



A Comparative Study of Topic Selection Schema in The First-time Conversation Between Japanese and Sundanese Native Speakers

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ABSTRACT

First-time conversations play an important role as a starting point in building relationships. However, the lack of information about interlocutors makes it difficult to decide what topic to take up. In this study, we targeted 10 pairs of native Japanese speakers and Sundanese native speakers, clarified what topics would be selected in the first-time conversation by university students, and examined similarities and differences between both native speakers. As a result, in the conversation data of the Japanese pairs, 20 topics out of 83 topics were recognized as “topic items”, and depending on the relationship between the topic items, they were then can be classified into eight categories, namely “affiliation”, “origin”, “university life”, “hobbies/enjoyment”, “living”, “commonalities”, “specialty”, and “society”. On the other hand, in the conversation data of the Sundanese pairs, 16 topics out of 95 topics were recognized as “topic items”, and they can be classified into seven categories, namely “university life”, “affiliation”, “residential”, “origin”, “commonalities”, “specialty”, and “society”. The overall picture of the classified categories and the topic items corresponding to the subclasses is the “topic selection list”, and the set of culturally shared knowledge about this “list” is the “first-time conversation topic selection schema”. The results of this study can be applied as a reference for topic selection in the first conversations with Japanese native speakers or Sundanese native speakers, especially between university students. The results also can be used as a repository of scientific knowledge in related fields such as sociolinguistic studies on conversational analysis, and as a reference on Japanese language education studies in general.

KEYWORDS

Contrastive study; First-time conversation; Japanese; Sundanese; Topic selection schema.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a lot of discourse analysis research that raises the themes of speech acts such as to request, invitation, refusal, compliment, apology, etc. Kusumawati (2020) contrasts

Indonesian and Japanese compliments, while Haristiani and Sari (2019) contrast Japanese and Indonesian apologies, while Chandrawisesa, Kiyama, Haristiani, and Sudjianto (2019) contrast Japanese and Indonesian invitation speech act. There is also research by Citra, Hamidah, and Firmansyah (2020) that discusses the speech act of

complaining in Japanese *anime*. As seen from these studies, contrastive analysis regarding discourse analysis in Japanese and Indonesian are mainly focused on speech act, while studies on topic selection in the first-time conversation are still limited.

Topic selection has a great influence on the smoothness of a conversation. If the selected topic is appropriate and favorable to each other, the conversation develops further and makes a good impression. On the contrary, if the selected topic is inappropriate and the content is not liked, it is expected that the conversation will be difficult to proceed with, and will give a bad impression to each other. Therefore, selecting mutually appropriate and preferred topics in conversation is very important.

On the other hand, the first-time conversation plays an important role in building relationships. Berg and Clark (1986) described that decisions about what type of relationship people wish to pursue are often made very early in a relationship, often right at the very beginning. In other words, a person's decision about what kind of relationship he/she wants is often determined at the beginning of the relationship, which is often seen in the first conversation. However, in the first conversation, there is the difficulty that the information and background about the interlocutor are minimal. Therefore, it is difficult to select an appropriate topic in a first-time conversation, which is a major obstacle to the smooth execution of the conversation.

Mimaki (1999) reveals that when the first-time conversation scene is viewed from the communication side, it is clear that there are conflicting demands to bring the mental distance closer to facilitate communication and at the same time to maintain a certain distance from consideration for sparse partners.

Currently, with the progress of globalization, the number of foreign tourists is increasing in each country. As well as in Japan, the acceptance of foreign workers is being expanded as a national policy. In such an international situation, it is expected that the opportunities for different native speakers to have "first-time conversations" will increase more and more in the future. Also, with the development of the Internet, online exchanges will be actively carried out, and opportunities to converse with foreigners from completely different cultures will increase. At that time, there are concerns that communication gaps will arise due

to differences in language and culture, which will lead to misunderstandings.

Moreover, language and cultural differences will have an impact on the various types of topics chosen. Certain topics may be considered commonplace in one culture but the same topic may be considered taboo in another. Therefore, it is very important to know common information about topics that people usually bring up in a first-time conversation as a reference.

