

The Japanese Discourse Particle *Maa*

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要旨

「まあ」の分析

日常会話の中で頻繁に使われる「まあ」には国語辞典には表記されていない用途もあり、日本語学習者にとっては耳慣れた言葉でも使いにくいものであるように思う。ここでは、「まあ」を英語の"oh" "well" "sort of"と比較しながら、「まあ」の、話者だけが知り得る話者の世界と、聞き手を巻き込んだ話者と聞き手によって共用された世界とを結び付けるという役割を中心に、その性質を分析してみた。

1. Introduction

The Japanese discourse particle *maa* frequently appears in daily conversation in various usages, according to the contextual situation in which the particle is embedded. A dictionary, such as *Nippon Daijiten: Gensen*, however, only gives the definition of *maa* as an adverb, which is derived from *Kyogen*, a Noh farce, and as an interjection.

In this paper, by comparing the Japanese discourse particle *maa* with the English discourse particles *oh*, *well*, and *sort of*, I will try to examine the detailed function of *maa*. I will focus on the usages that are not defined in the dictionary, for example as a modifier of the speech act and as an indicator that the speaker has internally consulted in his or her private world.

2. 'Oh', 'Well', and 'Maa'

2.1. Interjection

Lawrence Schourup (1983) states that *oh* and *well* are evincives. He contends that an evincive is a linguistic item that expresses "thinking is now occurring or has just now occurred but does not completely specify its content" (Schourup 14). He claims that there are three worlds in discourse: (1) the private world which holds the speaker's inner thoughts at the moment of discourse, thoughts that the speaker may or may not utter; (2) the shared world, which includes the speaker's inner thoughts that the speaker uttered in order to share them with the addressee; (3) the other world which holds the addressee's inner thoughts that cannot be seen by the speaker.

Deborah James (1978) divides *oh* into two usages, *oh*₁ and *oh*₂. She states that *oh*₁ occurs at the beginning of sentences and indicates that the speaker has just found out or realized something with intonation indicating surprise or some other emotion. However, the

word oh1 itself does not express what the thought is. It is an evincive to indicate the speaker's emotional movement in the private world. The function of maa, as an interjection - the definition which the dictionary gives - is similar to that of the evincive, oh1. The difference is that maa in this usage seems to be used more often by women than men. Maa in this usage is usually followed by a description of the speaker's thought, and explanation for the reason of the speaker's sudden emotional realization.

- (1a) Maa, maitta naa.
'Maa, [that was] awful!'
- (1b) Maa, irasshaimase.
'Maa, you are welcome.'
- (1c) Maa, sore wa sore wa taihen osewani natte orimasu.
'Maa, I see, I'm very thankful to [your husband].'

It can also occur by itself without an explanation. This might indicate that the speaker is too surprised or too emotional to organize her inner thought and display it in the shared world.

- (1d) A: Kinoo Hanako ga kootsujiko ni atta n da.
'Yesterday, Hanako had an automobile accident.'
- B: Maa!

2.2. Choosing the most appropriate alternatives

The function of maa as an adverb mazu 'first of all' - one of the definitions the dictionary gives - is similar to that of the combination of oh2 and well. James states that oh2 indicates that the speaker is choosing one thing out of several possibilities or choosing one description out of several possible descriptions. Oh2 indicates that there are other alternatives, which the speaker has not specified, none of which is the correct one. James claims that well indicates that not all of the information which the addressee might need is given in what the speaker is saying. The speaker chooses the most appropriate or approximate description.

Schourup emphasizes the function of well as the speaker's inner consultation. He claims that "well indicates that the speaker, at the time well is uttered, is consulting his or her current thoughts" (Schourup 102).

Maa also seems to express that the speaker is choosing the most appropriate possibility out of several other alternatives at the moment of discourse, after the speaker internally consulted in the private world. The speaker also knows that his or her choice is neither correct nor absolute.

- (2a) Maa yatte minasai yo.
'Maa, why don't you try [it]?'
(2b) Maa, otagai ni osaete.
'Maa, calm down, you two'
(2c) Ii toka warui toka jya nakute, sore wa maa oitoite.
'It's not a matter of good or bad. Let's, maa, leave it for now as it is.'
(2d) A: Watashi wa kore de shitsurei shimasu.
'Excuse me, I'll leave now.'
B: Maa maa, soo iwazu ni watashi no hanashi o kiite kudasai.
'Maa maa, don't say that, and please listen to what I have to say.'

