

# An Analysis of “Karakuri Funniest English”: The Collaborative Interactions between an American Interviewer and Japanese Interviewees

Shizuko OZAKI

The present study examines Foreigner Talk and nonverbal accommodation of a native speaker of English as well as behavioral accommodation of nonnative speakers. The goal of the paper is to describe what an English speaker and Japanese speakers with a limited English ability do in order to make their communication successful. It is revealed that the English-speaking interviewer adopts a slower speech rate, reduces grammatical complexity, uses simpler vocabulary, clarifies pronoun references, uses pantomimic gestures, and so on. The interviewees use pantomimic gestures, invent onomatopoeic words, and pretend to understand the interviewer so as not to block the flow of conversations. The whole process of the interviews described in this study is found to be a maximally collaborative endeavor by the native speaker and the nonnative speakers.

Keywords: Foreigner Talk, linguistic accommodation, caretaker talk

## Introduction

James (1993)<sup>1)</sup> describes linguistic accommodation as “the tendency we have as speakers to try to make our speech either more or less like that of our interlocutors” (p.39). He further discusses that the notion of accommodation was first investigated within interactions between speakers of the same language, and then it was extended to contacts between bilingual speakers, and most recently, it has been developed in encounters between native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs). Previous research has reported that NSs modify their speech while talking to NNSs through various means, such as altering the rate of speech, using simpler vocabulary, and so on. This phenomenon, known as Foreigner Talk (FT) (Ferguson, 1975<sup>2)</sup>; McCurdy, 1980<sup>3)</sup>; Medley, 1983<sup>4)</sup>; Terrell, 1990<sup>5)</sup>; Zuengler, 1991<sup>6)</sup>; James, 1993; Adams, 1998<sup>7)</sup>), has been a central topic of the study of accommodation in interactions between NSs and NNSs. The present study

examines FT and nonverbal accommodation of a native speaker of English as well as behavioral (verbal and nonverbal) accommodation (Janicki, 1986<sup>8)</sup>) of nonnative speakers. Specifically, it discusses a) what sorts of FT and nonverbal accommodation are conducted by the NS, b) how the NNSs react to such behavior, c) what sorts of behavioral accommodation are demonstrated by the NNSs, and d) how they affect the speech and behavior of the NS. By so doing, it aims to demonstrate elements that make beginning-level learners’ communication more successful.

## Description of Data

Data is collected from one section of a Japanese TV show, called “Karakuri Funniest English”<sup>note1)</sup>, where an American interviewer interviews passers-by on streets in big cities in Japan and asks them to tell a story on a certain topic in English, such as an unforgivable story,

a backfire situation, a “too bad” story, and so on. The interviewer has a lot of experience with talking with Japanese speakers. Furthermore, it seems evident that he is familiar with the Japanese language and culture. Most of the Japanese interviewees in the show have very limited command of English. They are all relatively young, ranging from teenage to early 30’s in both genders. The transcription conventions used in the study are provided in the Appendix.

accommodation by the interviewees, and d) the reactions of the interviewer. The first interview is approximately one and a half minutes long, and the participants are the interviewer (A) and two teenage girls (B and C). One of the girls (C) is a dominant interviewee.

## An Analysis of Interviews

In this section, two complete interviews are presented and discussed under the following aspects: a) the FT and nonverbal accommodation by the interviewer, b) the reactions of the interviewees, c) the behavioral

### Interview #1

1.

A: Please tell me <hand moving from B and C toward himself> your <hand pointing at B and C> komatta ((laugh)) =  
too bad

B:

C:

2.

A: = KOMATTA story. <hand pointing at a board with a cue >  
too bad

B: ((laugh)) Sore desho, <pointing at C's patch over her eye> kore desho. =  
that isn't it this isn't it

C: ((laugh))

3

A: Uh-huh komatta komatta. <pointing at C's patch> Ye:s, I think so. Uh-huh. =  
too bad too bad

B: <pointing at B's own crutches>

C: Komatta.  
too bad

4.

