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# How can we explain the differences between Japanese and English?

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# The differences between Japanese and English

- Why are they different in the way they are?
  - From the perspective of Western discourse:
    - Is Japanese discourse **irrational**?
    - Is it **serious**?
    - Is it **redundant**?
    - Is it **incoherent/inconsistent**?
    - Is it **ambiguous**?
    - Is it **non-assertive**?

- Unless we propose principles underlying Japanese discourse, we must resort to models prescribed by Euro-American academic disciplines. If we do this, we can only conclude that the Japanese discourse behaves mysteriously.
- Japanese discourse can be explained logically and coherently if **ba perspective** is employed.

# What is *ba* perspective?

- *Ba* contains the underlying principles and justification for such claims as those presented in:
  - 1) 'Thinking in the Forest' (Suzuki 1978)
  - 2) 'The insect view' (Kanatani 2002, Nakashima 2008)
- Thinking habits:
  - non-objective
  - non-linear
  - non-cause-effect
  - non-dichotomous
  - non-reductionism

# What is *ba* perspective?

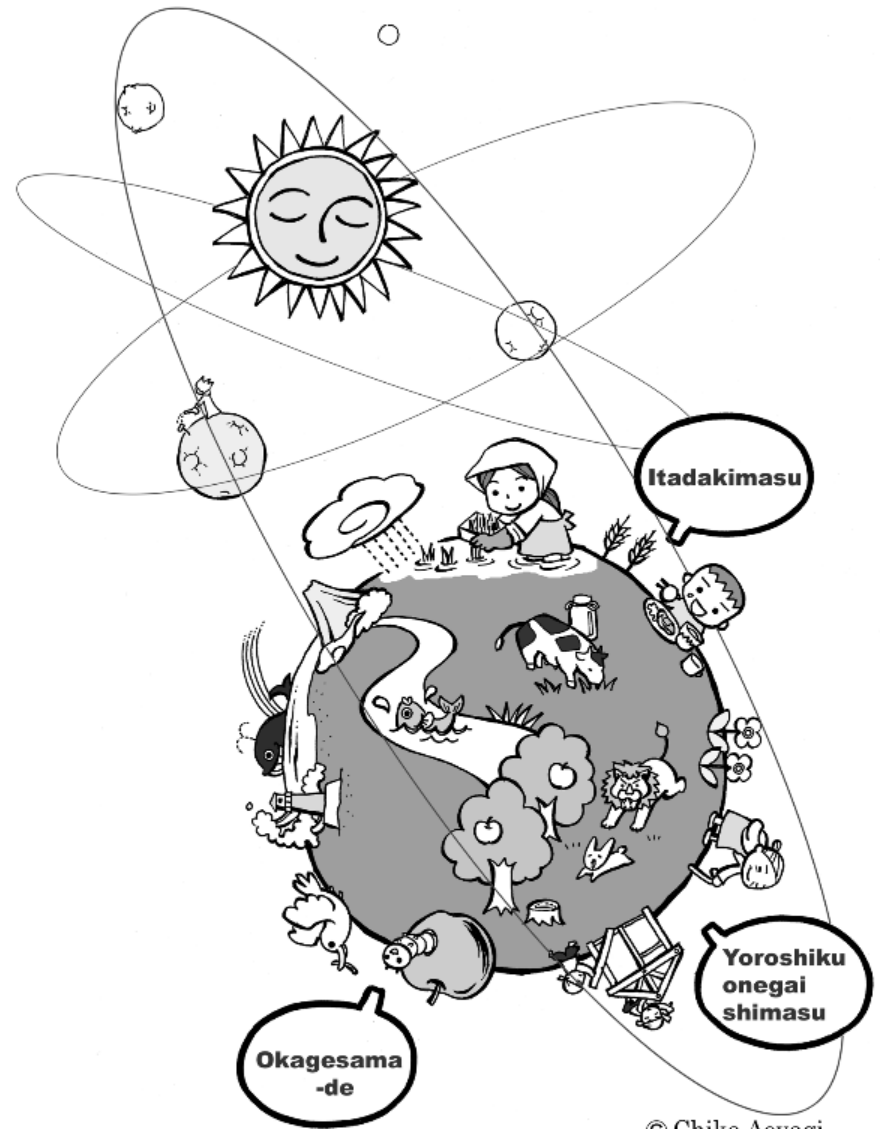
- It is to observe phenomena from subjective perspective.
- It is in contrast to the objective perspective prescribed by orthodox theory.
- It is **a super scientific perspective.**
  - ⇒ A new perspective more relevant to the reality of the current globe

Analogy in physics:

- Newtonian vs. quantum field physics



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An egocentric view of the globe

A 'ba' based view of the globe

How can we apply *ba*-oriented perspective to discourse interpretations?

## FIVE ASSUMPTIONS ON THE LOGIC OF *BA*

- 1) **Subjective** perspective
- 2) Static model of **dual domains of self**
- 3) Dynamic model **of improvised drama**
- 4) **Covert communication** as well as overt communication
- 5) **Self-organization** as the operational key

## (1) Subjective perspective

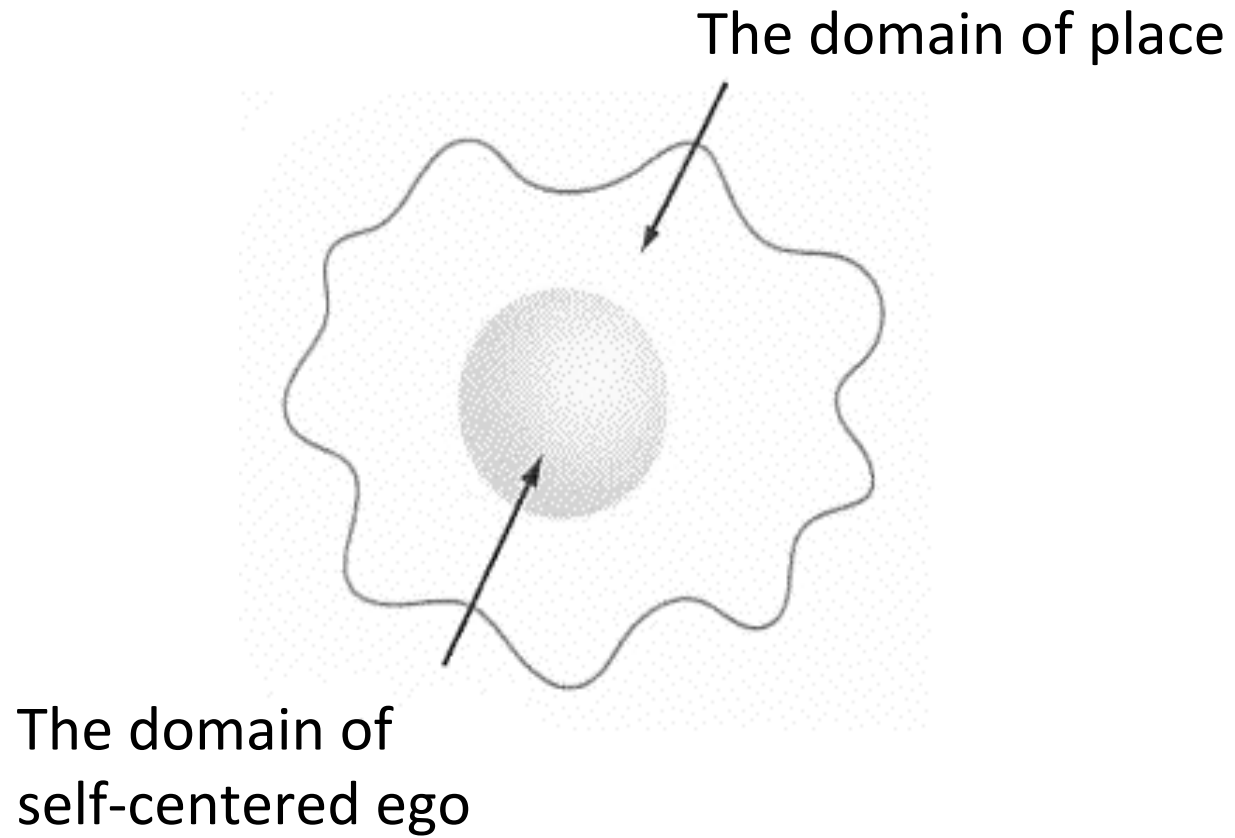
- The researcher/the observer identifies him/herself with the speaker/the protagonist/the addressee.
- The researcher/the speaker embeds him/herself in the *ba* (context of speaking).



