). When what F1 wanted to say was completed through cooperative work, F1 concludes it by saying “That’s right,” agreeing with the outcome of the collaborative work. Thus, while F2 may have interrupted F1 by uttering something different from what F1 had in mind, the discourse remains as harmonious as it could be.

Co-construction is actually pervasive not only in women’s chatting but also in various discourse genres in Japan: It is effectively used in classrooms where the teacher elicits responses from the student by uttering a part of a statement and having the student complete it or fill it in. It is also used by a professional interviewer by uttering only a small part of the discourse and inviting the interviewee (=guest) to complete it. Being a good teacher or a skilled interviewer requires a high degree of sensitivity to the context: he/she must constantly pay empathetic attention to on-going discourse.

5. Argument Culture and Harmony Culture

One cannot deny that Japanese people make great efforts to maintain the harmonious appearance of conversation, avoiding direct expression of disagreement and using channeling particles throughout conversation. However, the same data can be studied from different perspectives, revealing that the power semantic in the sense of Brown and Gilman (1960) also operates constantly and consistently, however subtle they may be. Ehara's study (1984) reports that in male-female conversations interruptions, silences and negative non-supportive backchannels are utilized by the male to keep the conversation under his control. A quick look at the ways in which switching from the polite desu-masu style to the neutral style or vise versa in my data basically supports this perception: the student from a more prestigious university using the so-called T-form while his partner mainly uses the V-form. For Japanese speakers the vertical principle is equally important as the principle of harmony. I have shown that the phatic function is coded in the Japanese language as channeling and backchanneling and as pause fillers, and that the “phatic communion” occurs in daily conversations just as Malinowskii observed in the life of natives in the Trobriand Islands. However, I must emphasize that our society is not in equilibrium, that it is rapidly changing. Beneath the surface harmony, we desire to change our social positions, thus experiencing various forms of interpersonal conflict.

Deborah Tannen (1998) argues that American culture is an “argument culture,” in which opposition is considered the best way to get things done, while Asian cultures (Japanese culture is frequently referred to as a typical Asian culture) are “harmony-focused cultures.” However, the points I have made indicate that her view of Asian cultures is too categorical, too ahistorical, and inaccurate. She states, for example, “Asian cultures, such as Japanese, Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese, place great value
on avoiding open expression of disagreement and conflict because they emphasize harmony...... Asian culture is based on different assumptions. Far from threatening harmony, Asians believe, strict hierarchy ensures it: Power relations are fixed, and fixed relations ensure inclusion in the group, that in turn promotes intimacy” (212-3). Lebra (1984) perceives the opposite: “What appears as a proof of unity may turn out to underscore the prevalence of disunity. The maintenance of harmony itself can be responsible for intensifying conflict” (56). There are in fact disturbingly many socio-psychological problems indicative of anger and confusion of oppressed groups or individuals. Japanese people do interact very cooperatively with each other, but this does not mean that the harmony comes from their conscious heart.

The theme of the New Year's Special of the morning talk show televised over Asahi TV in Japan (January, 2000) was the Japanese lack of an autonomous self, individualistic thinking. The program concluded with the note that the Japanese should try to develop a stronger sense of self as members of the international community. It is ironic that some American intellectuals advise Americans to become more like Asians and Japanese are hoping to be more like Americans. Peoples may be searching a better way of doing things anticipating, consciously or unconsciously, the coming of an age of globalization. Linguistic analysis of Japanese conversation focussing on the complex way the dimensions of power and harmony interact with each other will throw light on important questions concerning the future directions for both American and Japanese culture.

Notes:

[1] Three sociologists, Ehara Yumiko, Yoshii Hiroaki and Yamazaki Keiichi, recorded and transcribed 32 sets of 30-minute conversations (10 male-male pairs, 10 female-female pairs and 12 male-female pairs), of which I obtained copies of 26 sets during my field work in Japan in 1997 for the purpose of ethnomethodological study of conversational control with particular focus on gender. I am very grateful to these researchers for their generous permission for the use of their transcripts for my analysis. The data methodically gathered controlling variables without losing the naturalness of the setting gave me much confidence in my findings. Without their data, I would not have been able to develop my ideas about Japanese conversation.

[2] The total occurrence of *sa* in female speech is about half of that in male speech. It is certain that the gender of the speaker is somewhat influencing the use of *ne* and *sa*, but we will not pursue this question in this study.

[3] I have several examples similar to this in the data I have gathered, all of which are in female -to-female conversation.
[4] Examples of desu-ne were given in Reynolds 1996, which I repeat here.

A male newscaster talking to the then Foreign Minister Ikeda through satellite.

Caster: Daijin desu-ne
Minister: hai
Caster: nichibei-shunoo-kaidan de wa desu-ne nichibei kyooryoku no iwayuru gaido-rain o minaoshite desu-ne
Minister: hai
Caster: nihon shuuhen de mo ....

[Translation]
Caster: Mr Minister!
Minister: yes
Caster: In the Japan-US summit meeting ....
Minister: yes
Caster: [the decision was made] to reexamine the so-called guidelines of the Japan-US security cooperation and in the area surrounding Japan also ....

[5] Yahari and yappari are used in certain types of written discourse, but not with the same frequency. Yappashi and yappa are never used in writings unless in direct quotations or writings deliberately imitating spoken discourse.
References:


