

A Sequential Approach to the Relationship between Prosody and Social Action: The Case of *Eh* in Japanese Conversation

It is cross-linguistically well-known that the role of prosody is important to convey various syntactic, semantic and pragmatic meanings in sequential contexts where it is used. However, in conversational discourse studies, the coordination of the prosodic forms and meanings are generally considered so intricate that researchers have often declined to specify systematic relationships between them (Schiffirin 1987).

Recently, however, a growing number of studies in interactional linguistics have focused on the interconnectedness of social actions and sound patterns and elucidated various prosodic practices in interactional contexts (Couper-Kuhlen & Ford 2004). In this study, under the framework of interactional linguistics, I analyze the prosodic features (specifically, pitch height and length) of the so-called ‘interjection’ *eh* in Japanese conversation. Particularly, by showing the use of *eh* within *informing sequences*, I claim that the prosodic forms of *eh*, its sequential placements and social actions are, to some degree, systematically related.

First, my conversational data shows that *eh* is typically found in the following three sequential placements within informing sequences: (i) after the interlocutor introduces a new topic, (ii) after the interlocutor provides a consequence/upshot of what happened, and (iii) after the interlocutor’s talk reaches recognizable closure. The cases of *eh* found in (i) and (ii) indicate the *eh*-producer’s news receipt. In contrast, those cases in (iii), which made up the majority of my data (see Table1), do not indicate news receipts; instead, they serve to open a sequence, signaling a disjunctive move/shift/change in the interlocutor’s topical sequence (Hayashi 2007).

More specifically, those found in (i) frequently carry prosodic features such as a sudden extreme shift in pitch (and volume) (see excerpt/figure (1)). The manipulations of these prosodic features exhibit the producer’s interest in the interlocutor’s new topic and further contribute to the interlocutor’s talk in progress. In (1), C uses a news-receipt $\uparrow EH!$ (line24), which indicates her surprised reaction to K’s introduction of a new topic and facilitates K’s talk in progress. Those cases in (ii) are characterized by lengthening, high flat pitch, or gradually rising pitch (see excerpt/figure (2)). It has been reported that lengthening is associated with the producer’s ‘assessment’ (Mori 2006), and that high flat pitch also shows the producer’s ‘involvement’ in the current talk (Chafe 2002). Thus, in (2), by manipulating these emphatic prosodic features, R displays her evaluative stance to Y’s news and contributes to developing Y’s talk.

In contrast to the cases in (i) and (ii), the sequence-opening *eh* in (iii) carries relatively moderate prosodic features; that is, it is almost always produced considerably shorter in length and lower in pitch and volume (see Table1 and excerpt/figure (3)). When making a disjunctive move/shift/change using the sequence-opening *eh*, if the conspicuous prosodic features are employed, that may emphasize an impression of interrupting/discontinuing the interlocutor’s talk. Thus, in (3), R employs moderate prosodic features and displays her other-attentive orientation to developing the ongoing talk, which may further indicate R’s “negative politeness” toward Y to avoid possible face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson 1987).

In conclusion, I argue that the prosodic manipulations of *eh* in informing sequences are routinely situated in sequentially different positions, and that particular social actions are achieved through such systematic prosodic practices.

	Length (Average)	Pitch height (Average)	Occurrences
News-receipt <i>eh</i> in (i)	0.23 seconds	F: 408-452 Hz / M: none	7
News-receipt <i>eh</i> in (ii)	0.61 seconds	F: 288-366 Hz / M: 182-206Hz	19
Sequence-opening <i>eh</i> in (iii)	0.14 seconds	F: 247.5 Hz / M: 120.2 Hz	87

Table 1. Prosodic Characteristics of *eh*

Excerpt (1) *Eh* in (i): In lines 1-21 (not shown here), C tells her male friend K about fifth grade elementary students. After hearing C's talk, K initiates his talk about his sister who is also in the fifth grade (line 22).