A: = Plea- please tell me wha- wha- what happen. <hand moving top to down pointing at B and C's injures>

B:

C:

Kino, =  
yesterday

5.

A: Oh. English please. <hand moving from C toward himself>

B:

C: = karesi to kenka site:, nagurareta. <act of punching>  
boyfriend with fight did and got punched

6.  
 A: = yeah = ((unvoiced laugh))  
 B: ((laugh)) punching ((whispering at C's ear))  
 C: E::h. Yesterday, = = lovers is shock. <act of punching>  
 oh no
- 
7.  
 A: = oh, yeah = Wh- wh- why fighting? <act of punching> Why?  
 B: Nande nande  
 why why  
 C: A, punching = = punching. No no. E?  
 oh what
- 
8.  
 A: = yeah =  
 B: nande kenka sita no. ((whispering at C's ear))  
 why fight did question particle  
 C: A, naze, nande A, nande kenka sita no = = nande kenka =  
 oh why why oh why fight did question particle why fight
- 
9.  
 A:  
 B: = chityana koto de =  
 small things with  
 C: = sitan daro. = = so: so so so. Sma- small exerci- <fingers showing a small amount> =  
 did wonder right
- 
10.  
 A: <act of doing exercises> You fighting? <act of punching>  
 B: ((laugh))  
 C: = e, nani? fighting. <act of punching> Zutuki. <pointing =  
 what ((laugh)) head butt
- 
11.  
 A: Zutuki? What is zutuki? Head =  
 head butt head butt  
 B: ((laugh))  
 C: = at her head> Un zutuki. Zutuki wa: head hunting. <act of head butt>  
 yeah head butt head butt is
- 
12.  
 A: = hunting. ((laugh)) Head butt. = = Head butt.  
 B: Atama warui? Siturei desu yo.  
 head bad rude copula particle  
 C: = Head butt. = Atama warui?  
 head bad
- 
13.  
 A: <act of head butt> Do you still love your boyfriend? You love ME? Shhh =  
 B: A:: a: a: a. ((laugh))  
 I see  
 C: A:: a: a: a. I love you. ((laugh))  
 I see
- 
14.  
 A: = punch punch. <act of punching>  
 B:  
 C:

The first utterance of the interviewer in lines 1 and 2 is combination of FT and nonverbal accommodation: He gives the interviewees sufficient time between chunks of words, using deictic gestures. According to previous studies, altering the rate of speech is a major characteristic of FT (Ferguson, 1975; McCurdy, 1980; Derwing, 1987<sup>9</sup>; Terrell, 1990; Zuengler, 1991), and Adams (1998) studies gestures in FT and observes that deictic gestures are particularly helpful for NNSs. The interviewer moves his hand from the interviewee's side toward himself, meaning *tell me*, and points at the interviewees as he says *your*. Then, he reads today's topic with extra stress, which is written on a cue board both in English and Japanese. Therefore, at this stage, there is no confusion or misunderstanding on both sides, which is indicated by the interviewee's quick responses in lines 2 and 3. The answers to the inquiry *tell me your "too bad" story* are obvious to all of the participants because one of the girls is wearing a patch over her eye, and the other girl is walking on crutches. Thus, the interviewer goes on to ask what happened in line 4. He chooses to use the word *happen* without any inflectional suffix, such as *happened* or *happens*. The reduction of syntactic complexity in FT has repeatedly been reported in the literature (Ferguson, 1975; Terrell, 1990; Zuengler, 1991). As he asks this question, again he uses a deictic gesture of moving his hand from top to down, pointing at the girls' injuries. The patch and crutches are so eye-catching that the interaction starts out fairly smoothly.

At the end of line 4, where C starts to talk about what happened, the conversation moves from the here and now nature to a more complex content. She first explains it in Japanese, but noticeably, even when she is speaking in Japanese, she uses a pantomimic gesture of punching, which would not be expected if the conversation were an NS-NS interaction<sup>note2</sup>). A real challenge starts when the interviewer says, *English, please* in line 5. C keeps using the pantomimic gesture of punching as she speaks English (line 6). The interviewer's reactions are encouraging and cooperative: He provides back channel cues wherever possible (*yeah* and *oh yeah* in lines 6 and 7); and he imitates C's gesture of punching (line 7). The interviewer's question in line 7, *why fighting?*, is another example of the reduction of syntactic complexity, lacking the auxiliary verb *were* and the subject pronoun *you*.

