

## *Hai* as Vague Language

Enid Lee

College of Global and Regional Culture, Okinawa International University

elee@okiu.ac.jp

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the nature of *hai* pronounced with a fall-rise intonation (hereafter *Hai(FR)*) in Japanese spoken discourse from the perspective of vague language (VL) elasticity. The study shows that *Hai(FR)* is in the process of becoming more “stretchable” with regard to its pragmatic meaning and communicative function and produces the strategic effect of achieving politeness, both positive and negative.

### **Keywords**

Vague language, elasticity, Japanese

### **Introduction**

Many researchers have noted that speaking vaguely is an integral part of communication and that it can be manipulated to serve multiple functions (e.g. Channell, 1994; Cutting, 2007). Although there has been growing interest in VL research over the past two decades, it remains an understudied area of inquiry. This study attempts to examine the elasticity of *Hai(FR)* as a vague expression in Japanese interactions.

### **1 Vague language and elasticity**

VL, also known as “elastic language” (Zhang, 2015), refers to a linguistic unit with no clear-cut meaning. VL has versatile pragmatic functions such as giving the right amount of information, strengthening, mitigating, showing intimacy and solidarity, and self-distancing. Zhang argues that VL is essentially “elastic” because it can be “stretched and negotiated to suit moment-to-moment communicative needs.... The interlocutors in interaction co-construct the understanding of VL” (2011: 573). In Zhang’s model, the functions of VL elasticity are divided into “cooperation” and “noncooperation” types and a new analysis typology is used to cover a wider range of VL under four “stretcher” categories: quality, quantity, magnitude, and epistemic. This study suggests that the Japanese

*Hai(FR)* constitutes a new stretcher category, namely, prosody.

### **2 The study**

The data for this study were obtained from an 80-hour TV corpus consisting of 69 episodes of *Aibou*, a long-running TV drama series, and a questionnaire survey (N=46 adult Japanese native speakers) aimed at identifying attitudes toward the use of *Hai?(FR)* as a response form in conversation and its possible interpretations. *Hai(FR)* is generally regarded as impolite and disrespectful (Kitagawa, 1980) but a qualitative analysis of the data shows that it can be used to express positive and negative politeness. Like other VL items that have been analyzed in previous studies, the interpretation of *Hai(FR)* depends on a variety of pragmatic factors and it may serve multiple functions. For the sake of clarity, each illocutionary force and communicative function is treated separately to the extent possible, but in practice they tend to overlap.

### **3 Illocutionary forces**

Based on the TV data, six types of illocutionary forces were identified: (I) A response when one is called. (II) An exclamation of surprise/disbelief/curiosity/skepticism. (III) A request for repetition/confirmation/clarification. (IV) A request for further information. (V) A request for specific information. (VI) A comment on what was just said, a way of denying/objecting to the previous utterance or a verbal signal to indicate that one is confused or speechless.

### **4 Communicative functions**

*Hai?(FR)* was found to participate in five types of communicative functions: (A) A direct response to someone who just called one’s name or wanted to start a conversation. (B) An expression of one’s emotions such as surprise,

shock, confusion, annoyance, or disdain. (C) A back-channeling cue to indicate that one is listening. (D) A back-channeling signal to indicate agreement or disagreement. (E) A turn-assigning or -releasing device to elicit further information regarding the topic at hand, repetition, clarification, or confirmation of what was said by the interlocutor.

### 5 Discussion and Conclusion

Data obtained from the questionnaire reveal how native speakers make sense of *Hai?(FR)* in different situations. The questionnaire included six conversational excerpts taken from different episodes of *Aibou*. Participants were asked to paraphrase *Hai?(FR)* in each excerpt based on their own understanding of the situations and speculation of the speaker’s meaning. A total of 272 responses were collected and 140 different paraphrases were identified, i.e., an average of 23 paraphrases out of 45 responses per excerpt. The paraphrases fall into five meaning types corresponding to Types II-VI in Section 3, and some clearly carry a double meaning (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of responses for each conversational excerpt by meaning type

Ex.	II	III	IV	V	VI	II-III	II-V	II-VI	IV-V	Total
Ex.1	10	1	18	4	-	13	-	-	-	46
Ex.2	21	9	-	8	3	5	3	-	-	49
Ex.3	10	28	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	41
Ex.4	9	27	-	1	3	4	-	-	-	44
Ex.5	4	8	-	22	7	1	4	-	-	46
Ex.6	7	2	1	26	-	2	5	2	1	46
Total	61	75	19	60	13	28	12	2	1	272

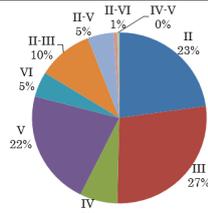


Figure 1: Percentages of responses by meaning type.

Figure 1 shows the majority of the responses (72%) fall into one of the three types, namely II, III and V, whereas Types IV and VI account for only 5-7%. Of the four double-meaning types, Type II-III is the most common. The diversity of paraphrases provided by the participants indicates that *Hai?(FR)* is a vague expression that carries a variety of meanings and can be used to convey multiple messages simultaneously. For example, in addition to an exclamation of surprise like “What?” to indicate that the speaker is taken aback or even offended by something his/her

interlocutor just said, *Hai?(FR)* may be used as a request for clarification related to the previous utterance, corresponding to “Pardon?” or “What exactly do you mean by that?”. It is also possible that the expression is used as a simple way of eliciting further information relevant to the topic at hand, while at the same time asking for specific information from the hearer, such as “Who?” “Where?” or “When?”.

The most common paraphrases differ from one conversational excerpt to another and that some interpretations are more likely to be chosen than others. Taking into account all the information available regarding individual conversations, some interpretations would seem to make more sense than others. For example, *Hai?(FR)* is most likely to be taken as an exclamation of shock for Excerpt 2, but a request for further information for Excerpt 1, a request for repetition or clarification of what was just said for Excerpts 3 and 4, an exclamation of surprise or a request for clarification for Excerpt 5, and a wh-question to elicit specific information for Excerpt 6.

The fact that there are varying interpretations of *Hai?(FR)* suggests that the meaning of the form is highly stretchable and negotiable. Although it is essentially determined by the immediate discourse context, variables in the speaker-hearer relationship are also relevant, such as the social distance between the interlocutors, differences with regard to age, gender, power, and social status, and levels of intimacy, familiarity, and solidarity. In addition, the hearer’s (and the audience’s) prior knowledge, experience and perspective all come into play. In other words, due to the fuzziness of *Hai?(FR)*, both speakers and hearers can choose appropriate interpretations to suit different contexts and communicative needs. When the needs of both parties are satisfied, positive and negative politeness can be achieved.

### References

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