## (2) The researcher/observer assumes the static model of dual domains of self

- The domain of self-centered ego
- The domain of place – ubiquitous self
- The borderline of the self is NOT the skin of the body.

# The self model: Egg metaphor



### (3) The researcher/observer assumes a dynamic model of improvised drama

- Things/phenomena change from moment to moment.
- Changes are made according to the ongoing interaction of the participants.
- The role of the audience in this drama is to motivate changes of the story.
- This is what is happening in real life.

#### (4) The researcher assumes covert communication in addition to overt communication

- Silence is not mere lack of content in communication but has meaning.
- Non-verbal signs are parts of discourse elements:
  - rhythm
  - gesture
  - eye-gaze
  - nodding
  - distance of interactants etc.

## (5) Self-organization: Operational key for *ba*

- **Self-organization** is the spontaneous often seemingly purposeful formation of spatial, temporal, spatiotemporal structures or functions in systems composed of few or many components.
- It is increasingly recognized that even the human brain may be considered as a self-organizing system, including its use in human communicative activities.

How can we explain the differences  
between Japanese and English discourse?

Explanations in terms of  
*ba*-oriented perspective

# Kawasoe: Viewpoints in Japanese and English

## Narrative Fluidity and Consistency

### Japanese

- narrate from three viewpoints;
  - narrator's viewpoint
  - the white circle's viewpoint
  - the yellow circle's viewpoint
- always end their narratives from the narrator's viewpoint

### English

- consistently narrate from the narrator's viewpoint
- Only half of the English speakers used “that was the story” to finish their narratives

# Is the Japanese narrator inconsistent?: What does 'fluidity' mean?

- From the perspective of *ba* assumption (1)
  - The Japanese narrator takes subjective perspective  
⇒ She narrates from three viewpoints depending on the foci, i.e. the narrator and the protagonists. Also, at the end of the narration the narrator returns to the objective perspective and ends the story.
- From the perspective of *ba* assumption (3)
  - The researcher assumes the model of improvised drama: the things change from moment to moment  
⇒ 'fluidity'



# Kudo: Topic Shifts in English and Japanese

- Number of main topics and subtopics

	<b>Total number of topics</b>	<b>Main topic</b>	<b>subtopic</b>
English	47	77%	23%
Japanese	125	21%	79%

# Why do Japanese speakers shift topics frequently? Why do they shift subtopics so frequently?

- From *ba* assumption (1)
  - Having subjective perspective, they have no birds-eye perspective to maintain the topic coherently.
- From *ba* assumption (3)
  - The perspectives change from moment to moment.
- From *ba* assumption (2)
  - The speaker and the addressee has inclination to share the domain of self.