The same utterance also shows a lexical substitution. That is, C's vocabulary item *punching* is substituted by a more appropriate word *fighting* with the pantomimic gesture of punching, which is the interviewer's imitation of C. Despite the effort of the interviewer, C does not understand his question until she gets support from B who translates the question (line 8). In line 8, the interviewer confirms that C understands the question by saying *yeah*, which also indicates that the interviewer understands Japanese. C tries to state that the cause of the fight between her and her boyfriend was a trivial matter, which results in her selecting the wrong words, *small exerci(se)* (line 9). In reacting to this mistake, the interviewer gives nonverbal corrective feedback by acting as if he is doing exercises (line 10). C is then assured of what her words meant, which is indicated by her laugh. The nonverbal corrective feedback is successful in that it makes C aware of her mistake without hurting her feelings although it is not instructive enough to indicate what word she should use instead.

A dotted vertical line in line 10 indicates an obvious editorial cutoff. *You fighting?* in line 10 again demonstrates the simplified syntax. The retrieved full sentence would be *were you fighting too?*, but the real intention would probably be *did you hit him too?*. The interviewer keeps using the word *fighting* (see also line 3) so as not to prevent C from comprehending his question. C's response, *zutuki* ('head butt'), reveals that she understands the question, but when she is asked to say the word in English, she chooses wrong words, *head hunting* (lines 10 and 11). However, her deictic and pantomimic gestures (i.e., pointing at her head and mimicking a head butt in lines 10 and 11) make herself perfectly understood. The interviewer's reaction to her mistake is a direct corrective feedback. He presents the correct words *head butt* (line 12). However, this correction is not successful, since the words are mistakenly taken as *head bad*, with which the interviewees assume that the interviewer's saying, *stupid* (line 12). The cause of the misunderstanding lies on the fact that Japanese does not distinguish the vowel [ʌ] in the word *butt* from the vowel [æ] in the word *bad*, and both vowels are perceived as [ɑ]. Brock *et al.* (1986)<sup>10</sup> report that NNSs' corrective feedback has little effect on NNSs, and the head butt instance here constitutes another



evidence for their observation. The misunderstanding, however, is cleared up with the interviewer’s gesture of a head butt (line 13).

The first interview can be concluded as a relatively successful communication in that the interviewer receives the answers to what he asks. In contrast, the second

interview, which is approximately one minute and 15 seconds in length, is unsuccessful in obtaining answers to the question, despite the various efforts both the interviewer and the interviewee make. The interviewer is again A, and the interviewee, a young man, probably in his 20’s, is B.

Interview #2

1.  
A: Uh Hello. Hi. How do you do. <hand pointing at B> Fine thank =  
B: Hello. Hi. How do you do. <hand pointing at A>

2.  
A: = you. <hand pointing at himself> And you? <hand pointing at B>  
B: Fine thank you. <hand pointing at A> And you?

3.  
A: Fine. <hand pointing at himself> Yeah, you’re fine? <hand =  
B: <hand pointing at A> Fine. <hand pointing at himself>

4.  
A: = pointing at B> I’m fine. <hand pointing at himself>  
B: You-fine? <hand pointing at A> I’m fine thank you. <hand =

5.  
A: Oh, yeah? = = Oke::y. Great. <shaking hands> Do you speak English?  
B: = pointing at himself> = yeah = <shaking hands>

6.  
A: <hand pointing at B> ((\*\*\*) Oh, all right. <shaking hands> English, E- English  
B: Akio Sekizuka. <shaking hands>

7.  
A: <hand gesture of speaking> OK? <hand gesture of OK> OK? <hand pointing at B> NO?  
B: OK. <hand gesture of OK> No.