The speakers' intention to use maa in these examples is that they are merely suggesting one option out of several other alternatives since these are not situations in which there is only one right thing to do. However, at the same time, the speakers think that the choices they make are the most appropriate possibility among the other alternatives. For example, in (2a), it seems that there is another alternative in the speaker's private world, such as 'not to try.' However, the speaker chooses to utter 'try' since she believes that it is the most appropriate option, although she does not know whether her choice of 'try' is right, compared to 'not to try.' Neither of the alternatives, 'try' or 'not to try,' in this case, is correct nor absolute.

2.3. Displeasure

There are some other usages of maa as inner consultation. Within the generalized function of well as the speaker's internal consultation, there are several more detailed function of well which are derived from the function as inner consultation. Schourup claims that they indicate: (1) displeasure; (2) "self-repair"; (3) attention getter; (4) hesitation. These functions are the result of the speaker's inner consultation which is exhibited in the shared world by the speaker in the most effective manner.

Julia Goldberg explains the first detailed function of well which is claimed to express the speaker's displeasure. She states that "well prefaced acknowledgment of the other's repair convey a sense of impatience or displeasure" (Schourup 60). There is a similar usage in Japanese.

- (3a) A: Kore de ii de shoo ka?
'Is this all right?'
B: Maa, ii de shoo.
'Maa, it's all right.'

(3b) Maa ii yo. Ore wa saiaku sore demo.

'Maa, that's OK, if it is for the worst situation.'

The speaker B in (3a) expresses her displeasure of the result of A's action, although she accepts it. The speaker in (3b) also reluctantly accepts the unfavorable result.

2.4. Self-repair

The second function of well which is claimed to indicate "self-repair" is that the word well itself does not carry the meaning of repair, and it is found "after a repairable item and before a correction" (Schourup 56). Schourup also cites from Goldberg's work which introduces J. W. DuBois's claim that "the repair following a well of this kind 'embodies a modification from the less accurate, more excessive, flamboyant or exaggerated to the more moderate and accurate'" (Schourup 56). Maa also has this type of function.

(4a) A: Jya. Eruee kara Osaka?

'Then, from LA to Osaka?'

B: Uun, Hawaii ni yoru no. Maa, moshi okane ga nokoreba no hanashi da kedo.

'No, [I]'ll stop at Hawaii. Maa, if [I] had some money left...'

(4b) Anpu, preeyaa, maa mazu naimono wa nai ne.

'An amplifier, a player, maa, everything is there.'

(4c) Oshibai shitete, rehaasaru shitari, maa, honban mo arimasu kedo...

'When I act, during a rehearsal, maa, there is also actual performing...'

(4d) Seishin seii maa kesshite kui no nai yoo ni.

'Do your best, maa, in order not to regret it later.'

In these cases, maa indicates that, at the moment of discourse, the speaker was thinking in the private world whether he or she should suspend the presupposition or not. Then the speakers decide to repair their presupposition in order to make their statement "more moderate and accurate." The discourse particle maa strengthens the notion that the speaker has been internally consulting his or her thought in the private world at the moment of discourse.

2.5. Topic shift and tying the present utterance to the next

The third function of well, which belongs to the category of inner consultation, is claimed to be an attention getter. Schourup states that well functions as a signal of changing a topic. An evincive, well, indicates the speaker's unseen inner consultation in the private world in order to justify his or her abrupt topic shift in discourse. By uttering the evincive,

well, "the speaker can imply that the shift is considered one and, by announcing that the consideration is occurring, invites the interlocutor to fill in some reasonable motive for the shift"(Schourup 53). Schourup also cites Goldberg's claim that there are cases in which well functions as a binder between the previous event and the current event. Goldberg states that "well marked moves are essentially 'backward looking' with a forward looking disposition," and they "tie the current utterance-unit back to the prior utterance unit(s) while providing information which progresses the conversation into next phase" (Schourup 53).

Schourup concludes that this type of well functions as "topic shifts, preclosing, closing, and changes from introductory to topic talk" (Schourup 54).

In a way similar to this type of well, maa as an attention getter also seems to appear in a situation in which it initiates: (1) a topic shift or (2) a tying of the present utterance with the previous one. At the same time maa guides the conversation into the "next phase" in both cases.