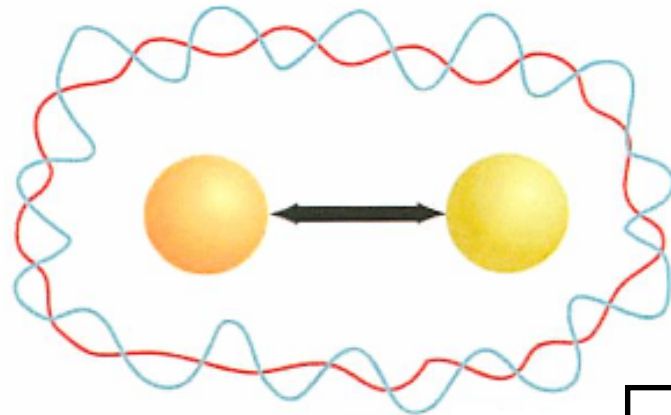
# Machi: Repeating for Unity of Mind

- Having no “I” or “you,” speakers cannot tell whether the repeater is talking about her own feelings or the initiator’s.
- This ambiguity makes the sentence lack information.
- At the same time, this ambiguity strongly facilitates the two participants’ unity of mind.
- Speakers **do not have to draw a clear boundary** between “my feelings” or “your feelings,” but can make it “our feelings.”
- Unspecified subjects in Japanese make **participants’ feelings accessible and sharable**, and thus it is easy for sympathizing repetition to occur.

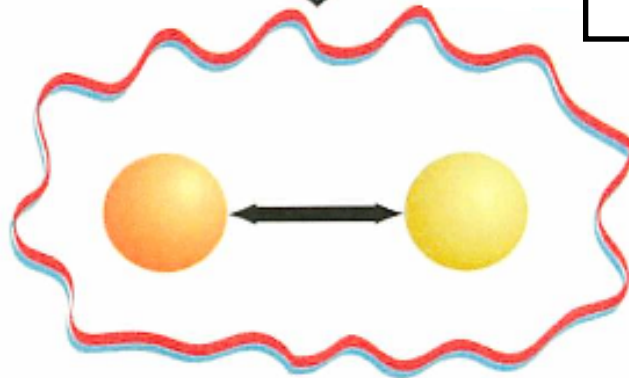
# Why is the inclination of unity of mind found in Japanese discourse?

- From *ba* assumption (2) and (5)
- The domain of selves in two speakers self-organizes and creates the common domain to share *ba*.

# Shimizu's egg model of self



The self-organization of  
the domain of place



The sharing of *ba*

# Kobayashi: When and How Are Backchannels Used?

The different stances towards communication

<Japanese>

- Conversation is something that has to be constructed by the participants.  
⇒ Cooperation and establishment of a social relationship with others

<English>

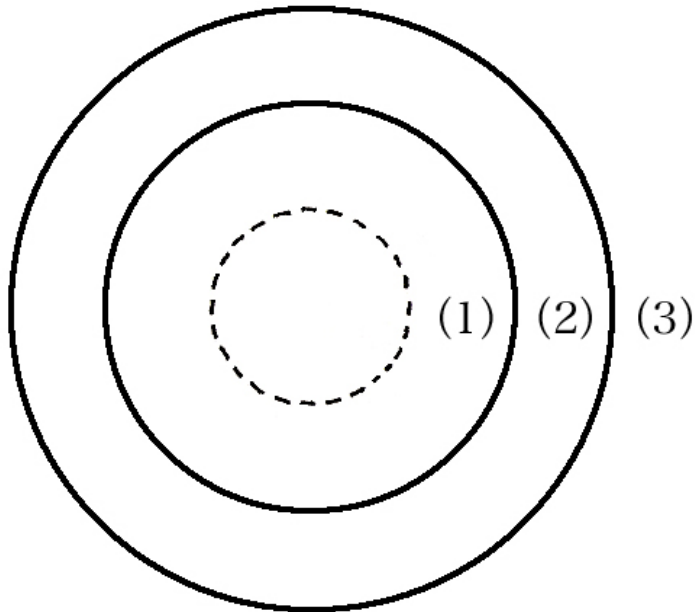
- Exchanging information and stating what the speakers want to say are important.  
⇒ Independence and individualism

# Why Japanese speakers have a different stance from English speakers?

- From *ba* assumption (2)
  - Japanese speakers are more inclined to share the domain of place.
- Why?
  - It is because of the differences in the structural construal of the selves between Japanese and English as shown in the following figures.