22. K: *mo: ne:: yada na:: sore-uchino imooto ga sa::*, K: Oh no, that's no good. You know, my sister is,
 23. *choodo sa::, kotoshi shoo go de sa:: (noise)* She is also in the fifth grade in elementary school.
 24. ⇒ C: ↑**EH!** (514-391-659 Hz) C: ↑**EH!** (514-391-659 Hz)
 25. K: *ichiban shita ga. (continues)* K: (I mean) the youngest one. (continues)

Excerpt (2) *Eh* in (ii): In lines 1-6 (not shown here), Y tells R about her experience about the cold weather in N.Y.

7. Y (female): (*mottekita kotoo*) *wa moo usukute::*, Y: (the coat I brought with me) was not warm enough.
 8. R (female): *un.* R: uh huh
 9. Y: =>*kirarenaku natte<* Y: I was not able to wear (that one),
 10. *soko de kotoo [o ka]tta* so [I bought (new) one there.
 11. R: [*katta*] R: [(You) bought (a new one)!
 12. Y: *mi(hh)ta(h)i(h)na huh huh huh=* Y: (something) like (that happened).
 13. ⇒ R: =**e**:.....[:**h?** (242-431Hz) R: =**e**:.....[:**h?** (242-401Hz)
 14. Y: [U:.....↓*n soo=* Y: [Yea::h!

Excerpt (3) *Eh* in (iii): In lines 1~36 (not shown here), Y (female) tells R (female) about how she feels about beauty salons in the US. In line 40, R disjunctively changes a topic of the current talk.

37. Y: >*nanka kowai [na::<toka omotte::*, Y: I think it's kind of [scary (to have my hair cut in the US)
 38. R: [*a:: soona nda.* R: [Oh, I see.
 39. Y: *u::n soo soo°soo da yone::°*, ↑*jaa, =* Y: Right. That's right, well then-
 40. ⇒ R: =**e**- (202 Hz) *doko shusshinnan[°deska?°=* R: **e**- (202 Hz) where are you [from?°
 41. Y: [*ahh,* Y: [Oh.

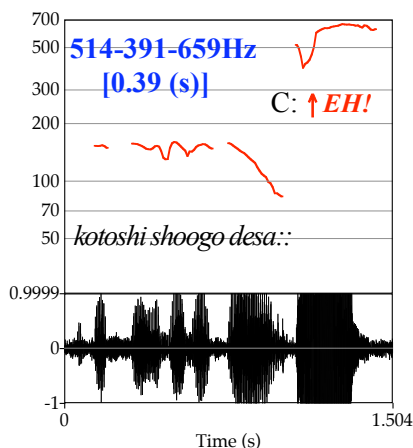


Figure1 C's ↑*Eh* in line 24

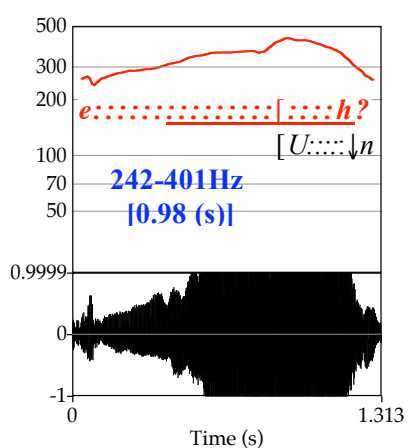


Figure2 R's **e**:.....[:**h?** in line 13

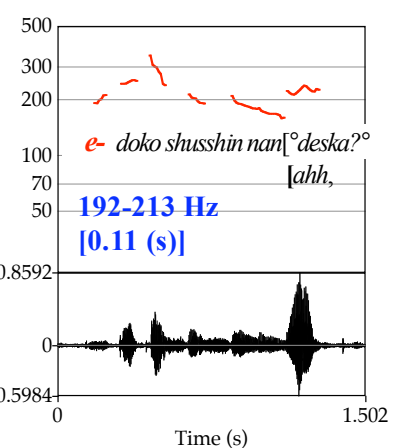


Figure3 R's **e**- in line 40

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