Under the above circumstances, research on topic selection in a first-time conversation is considered to be very important.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Topic Selection Schema

The term schema has various names such as script, schema, prototype, etc. depending on the fields such as linguistics, anthropology, and psychology. According to Tannen and Wallat (1987), schema frames and related terms fall into two categories. One is the interactive framework of interpretation, which is called 'the frame', and the other is the knowledge structure, which is called 'the schema'.

On the other hand, regarding the topic selection schema, Mimaki (2013, p.170) stated that "A collection of culturally shared organized knowledge is called a schema. Therefore, regarding the topic selection in the first-time conversation is shared within the same culture". For example, when a Japanese university student has a first-time conversation, a specific topic tends to be selected because of the shared knowledge about what kind of topic to select.

Previous Research on Topic Selection

Research on topic selection in first-time conversations, based on research methods can be classified into two types. One is the research based on questionnaires and the other one is the research based on conversation experiments.

Nishida (1996), and Kumagai and Ishii (2005) conducted research using a questionnaire survey method. Nishida (1996) used a questionnaire survey to investigate the actual situation of self-disclosure in first-time conversations with Japanese and Americans. As a result, it was found that Americans have more topics than the Japanese, and the Japanese have far more items

that they do not talk about than Americans. And Nishida says, the Japanese can point out that there are more “non” personal topics than Americans.

Kumagai and Ishii (2005) conducted questionnaire surveys and interview surveys with Japanese and Koreans to clarify the consciousness of Japanese and Korean speakers on various types of topics. As a result, topics such as “hobbies,” “leisure,” “sports,” and “television programs” were commonly preferred, while “body size,” “religion,” and “income” were undesired topics. Kumagai and Ishii (2005) also stated that the points related to positive politeness and negative politeness, such as “raising the story” and “not stepping into private matters”, were commonly recognized as points for selecting a topic for the person who met for the first time.

Mimaki (1999) and Zhang (2006) conducted research using the conversational experimental method. Mimaki (1999) conducted the first-time conversation experiment with 38 sets of Japanese university students and examined the existence of topic selection schemas in Japanese society and various strategies involved in topic selection. As a result, 95% of the total number of topics 265 was aggregated into 23 topic items, and when considering the 23 topic items from the relevance of the contents, it was able to categorize them into eight types, namely “university life”, “affiliation”, “residential”, “commonalities”, “origin”, “specialty”, “career,” and “examination.” Next, it is concluded that the topic selection strategies are recognized into 3 types based on the topic selection source and 3 types based on the topic content, for a total of 6 types. While Zhang (2006) conducted the first-time conversation experiment with 20 female university students from Taiwan and Japan (10 pairs in total), divided the 20-minutes conversation time every 5 minutes, and measured the feeling of closeness to each other by adopting the “topic type” by Svennevig (1999) and Tryggvason (2004). As a result of the analysis, there was not much difference between Japan and Taiwan regarding the first-time conversation for 20 minutes, but the percentage of topics in the Japanese pairs changed with time. On the other hand, the percentage of Taiwanese pairs has not changed. Fifteen minutes after the conversation began, the Japanese pairs tended to talk about themselves, and the Taiwanese pairs talked more about third parties and less about themselves.

Tang (2014) conducted the first-time conversation experiment with 18 pairs of Japanese university students and 20 pairs of Chinese

university students and considered the tendency of topic selection and how to develop conversations between Chinese and Japanese native speakers. As a result, both pairs tended to disclose personal information such as their affiliation and bring them closer to each other. On the other hand, the Chinese pairs are seen to disclose private topics and often mention non-speakers. The Japanese pairs proceeded with the conversation while considering each other’s areas. In addition, it is reported that there was a difference that the Chinese pairs start the conversation by directly asking for the other person’s personal information, but the Japanese pairs often start the conversation with standard expressions.

The above is an overview of previous studies related to this study. As mentioned above, research on topic selection for first-time conversations has accumulated comparative studies in Japanese-American, Japanese-Korean, Japanese-Taiwanese, and Japanese-Chinese, but there are few studies targeting languages in non-Kanji cultural spheres. Among them, there is no research on Sundanese, which is the Indonesian folk language. Therefore, in this study, we contrast the topic selections of Japanese native speakers and Indonesian Sundanese native speakers in the first-time conversation and clarify the topic selections of both language speakers in the first-time conversation.