8.  
A: Chotto? <fingers showing a small amount> Oh yeah? OK. <hand gesture =  
a little  
B: Chotto. <fingers showing a small amount> Yeah.  
a little

9.  
A: = of OK> Let’s see, whew. Please tell me <hand moving from B toward himself, then pointing at a cue board> Yeah, =  
B: Please tell me komatta.  
too bad

10.  
A: = komatta story. <hand pointing at B> Yeah. DOOZO. <hand moving from B toward himself>  
too bad please  
B: Komatta...  
too bad

11.  
A: ((laugh)) Yes. What is YOUR job? <hand pointing at B> ((laugh)) Ah, sorry. You- your job.  
B: KOMATTA. E?  
too bad what



seems to be motivated by the speaker’s stereotypical assumption on the culture of his interlocutor; that is, his belief that Americans use many gestures.

Interview segments #1 to #5 below present yet other behavioral instances in NS–NNS interactions as well as additional examples of the points made so far.

**Interview segment #1**

Participants: A = interviewer; B = high school girl

1.  
A: = Yes = Oh no. Why- why do you think <pointing at his head> =  
B: MY boyfriend = = bye bye say good bye. <waving hands>

---

2.  
A: your boyfriend = = bye bye. <waving hands> = uh-huh = Oh yeah?  
B: Dooshite hai ok. = yeah = Oh::: I face = = is uba:: . <crossing hands>  
why yes

In the first line of interview segment #1, B tries to tell that her boyfriend broke up with her. The interviewer’s words following her statement, *why- why do you think... your boyfriend ... bye bye?* illustrate some typical features of FT: Giving the NNS extra time between chunks of words, reducing grammatical complexity by omitting the verb *said*, and repeating the words that the NNS used, *boyfriend* and *bye bye*. *Your boyfriend* would be replaced by *he* in an NS–NS interaction, but A chooses not to use the pronoun. Avoiding pronouns has also been reported in the FT literature (Zuengler, 1991). Also, he uses the deictic gesture of pointing at his head as he says the word *think*. The interviewee’s reactions demonstrate that such FT is helpful to her. Given extra time, she shows her process of

digesting what the interviewer says (*Dooshite hai ok* ‘why yes ok’). The natural occurrences of *yeah* and *Oh:::* also indicate her understanding of the interviewer’s question. One curious behavior found in the example is that she invents an ideophonic word, *uba::*, which is neither Japanese nor English. She could use the Japanese word for *bad* directly or indirectly. From one point of view, the invention of the ideophonic word together with the use of the gesture of crossing hands<sup>note4)</sup> can be seen as her effort to make herself understood. From another point of view, she may just want to avoid uttering any real words that mean *bad*, referring to her own face.

Now, observe the following segment.

**Interview Segment #2**

Participants: A = interviewer; B = man in his 20’s

1.  
A: Really = = everyday =  
B: = everyday = = Oh::: I { Yes. = Uh-huh = =  
love uh::: beautiful girl = = very =

---

2.  
A: = Uh-huh = = Yes = NO. BUT many many many woman. <hand moving horizontally>  
B: = uh:::but = = she: was: married. Hmm =

A asked B to tell him his backfire situation. B's answer is his whole life. He says *everyday*, which is repeated by A in line 1 as an encouragement. A's back channel cues, *yes* and *uh-huh* in both lines, are rather deliberately articulated, which also seems to play a role in making B continue to speak. A's words in line 2, *many many many woman*, shows other typical FT features: It contains a reduplicated form, *many many many* (Ferguson, 1975) and the use of the singular *woman* in the place of the plural, and the utterance accompanies the iconic gesture which tries to show "there are many in the world."

The following segment is concerned with the NS's corrective feedback.

