

Question tags and response particles in Japanese interactions are quite regular ... or are they?

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Japanese is known to be a morphologically agglutinative and syntactically verb-final language. Instead of marking subjects obligatorily as English does, Japanese has a wide range of utterance-final pragmatic particles (or sentence-final particles for the written counterpart), which mark various attitudes of the speaker. Using 15 ordinary video conversations of Tokyo Japanese (collected by NINJAL-National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics), I have identified the sequences of “request for confirmation and responses” i.e. the target phenomena of this project.

As for the questions of ‘requesting confirmation,’ Hayashi (2010) identified some question-tag endings including *janai* (COP:TOP *ja*+NEG *nai*), *desho* (polite presumptive form of a copula *desu*), and a combination of final particles *yo ne* (*yo* is associated with claiming authority and *ne* with showing/seeking agreement). As for responses, while answers with response particles indicating yes (e.g., *un*, *hai*) and no (e.g. *iya*) are quite frequent, the repetition of the final part is also found regularly (Hayashi 2010).

In the following excerpt, notice that the tag-question ending in line 1 (i.e., *janai desu ka?*) receives an affirmative response consisting of a declarative version with another tag-ending *yo ne* (i.e., *desu yo ne*) in line 2. The use of *desu yo ne* (or more casual *da yo ne*) as an independent response token (line 2) to affirm someone’s preceding utterance feels fairly recent to me and some other native speakers.

Desu yo ne (line 2), though it has a polite copula form *desu* in it, would hardly be considered a full-fledged form: Normally, it would require a noun or a demonstrative form *soo* ‘that’ to be called well-formed (e.g., *soo desu yo ne* ‘that’s right’). It is suggested that the process of repetition of tag-type endings seems to have played a crucial role in the rise of *desu yo ne* and *da yo ne* as independent response particles.

The cursory observation of the combination of the question tags and response particles in the context of request for confirmation, shows that gaze and prosody are also quite relevant for an utterance to be understood as confirmation-seeking in Japanese (Hayashi 2010).

Example: (Request for confirmation/seeking agreement)

(Sugita = owner of a shop with the multi-purpose rental space; Kawauchi = a local artist who wants to start an art class using the space once or twice a month.)

1. → Sugita: yoyakusee no hoo ga kakujitsu **janai desu ka?**

reservation.system GEN way NOM assuring janai COP QFP

'Accepting people with reservation would be more assuring, wouldn't it?'

2. → Kawauchi: **desu yo ne.**

COP FP FP

'Wouldn't it?'

3. Sugita: un un un

'Yeah yeah.'

4. Kawauchi: toriaezu yoyakusei tte yuufuuni fureta

tentatively reservation.system COMP in.such.a.way touch.upon

hoo ga ii desu ne.

way NOM good COP FP

'At the moment, it would be better to mention that the class will be on a reservation basis.'

5. Sugita: un.

Yeah.

COMP=complementizer, COP=copula, FP=final particle, GEN=genitive, NOM=nominative, QFP=Question, TOP=topic

Hayashi, Makoto. 2010. An overview of the question-response system in Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42-10: 2685-2702.