Based on the problems of the previous research mentioned above, the research theme of this research will be set. (1) What is the number of topics in the first-time conversation between Japanese and Sundanese for 15 minutes? (2) What is the topic selection schema in the first-time conversation between Japanese and Sundanese?

RESEARCH METHOD

The Objects of This Research and Data Collection Method

Regarding the data collection method, this study uses conversation experiments. However, conversation experiments are conducted online. The details of the research subject and data collection procedure are explained as follows.

The Objects of Research

The subjects of this study are “Japanese university (graduate) students” and “Sundanese university students”, and the details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Objects of This Research.

| Object | Gender/Pair (Number) |
|-------------------|----------------------------|
| Japanese Student | Male/5 pairs (10 people) |
| | Female/5 pairs (10 people) |
| Sundanese Student | Male/5 pairs (10 people) |
| | Female/5 pairs (10 people) |

Research objects in this study were as seen in Table 1. The pair's partner of the subject was someone they met for the first time, of the same sex, and the same or close in age. The average age was 18,1 years old for Japanese, and 18,5 years old for Sundanese.

The objects from the Japanese side were university students of the Prefectural University of Hiroshima, and the object of Sundanese were university students of the Indonesia University of Education. In addition, some of the Japanese objects were taken from corpus data "Basic Transcription System for Japanese: BTSJ" by Usami (2021). From the data of the conversation experiment of the students of Prefectural Hiroshima, there are 1 male pair (2 people) and 4 female pairs (8 people), and from the BTSJ data, there are 4 male pairs (8 people) and 1 female pair (2 people).

The reason for using the BTSJ corpus data for Japanese objects is that the number of participants in the conversation experiment at the Prefectural University of Hiroshima was not sufficient. Hence, the corpus data of BTSJ was used to match the number of the Sundanese objects. The difference between Japanese conversational data and the BTSJ corpus was that the conversation experiment at the Prefectural University of Hiroshima was an online conversation conducted using Microsoft Teams, and the BTSJ corpus was a corpus data of face-to-face conversation.

Data Collection Procedure

First, a conversation experiment was conducted and recorded. Before participating in the conversation, the object signs a consent form and agrees to be recorded during the entire conversation and interview. After confirming that the interlocutor is the person they meet for the first time, 15 minutes of conversation is started. After the conversation, a follow-up interview was conducted and the objects were asked about their impressions. The 15 minutes conversation data was transcribed by coding work and along with the BTSJ corpus data were used as analysis material.

Coding Work and Analysis

In the coding work, conversation experiments were transcribed and topic classification was conducted.

Regarding transliteration, Japanese conversation data was transcribed in accordance with Basic Transcription System for Japanese (BTSJ) 2019 Revised Edition by Usami (2019). The Sundanese conversation data was also transcribed based on the principle of BTSJ and only a few symbols changed as necessary for writing Sundanese.

Furthermore, referring to the description by Maynard (1993) that the cooperation of conversation participants sets the framework of the topic, and the topic is selected and developed even if the participant introduces a certain topic unilaterally, the other party is just nodding. If the talks do not develop, they will not be recognized as a "topic". In this way, one topic is separated from another.

The analysis procedure in this study was conducted as follows.

- (1) Calculate the number of topics as total, the average number of topics per pair, the type of topics, and the average of the types of topics per pair.
- (2) If a "topic type" calculated in (1) is selected by two or more pairs, it is defined as a "topic item".
- (3) Examine and categorized the extracted "topic items" from relevant contents.
- (4) The classified categories and the topic items corresponding to the subclasses is the "topic option list", and the set of culturally shared knowledge about this "list" is the "first-time conversation topic selection schema".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Number of Topics Selected by Japanese and Indonesian-Sundanese Speakers

In the conversation, many topics were commonly selected by the pairs. In this section, we classified the topics into "number of topics (total)" and "types of topics" and calculated them. The results, including the average per pair, are shown in Table 4 (the format of the table was created based on Tang (2014)).