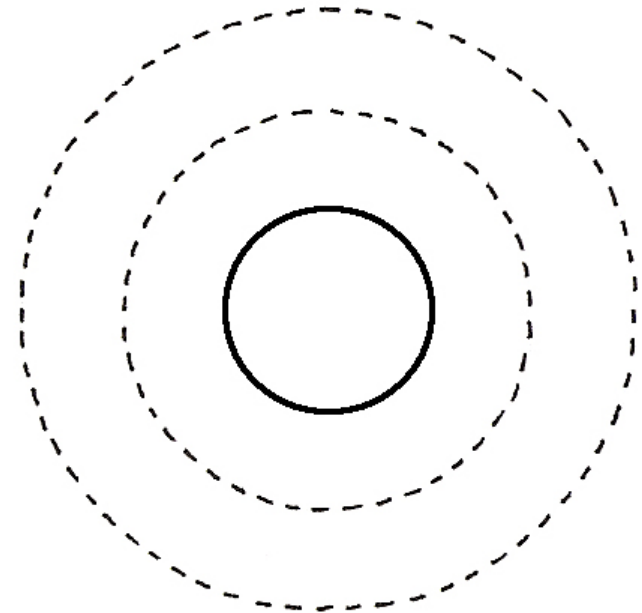
# Structural construal of self in Japanese and Americans

Japanese



- (1) *uchi* (ingroup)
- (2) *soto* (outgroup)
- (3) *soto no soto* or *yoso*  
(outside of outgroup)