The function of maa as initiating a topic shift can be illustrated at situations as follows:

- (5a) Maa kichi to deru ka kyoo to deru ka ashita no kaigi ga tanoshimi desu na.
'Maa, whether [this] will work out or not, I'm looking forward to tomorrow's meeting.'
- (5b) A: Sore wa taihen mezurashii koto da to omou n desu ga...
'I think that is very rare, but...'
B: Maa. Kuni-san no kao o mitereba nee.
'Maa, if you keep looking at Kuni-san's face, don't you agree?'
- (5c) Maa de mo nani. gure zuni sa, chobitto gureta kedo, ganbatta yo na.
'Maa, what should I say, without becoming a big trouble to others, although I was bad for a little while, we did do our best, didn't we.'
- (5d) Shoorai wa doo suru n desu ka.
'What's [your] future plan?'
Maa tonikaku ganbatte kudasai.
'Maa, at any rate, good luck to you.'

Maa in these cases implies that the speaker's intention of changing the topic is not abrupt, but it has instead already been considered in the speaker's private world. By uttering maa, the speaker allows the addressee to enter into his private world in order to justify his topic shift and take the topic into the next stage.

2.6. Hesitation

The fourth function of maa as inner consultation indicates the speaker's hesitation to utter the rest of the sentence; therefore, the speaker eliminates or omits the sentences which indicate what exactly is in his or her mind.

(6a) A: Katei to shokuba wa hanashite okitaitte koto?

'You mean that you want to separate your home life and your working place?'

B: Ec, maa...

(6b) A: Matsuyama wa yoku?

'Does Matsuyama [come here] often?'

B: Ec.

'Yes.'

A: Itsumo hitori?

'Always [come here] alone?'

B: Maa...

'Maa...'

(6c) A: Aayuu no doo omoimasu?

'What do you think about such a scene?'

B: Iya, maa...

A: Watashi wa kirai da na.

'I don't like it.'

(6d) A: Aa, mendoomi no ii kata da.

'Oh, you take care of others so well.'

B: Maa...

(6e) A: Shinkon-san desu ka.

'Are you two newly weds?'

B: Ec, maa...

All the examples of (6a), (6b), (6c), (6d) and (6e) show that the speakers have not expressed themselves fully, but instead have avoided displaying what they feel in their private world. It may be that the speakers do not wish to offend the addressees who think differently, so, they withdraw from continuing further as in (6a) and (6c). It may be that the speakers are internally consulting how they should continue or discontinue their speech in order to share opinions or feelings as in (6b) and (6d).

This maa can also indicate the speaker's displeasure at being asked about something which he or she regards as a private issue and not appropriate for the addressee to ask the

speaker. In the case of (6e), the speaker express that he does not wish to discuss the topic, by using maa.

3. 'Sort of' and 'Maa'

3.1. Hedge

The last function of maa is maa as a hedge. This type of maa can be compared with sort of, a de intensifier in English. George Lakoff (1972) claims that sort of as "a predicate modifier" which "takes values that are true or close to true and makes them false while uniformly raising values in the low to mid range of the scale, leaving the very low range of the scale constant" (Lakoff 195). he explains this, using the degree in "birdness."

- (a) A robin is sort of a bird.
- (b) A chicken is sort of a bird.
- (c) A penguin is sort of a bird.
- (d) A bat is sort of a bird.
- (e) A cow is sort of a bird.

(Lakoff 195)

In the degree scale of truthfulness, both (a) and (e) are false and are constantly marked at "the very low range of the [birdness] scale." On the other hand, in the cases of (b), (c), and (d), the degree of birdness of the statements varies between low and middle range of the scale. The de intensifier, sort of, places the degree of birdness of "a chicken" at the range where it is "very close" to the truth in the scale. It places "a penguin" at the range where it is "close to" the truth, and "a bat" "pretty close to false." Lakoff states that, in order to use the predicated modifier, sort of, effectively and to understand the speaker's intention, both the speaker and the addressee need to "be able to make an underlying distinction in degree of birdness between robins on the one hand and chickens and penguins on the other" (Lakoff 195). The functions of sort of depends on such a distinction and indicates that the statement is "true to a certain degree" (Lakoff 210). The degree of the value depends on the range of distinction and the standard which the speaker and the addressee share.

Maa as a hedge functions a little differently than sort of. Maa measures its statement on the scale of truthfulness, and superficially "takes values that are true or close to true and makes them false" in order to weaken its actual truth value. It is to avoid declaring the statement straight forwardly for whatever reason. This maa works as a cushion.