### Interview Segment #3

Participants: A = Interviewer; B: man in his 20's

- 
1.  
 A: English please. <hand moving from B toward himself> Yes. = Yes  
 B: English. O-o-old woman =
- 
2.  
 A: = (laugh) One =  
 B: <start using hand gestures uneasily> standing in my bath. Bath. Bath. Wh-wh-why laughing? Bath.
- 
3.  
 A: = moment. ((laugh)) Old lady standing in your bath? No. ((laugh)) Bath or bus?  
 B: Bath! Yeah, bath! Bath. Bath.
- 
4.  
 A: Bus! <gesture of holding on to a strap> Bus!  
 B: <gesture of holding on to a strap> Bath. Bath.
- 

Apparently what B means in lines 1 and 2 is that an old lady was standing on a bus. A acknowledges B's mistake by repeating his words in line 3. A repeats the words of B; that is, he omits the indefinite article *an*<sup>note5)</sup> before *old lady* and the auxiliary verb *was* before *standing*. Then, A gives an explicit corrective feedback by saying *No. Bath or bus?*. They are arguing over bath vs. bus while both mean bus and there is no confusion about it since the intended meaning is clear both by the context (i.e., it is very unlikely that an old lady is standing in your bath) and by the pantomimic gesture of holding on to a strap (line 4). The difficulty is again attributed

to vowels. Japanese does not have either [æ] nor [ʌ]. B is successful in pronouncing the non-Japanese sound [æ], but unfortunately his choice was wrong. Without having a solution for the problem, the communication goes on since the problem does not damage the essential understanding of the conveyed message.

The next segment demonstrates the case in which the interviewer's series of corrective feedback are obviously successful.



I have demonstrated so far various instances of FT and NNS's responses as well as behavioral accommodation of the NNS and their effects on the NS. Table 1 below summarizes the characteristics of accommodation in the NS-NNS interactions observed in the current study.

Table 1. The Characteristics of Accommodation in the NS-NNS Interactions

FT and Nonverbal Accommodation by the NS	Successful (+) or Unsuccessful (-)?	Behavioral Accommodation by the NNS	Successful (+) or Unsuccessful (-)?
1. Extra time between chunks of words	+	1. Pantomimic gestures	+
2. Reduction of syntactic complexity	+	2. Deictic gestures	+
3. Repetitive use of the same word	+	3. Iconic gestures	+
4. Direct/indirect corrective feedback	+ / -	4. Echoing	-
5. Frequent use of back channel cues	+	5. Guessing	-
6. Deliberate speech	+	6. Simultaneous translation	+
7. Paraphrasing	+	7. Invention of ideophonic words	+
8. Use of the NNS's language	+	8. Reference to the 'here and now'	+
9. Use of the NNS's vocabulary	+	9. Stereotypical behavior	+ / -
10. Use of reduplicated forms	+		
11. Deictic gestures	+		
12. Pantomimic gestures	+		
13. Iconic gestures	+		
14. Stereotypical behavior	+		

It should be noted that whether or not an item is successful is judged according to whether or not it has a positive effect on the succeeding communication. Those judged as unsuccessful happen to be unfortunate incidents in the data described in the current paper

and are by no means strategies to be avoided. The characteristics listed in Table 1 are facts about the NS-NNS interactions where the NNS has a very limited command of the target language.

### Conclusions

It is safe to claim that the interviews examined in this study are collaborative work by the NS and NNS. Using James' (1993) notion of convergence, the data shows maximal convergence by both sides, which can be depicted as in Figure 1. The NS's convergence is downward because the NS deliberately uses "incorrect forms" for the purpose of being simple. The NNS's convergence is depicted as an upward arrow because the NNS tries to be better in the NS's language. Their goal is mutual understanding. The NS-NNS interactions in "Karakuri Funniest English" are found to be particularly collaborative, meeting all three conditions described in