Table 4: The number of topics and types of topics between Japanese and Sundanese pairs.

| Pairs | Total number of topics | Average number of topics per pair | Topic types | Average number of topic types per pair |
|-----------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|--|
| Japanese | 83 | 8.3 | 32 | 3.2 |
| Sundanese | 95 | 9.5 | 31 | 3.1 |

As shown in Table 4, the Japanese pairs have fewer topics than the Sundanese pairs. However, it was found that the Japanese pairs had more topic types, meaning that topics types selected by Japanese multiple pairs in common and topics selected by only one pair had more variations. As shown in Table 4, 32 topic types were extracted for the Japanese pairs and 31 topic types were extracted for the Sundanese pairs. Looking at the average number of topics used per pair, the average number of topics per pair used by Japanese pairs is 8.3, and the average number of topics used per pair by the Sundanese pair is 9.5. Regarding the topic type, the average topic type per Japanese pair is 3.2, and the average topic type per Sundanese pair is 3.1.

As mentioned above, the number of topics in total and the different types of topics in the first-time conversation between Japanese and Sundanese have been clarified. However, since topic type is a topic that combines the topic selected by multiple pairs in common and topic selected by only one pair, in order to clarify the topic selection schema, it is necessary to pay attention to the “topic item” which is the “topic” selected in common by multiple pairs and calculate it. This topic item will be examined in detail in the next section.

Topic Selection Schema

In the previous section, the number of topics and the number of types of topics in the first-time conversation between Japanese and Sundanese were clarified. This section mainly describes topic items and topic selection schema. As mentioned in the previous section, topics selected by multiple pairs in common are named “topic items”. Of the 33 topic types of the Japanese pairs, 20 topics were “topic items”, and of the 31 topic types of the Sundanese pairs, 16 topics were extracted as “topic items”. Then, the above topic items were examined according to the relevance of the contents, and

these were classified into several categories. The overall picture of the classified categories and the topic items corresponding to the subclasses is the “topic selection list”, and the set of culturally shared knowledge about this list is the “first-time conversation topic selection schema”, which is based on the definition of Mimaki (1999).

Through the above procedure, the topic selection schema for the first-time conversation of Japanese university students is shown in Table 5 based on the format of Mimaki (1999).

Table 5: Topic selection list and categories for first-time conversations of the Japanese university student.

| | Japanese Student | |
|---|----------------------------|--|
| | Topic Category | Topic item () is selection rate per pair: % |
| ① | Affiliation (19.71) | Self-introduction (100) Department (40) |
| ② | Origin (18.30) | Birthplace (40) Club activities (40) Alma mater (30) Dialect (20) |
| ③ | University life (18.30) | Class (50) Circle (50) Part-time job (30) |
| ④ | Hobbies/ Enjoyment (18.30) | Hobby (40) Music (30) Manga/ Anime (20) Sport (20) Game (20) |
| ⑤ | Residential (9.86) | Current place of residence (40) School commute (30) |
| ⑥ | Commonalities (9.86) | Common experience (40) Common acquaintance (30) |
| ⑦ | Specialty (2.82) | Major (20) |
| ⑧ | Society (2.82) | Infectious disease (20) |

As shown in Table 5, the topic items of the Japanese pairs were classified into eight categories, namely “affiliation”, “origin”, “university life”, “hobbies/enjoyment”, “residential”, “commonalities”, “and specialty” and “society.” This result is similar to that of a Japanese university student in Mimaki (1999), although the details are different. What is different from Mimaki (1999) is the topic items of “hobbies”, “music”, “manga/animation” in the category of “hobbies/enjoyment”, and the topic items of “infectious diseases” in the category of “society”. On the contrary, the categories of “course” and “exam” and their topic items in Mimaki (1999) do

not appear in the survey results of this study. Of particular note about the results of the Japanese pairs in this study is the topic item “self-introduction,” which is not found in the results of Japanese university students in Mimaki (1999).