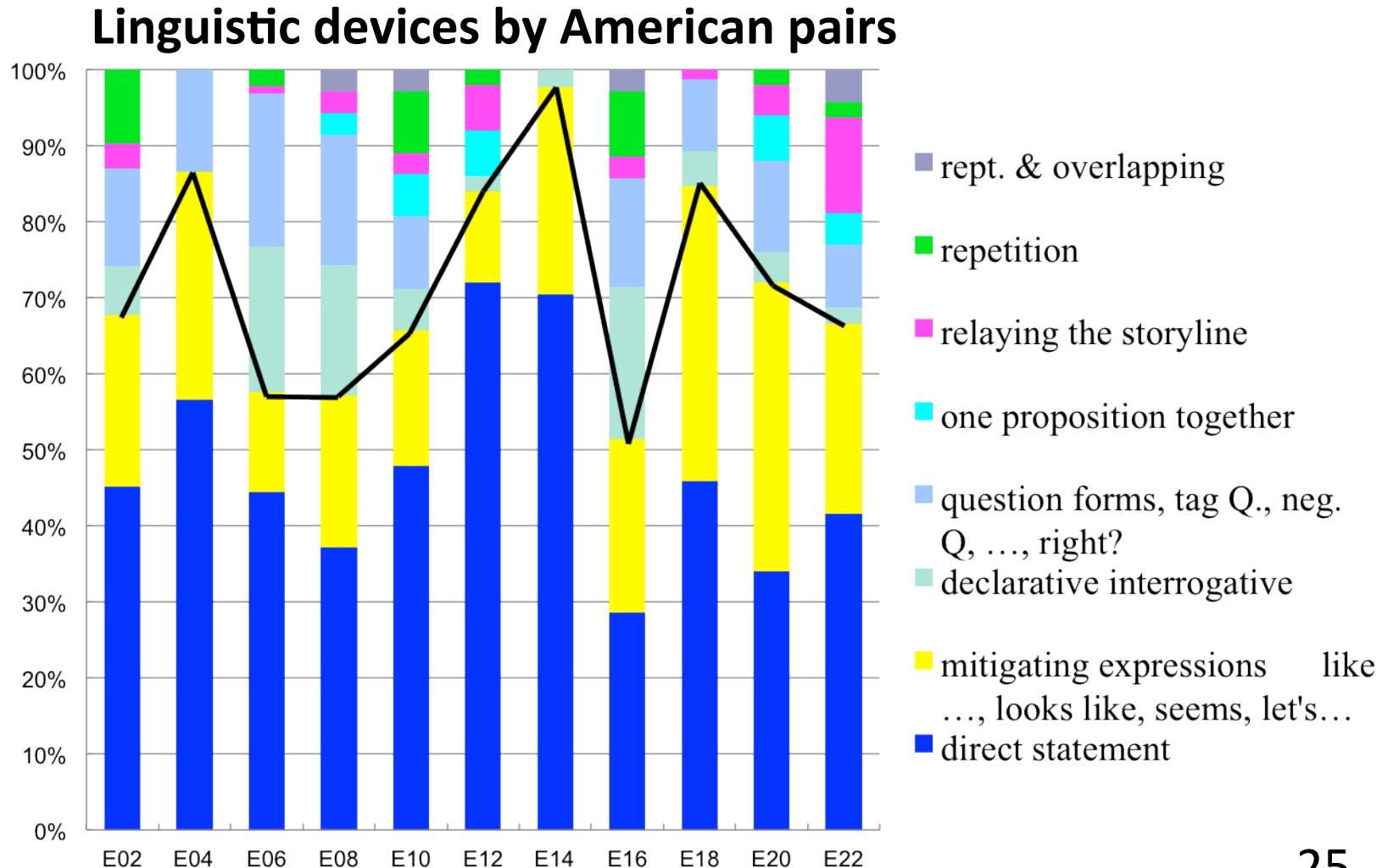
Americans



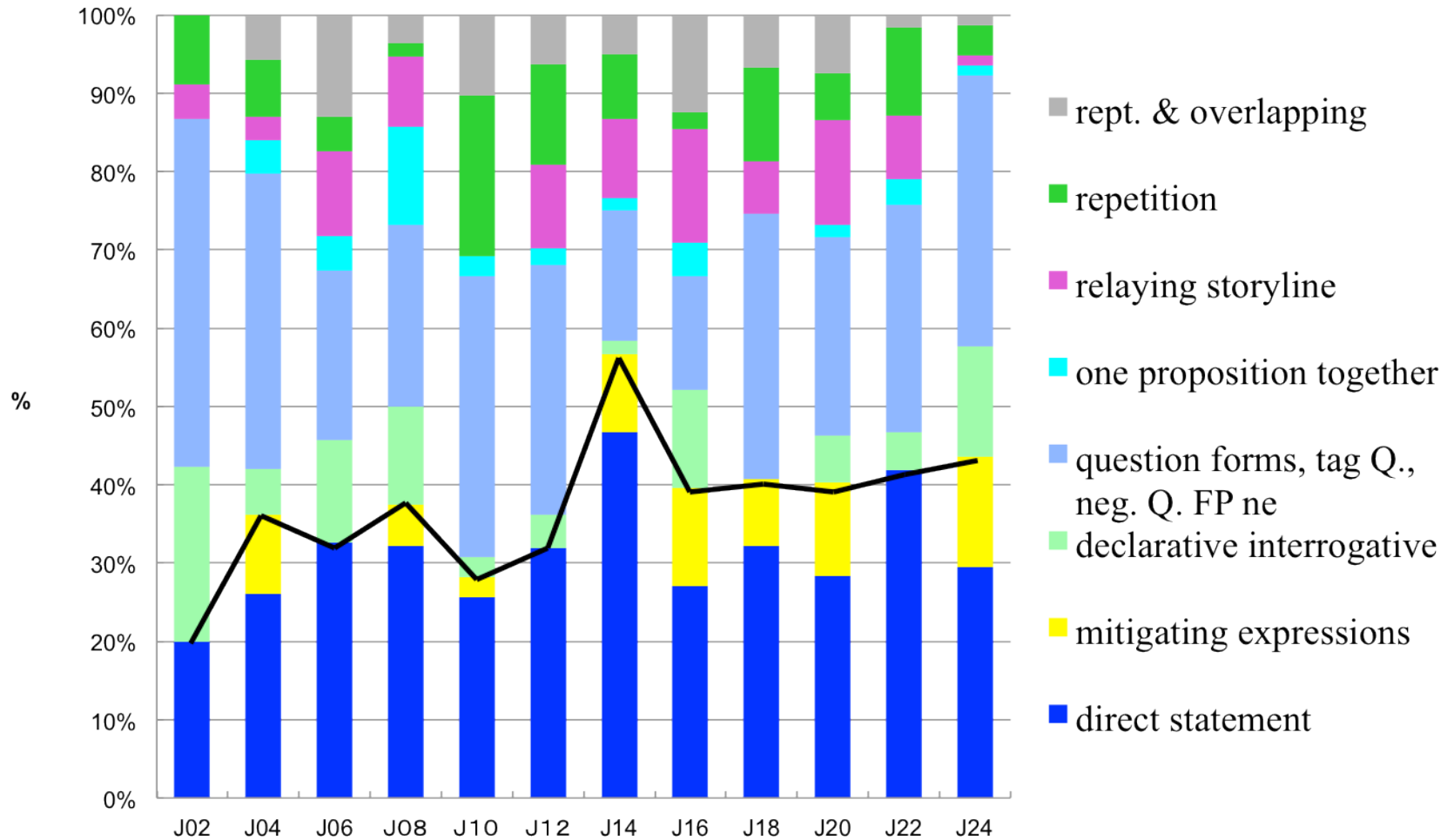
Ide (2012)