(7a) A: 26 nichī ni kuuseki ga deru kamo shiremasen yo ne.

'There is a possibility that 26th might later be open, isn't it?'

B: Ec... Demo maa dame de shoo ne.

'Yes... But maa it probably won't.'

(7b) A: Ashita asa hayai n da kedo...

'[I] need to get up early tomorrow morning...'

B: Maa ii jyanai. Ikimashoo yo.

'Maa, it's OK. Let's go.'

By uttering maa, B in both (7a) and (7b) makes the statement sound as if it were false even though it is true. This maa marks the statement following it as false, placing the degree of its falsehood between the range of low and middle in the scale, not as absolute. As a result, B changes the value of the statement with a degree that ranges from low to middle in a scale.

However, as maa does not have the power to raise the value of the statement to the highest degree on a scale and thus changes it into an absolute false, an opposite meaning. When B in (7a) said, 'maa dame de shoo,' both A and B recognize that B only intends to soften the negativity of the statement since B knows that it is not what A wants to hear.

In the case of (7b), too, the speaker B places the degree of the statement, 'ijyanai,' not at the highest of a scale but somewhere along the range from low to middle. As B fully understands the reason why A hesitates to go, she cannot say 'ijyanai' with the highest quality in a value scale without adding maa and setting it in a lower level of a scale. B uses maa in order to display her consideration for A's situation while still encouraging A to go with her.

3.2. Indication of degree

Maa as a "predicate modifier" can be used to indicate the mere degree of the conditions by itself.

(7c) A: Tesuto doo datta?

'How was the test?'

B: Maa maa datta.

'It was maa maa.'

(7d) A: Sochira no yoosu wa doo desu ka.

'How is the situation over there?'

B: Un. Maa maa da.

'It is maa maa.'

(7e) A: Suki na tabemono wa?

'What's your favorite food?'

B: Karasu

'Crow.'

A: Maa maa omoroi.

'It's maa maa funny.'

Using the scale of maa as a "predicate modifier", maa as a degree indicator points out the level which range from low to middle in a scale. In (7c), B's assessment of how well he did on the test ranges from low to middle in a scale with the highest degree as the best. Similar to the usage of sort of, in order to determine the specific level in the scale of maa, the speaker and the addressee need to share the same standard. Generalizing about Japanese, one could say that Japanese tend to display themselves with the degree which is lower than the actual level in a scale. The degree which is shown in the shared world might be lower than the degree in the private world.

This usage of maa cannot be used before a statement in which there is no range in its value to be modified by a "predicate modifier," or in cases where there are no other alternatives from which to choose, or where there is no reason for a speaker to hesitate in uttering a statement. For example:

(8a) *Kyoo wa doyoobi de, ashita wa maa nichiyooobi desu.

'Today is Saturday, and tomorrow is maa Sunday.'

The speaker cannot place the degree of logical fact between the range from low to middle in a value scale. As the statement, 'tomorrow is Sunday,' is an absolute truth without any alternatives, the degree of its truth value in a scale can only be at the highest quality. The speaker also does not need to hesitate to utter the mere fact that 'tomorrow is Sunday.'

(8b) Situation: This example is not uttered to inform Taro's death to someone.

*Kinoo Taro ga maa nakunatta.

'Yesterday, Taro maa died.'

The state of 'being dead' does not allow maa to vary between a range from low to middle in the scale of death. Logically, there would be no degree in the state of death. For example:

*He is deader than she.

*He is the deadest of all.

4. Conclusion

After examining various usages of the Japanese discourse particle maa in actual contexts, one could conclude that maa essentially functions as an evincive which indicates that the speaker is internally consulting, and it enables to modify the speech act. Maa is used as a tool to connect the speaker's private world to the shared one.

The degree indicated by maa in the shared world may be lower than where the speaker locates himself or herself in the private world, due to the modesty which Japanese commonly exhibit.

References

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Japanese TV Drama

- Furuhata Ninzaburou vs. SMAP (3b) (6d)
Futari no siisoo game (1b) (1c) (4d) (5a) (6a) (6b) (6c) (6c) (7d)
Hagure keiji (2d)
HEY! HEY! HEY! (7c)
Kita no kuni kara no subete - arekara 15 nen (1a) (2b) (4c) (5b) (5c)
Kita no kuni kara '95 Himitsu (2c) (4b)