On the other hand, the topic selection schema for the first-time conversation of Sundanese university students is shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Topic selection list and categories for first-time conversations of the Sundanese university student.

| | Sundanese Student | |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| | Topic Category | Topic item () is selection rate per pair: % |
| ① | University life (27.50) | Class (80) Term-end exam (70) Circle (40) Campus (30) |
| ② | Affiliation (21.25) | Department (80) Self-introduction (60) Admission (30) |
| ③ | Residential (17.50) | Boarding house (60) Current place of residence (40) School commute (40) |
| ④ | Origin (15.00) | Birthplace (80) Alma mater (40) |
| ⑤ | Commonalities (12.50) | Common experience (50) Common acquaintance (50) |
| ⑥ | Specialty (3.75) | Major (30) |
| ⑦ | Society (2.50) | Infectious disease (20) |

As shown in Table 6, the topic items of the Sundanese pairs were classified into 7 categories, namely “university life”, “affiliation”, “residential”, “origin”, “commonality”, “specialty”, and “society”. Compared to the results of the Japanese pairs, it can be said that they are similar except for the categories of “society” of the Sundanese pairs and “hobbies/enjoyment” of the Japanese pairs. Next, among the topic items found in the Sundanese pairs, there are four topics that the Japanese pairs do not have, which are “term-end exam”, “campus”, “admission” and “boarding house.” On the contrary, in addition to the “hobbies/fun” category and its topic items, the Sundanese pairs do not have two topic items, which are “club activities” and “part-time job”.

Mimaki (1999) calls a culturally shared set of organized knowledge a schema. It is considered that the “Japanese and Sundanese university student’s first-time conversation topic selection schema” clarified in this study is generally shared

as knowledge in the first-time conversation of Japanese and Sundanese university students.

Next, the topic items for which 5 or more pairs were selected in each pair as shown in Figure 1 (Japanese pairs) and Figure 2 (Sundanese pairs).

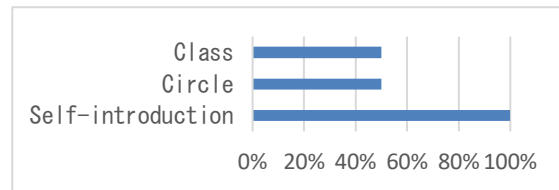


Figure 1: Topics with a high selection rate of Japanese pairs.

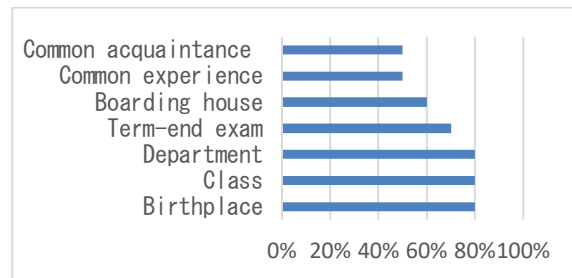


Figure 2: Topics with a high selection rate of Sundanese pairs.

As shown in Figure 1, out of the 10 Japanese pairs, 5 or more pairs have selected only 3 topic items in common, which are “self-introduction,” “class,” and “circle.” On the other hand, as shown in Figure 2, out of the 10 Sundanese pairs, the topic items commonly selected by 5 or more pairs are eight topic items namely “hometown”, “class”, “department”, “term-end exam”, “boarding house”, “self-introduction”, “common experience” and “common acquaintance.” It can be summarized that while the Japanese pairs talked about relatively diverse topic items, the topics covered by the Sundanese pairs were common to many pairs. On the other hand, the most frequently selected topic item for the Japanese pairs was “self-introduction,” which was selected by all 10 pairs. On the other hand, the most selected topic in the Sundanese pairs is “hometown”, which is selected by 9 out of 10 pairs.

Topic Selection in First-time Conversation by Japanese and Indonesian-Sundanese Speakers

Topic visualization system for unfamiliar couples in face-to-face conversations are often difficult, since some of people are weak at making face-to-face conversations with people for the first time (Nishihara, Yoshimatsu, Yamanishi, & Miyake, 2018). Hence, the study of topic selection in first-time conversation in cross-cultural context is important and interesting.

Regarding the topic selections between Japanese and Sundanese, as seen from the data in the section above, the Japanese pairs used 83 different topics, and the Sundanese pairs used 95 different topics, which means that the Sundanese pairs used more topics. However, the number of 'topic items' by Japanese pairs was 20 items while the Sundanese pairs used 16 items. This means that the Sundanese pairs had a large number of commonly selected topics, while the Japanese pairs had a slightly wider variety of topics. As shown in Figure 2 in the previous section, the Sundanese pairs have seven high-selection topics. Therefore, it can be said that these seven are "topic selection schemas" that are generally shared as knowledge "suitable for picking up" in a first-time conversation by Sundanese university students.