# Fujii: The Differences of Situating Self in the Place/*Ba* of Interaction between J. and A.



# Figure 3: Linguistic devices by Japanese pairs



# Why do Japanese speakers use so much linguistic devices of mitigation?

- Mitigating expressions:
  - repetitions
  - questions
  - declarative interrogative
- From *ba* assumption (2)
  - Japanese speakers are more likely to share *ba* between interactants.
  - Mitigating expressions are devices to negotiate interactional relationships between interlocutors.

# Ueno: Social Indexicality of Question-Asking in Japanese Teacher-Student Conversation

- The teacher asks questions to the student for social indexing of the vertical complementary roles.
- From *ba* perspective (1)(2)(5)
  - In the beginning there is *ba*, where individuals exist with subjective perspective.
  - The teacher interacts with the student in the shared *ba*, where self-organization in the domain of place operates and stabilizes the scheme of social system of the Japanese society.

## Nomura: Differences of Narrating Thoughts and Emotions of the Characters in E. and J. Narratives

- Emotive adjectives can be used to describe the feeling of others in English but not in Japanese.
- The Japanese speakers believe ‘Thoughts and emotion can only be felt by that person, and they can never be experienced by other people.’

## From *ba* perspective (1)

- The English speaker takes objective perspective, and therefore can describe feelings of other persons objectively.
- The Japanese speaker takes subjective perspective in speaking. He/she can describe his/her own feelings. However, they cannot know the feelings of others as they do not have objective perspective.

# Summary

- From the perspective of western orthodox thinking:
  - Is Japanese discourse *mysterious*?
  - Is Japanese discourse *ambiguous*?
  - Is Japanese discourse *not serious*?

- The answer is **NO**.
- The Japanese discourse can be interpreted reasonably, when the perspective of *ba* is employed.
- The *ba* perspective is a challenging one that copes with the complex phenomena of our everyday lives.
- It is therefore significant to observe and interpret natural discourse from *ba* perspective.



# Acknowledgement

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