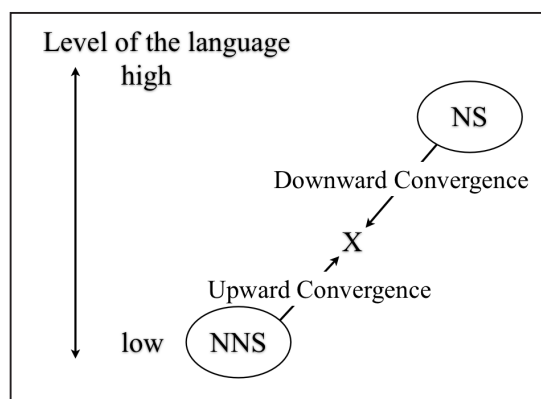


Figure 1. The Convergence Schema in the NS-NNS Interactions

Zuengler (1991). The use of FT is increased 1) when NSs have desire for communication efficiency and mutual comprehension, 2) when topics are abstract, and 3) when NNSs’ competence is low. The interviewer is strongly motivated to gain mutual comprehension because making the conversation continue is a primary part of his job. The topics treated in the show are always abstract in that they are beyond just the here and now nature. The low competence of the interviewees is key to making the interactions funny. The interviewer in the show is perhaps more motivated to have successful communication than NSs in real life conversations, and likewise, the interviewees are more cooperative than NNSs in more natural settings, due to the fact that they are on TV. It is likely that this fact plays a role in producing maximal convergence with a number of instances of the features discussed in the FT literature. It is known that the use of FT and nonverbal accommodation enhances learners’ comprehension. In addition, the study demonstrates beginning-level learners’ behavioral accommodation, which potentially helps them get better understood. Close examination on more of these features and their likeliness for success with more extensive data will certainly be worthy of attention for pedagogical purposes.

## Notes

- 1) “Karakuri Funniest English” was a segment in “Sanma’s Super Karakuri TV” broadcasted on TBS since 1996.
- 2) One possibility is the reversed roles of the NS and NNS. C, in speaking in her native language Japanese, is here the NS, and the interviewer is the NNS. Another possibility is that C accommodates her behavior while speaking Japanese at the presence of the American interviewer.
- 3) B interprets “tell me komatta (‘too bad’) story” as “articulate the word *komatta*” (line 6). Whether or not he does so on purpose is unknown, but it may be possible that he does so because he cannot think of any story on the spot.
- 4) A cross sign [X] denotes ‘bad’ or ‘incorrect.’
- 5) Japanese does not have articles, which makes it hard for Japanese learners of English to master the

English article system.

## References

- 1) James C, Accommodation in crosslanguage encounters, *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics*, **27**, 39-48 (1993).
- 2) Ferguson CA, Toward a characterization of English foreigner talk. *Anthropological Linguistics*, **17** (1), 1-14 (1975).
- 3) Mccurdy PL, Talking to foreigners: The role of rapport (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, **42** (1), 196 (1980).
- 4) Medley RM, Interethnic communication: A study of the foreigner talk of native speakers of English in conversation with nonnative speakers (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, **44** (10), 3050 (1983).
- 5) Terrell TD, Foreigner talk as comprehensive input. *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*, **1990**, 193-206 (1990).
- 6) Zuengler J, Accommodation in native-nonnative interactions: Going beyond the “what” to the “why” in second-language research, In: Contexts of Accommodation: Developments. Giles H et al. (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 223-244 (1991).
- 7) Adams TW, Gesture in foreigner talk (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, **59** (4), 1099 (1998).
- 8) Janicki K, Accommodation in native speaker-foreigner interaction, In: Interlingual and Intercultural Communication: Discourse and Cognition in Translation and Second Language Acquisition Studies. House J, Blum KS (eds.), Narr, 169- 178 (1986).
- 9) Derwing TM, Individual differences in foreigner talk: Factors in successful communication with non-native speakers (Doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, **48** (5), 1188 (1987).
- 10) Brock C, Crookes G, Day R, Long M, Differential effects of corrective feedback in native speaker-nonnative speaker conversation, In: Talking to Learn: Conversation in Second Language Acquisition. Day RR (ed.), Newbury House, 229-236 (1986).



**Appendix**  
Transcription Conventions

< >	- gestures
space	- untimed pauses
(( ))	- vocal quality
capital letters	- louder speech
:	- stretched sound
-	- halting or abrupt cutoff
=	- latching or single speaker's utterance over multiple lines
□	- overlapping utterances
.....	- editorial cutoff
((***))	- unintelligible utterances