The function of filled pauses as discourse segment boundary markers in Japanese monologues

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Previous research on filled pauses (fillers) has shown that they not only provide evidence for the speaker’s mental attitudes, processes or emotional states, but also contribute to informing the listener of the discourse structure. Research on Dutch fillers shows that fillers, particularly phrase-initial ‘um’, appear more frequently after stronger boundaries than after weaker ones, which suggests that fillers may provide contributory evidence to prosodic boundary strength [1]. We investigated the distribution of fillers at boundaries of different strength in monologues in order to consider whether Japanese fillers may also convey information about boundary strength. Assuming that difference in the distribution indicates difference in the function, we tested the following hypotheses: 1) fillers appear more frequently at deeper boundaries than at shallower ones. 2) Fillers occur phrase-initially more often after stronger boundaries than after weaker ones. 3) ‘Eto’ and ‘e’ tend to appear more frequently at deeper boundaries than ‘ano’ and ‘sono’. Among these fillers, ‘eto’ and ‘e’ have no semantic meanings, whereas ‘ano’ and ‘sono’ can function either as fillers or else as demonstrative adjectives, similar to English ‘that’ and ‘the’ respectively. Hypotheses 1) and 2) were based on the assumptions that the likelihood of the occurrence of fillers varies with the speaker’s cognitive load. It was hypothesised that the speaker’s cognitive load is heavier at deeper boundaries, because of the additional planning time needed at discourse as well as sentence and phrase levels. The third hypothesis was based on our earlier finding that ‘eto’ and ‘e’ tended to occur more frequently at stronger syntactic boundaries than ‘ano’ and ‘sono’ [2].

Five speeches on given topics by voluntary subjects were taken from the Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese (CSJ Monitor Version 2001 [3]). The transcription of speech was divided into intonational phrases (IP), in terms of J-ToBI labelling, by the author. An IP was regarded as the smallest unit that composed a discourse segment (DS). A DS was defined as a unit based on the speaker’s purpose of utterances. Boundary types were defined as follows; three labellers were instructed to mark the beginning of DS at the beginning of IPs where the speaker had just finished one purpose of discourse and was now moving on to talk about another. IP-boundaries immediately before the IPs where three labellers marked the beginning of DS were defined as the strongest boundaries, and those before the IPs where no labeller marked the beginning of DS, as the weakest boundaries. Between the IPs immediately after the strongest boundaries and those after the weakest boundaries, the numbers and ratios of IPs with fillers, locations of fillers in the IPs, and the distribution of each type of filler in the IPs, were compared. Hypothesis 1) and 2) were supported by four out of five speeches. Hypothesis 3) was most strongly supported by phrase-initial ‘eto’, which increased remarkably as boundary strength grew. The results indicate that phrase-initial ‘eto’ and ‘e’ provide contributory evidence to the location and the strength of DS boundaries in Japanese.