A similar tendency was seen in Tang (2014) on such topics of daily life. According to Tang (2014), topics closely related to dormitory life were found in the Chinese group, but not in the Japanese group. In addition, Tang (2014) states that items such as "seminars (*zemi*)," "graduation thesis (*ronbun*)," "study abroad (*ryuugaku*)," and "volunteer (*borantia*)" were not found in the Chinese group. Since the Japanese students who participated in this study are mostly new students, such items did not appear. Although it is not seen in the Sundanese group of this research, it is unlikely that it will appear even if the grade goes up because "seminars (*zemi*)," "study abroad (*ryuugaku*)," and "volunteers (*borantia*)" are not common in Indonesian universities.

Below, let us consider the reasons why each topic was taken up so much in each pair. First of all, it is thought that the reason why many Sundanese talks about "boarding house" is that life in boarding house is common among Sundanese college students. On the other hand, Japanese students did not talk about living in a "boarding house" and "apartment". This result was probably

obtained because the main target of this study was the students of the Prefectural University of Hiroshima. Of the ten Japanese students who participated in the conversation experiment in this study, only one was from outside the prefecture. Since many students still live in their parent's homes and their lifestyle before entering university continues, so they didn't particularly talk about it. However, this result cannot be generalized as a topic selection schema that is commonly used by all Japanese university students, and more case studies are needed to generalize this result.

On the other hand, the "part-time job" topic that was often taken up by the Japanese pairs never appeared in the Sundanese pairs. The reason is that "part-time jobs" are not common in Indonesia where the Sundanese live. In Indonesia, few college students work part-time while attending college, due to not many opportunities to do part-time jobs. The topics of "admission" and "campus" were also taken up by the Sundanese pairs. This tendency was most likely seen because the conversation experiment was conducted immediately after the admission of the Sundanese students. Therefore, many topics related to "admission" methods and "campus" was selected. Also, the reason why many "final exams" topics were taken up is that the conversation experiment was conducted during the final exam period of the university. Here it can be understood that the general conditions that occur in the same environment can be used as topics of conversation that are easy to bring up. Other than topic selections, in first-time conversation, this study also found that Japanese used interjectional expressions such as *anoo*, *sonoo* or *etoo* to maintain conversation as found by Morita and Takagi (2018, 2020).

As mentioned above, there are many differences between the Sundanese pairs and the Japanese pairs, but in common with both pairs, the topics of "hometown" and "class" were often taken up. This tendency is similar to results by Zhao (2014) who found that the topic selection schemes of Japanese and Chinese are similar, particularly according to topics about individuals including "place of residence" and "place of origin". In other words, it can be said that the Japanese, Chinese, and Sundanese topic selection schema is similar, but the Sundanese choice of topics was more similar to the Chinese than the Japanese regarding many topics such as "hometown" and "boarding house". Hence, it can be considered that such topics should be taken up

in the first-time conversation among college students regardless of their nationality. However, as mentioned above, how much the results of this study can be generalized must be an issue for the future and further investigation is required.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the topic selection schema for the first-time conversation of fifteen minutes conversations by ten pairs of the Japanese university student pairs and the Sundanese university student pairs was analyzed. The results showed that the Japanese pairs had more topic items that were commonly taken up by two or more pairs than the Sundanese pairs. The Japanese pairs used eight categories of topic items, while Sundanese pairs used seven categories. Moreover, there are many differences between the topic selection schemas of the Japanese pairs and the Sundanese pairs, but there are also some commonalities. As for the topics of “part-time job” and “boarding house”, there were differences in the topics of “admission” and “final test” due to different cultures and the timing of the conversation experiment. While the topics of “hometown” and “class” are common topics that are often selected by university students in both countries.

However, there is some weakness in this study, including the procedure for putting topic items into several categories. In this study, the categories were classified concerning previous studies. To increase the validity, a method that can be scientifically explained is needed in future studies.

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