

# Perception of Vowel Fillers: Observation and Analysis

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## I. Introduction

In the study of discourse analysis (or conversation analysis), vowel fillers (or filled pauses) have been one of the researchers' interests. The use of vowel fillers, along with other fillers such as *ano* or *eeto* ("uuuhh"), is considered as a part of the speech in Japanese communication. In political settings, for example, vowel fillers are frequently found in speeches made by politicians (Reynolds, 1984, 2002; Yokoyama, 2002).

In general, vowel fillers are used mostly by male speakers, while *ano*-fillers are used mostly by female speakers (Reynolds, 1984, 2000). Except for a few recent cases like the one by the present prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, whose speech is "devoid of vowel fillers" (Reynolds, 2002), vowel fillers are one of the stereotypical speech patterns found in male politicians of Japan. The late Masayoshi Ohira, a former prime minister of Japan, was famous for his inarticulate speech, where he uttered many vowel fillers. It is claimed, however, that such speech with quite a few vowel fillers has nothing to do with the speaker's leadership capability (e.g. Curtis, 1995) <sup>(1)</sup>.

The functions of fillers have been discussed in previous research. As cited in my preceding paper (Yokoyama 2002), fillers function: 1) to avoid silence; 2) to draw attention of the listener(s) to facilitate a smooth beginning of a speech; 3) to fill a time gap or make up for the time when the speaker is looking for the next word

to say; and 4) to fill in a time gap caused by the speaker's hesitation (Peng, Hori, Horiguchi, Ide, Takahara, and Tanaka, 1981; Reynolds 1984); and 5) to try "to buy time or keep his [=the speaker's] turn" (Quimbo, Kawahara, and Doshita, 2000). One reason why vowel fillers are often found in politicians' speech may be the speaker's strategy (Reynolds: personal communication); another may be politicians' strong belief that they are responsible for the words they use.

The prosodic characteristics of fillers have been studied by many researchers. Kawamori, Kawabata, and Shimazu (1995) note that fillers have a long, flat contour and do not have a sharp drop at the end (p.58). Additionally, Quimbo et al. (2000) compared the typical fillers and their fluent homonyms of an ordinary word, e.g. *eeto* ("uuuhh") vs. *eeto* ("eight"), and showed that the duration of fillers are usually longer than ordinary words, and that relatively long silences succeed them. Recently even in the field of computer programming, vowel fillers (or vocalized filled pauses) are considered as a part of a spontaneous speech, and studying fillers is inevitable for a computer to be able to "understand speech" (Goto, Itou, and Hayamizu, 1999, p.1018). The present study aims at investigating how Japanese listeners perceive such vowel fillers.

## II. Perception of Vowel Fillers

Reynolds (1984) conducted an empirical study on how vowel fillers and *ano*-fillers were perceived by Japanese listeners. Her study focused on how these two types of fillers were perceived differentially by native speakers of Japanese. As for the results, she wrote: "More than 50% of vowel fillers were missed while only 21.6% of *ano*-fillers were missed" (p.9). Vowel fillers showed a

tendency to be overlooked more easily than *ano*-fillers. Here, in this study, I conducted a follow-up experiment of Reynolds' study (1984) and investigated the listeners' perceptions of vowel fillers with a larger number of subjects. The study also examined factors that may affect perceptual achievement, namely duration, vowel quality, and the prosodic environment.

### III. Experiment

*Materials*<sup>(2)</sup>: Three speech samples by two speakers in the interpellation session at the Budget Committee of the National Diet held in 1998 were employed as the materials. Keizo Obuchi, the Prime Minister of the Liberal Democratic Party, represents the government party and answers to Naoto Kan, a member of the House of Representatives of the Democratic Party. Kan, representing the opposition party interpellates the prime minister. For this experiment, the 13th and the 16th turns of Obuchi's and the 28th of Kan's were selected<sup>(3)</sup>. (I show the beginning of Obuchi's 13th turn below. See more details in **Appendix**.)

#### Obuchi's Speech (13th Turn)

Obuchi: EEE kookyuu genzee EE aruiwa kookyuu-teki-na  
genzee-ni-tuite syuju giron-sare-te-ori-masu-ga AA yaya  
kotoba-ga hitoriaruki-si-te-iru men-mo OO iname-masen-node E  
oyurusi-o itadaki-masi-te E kono sai, watakusi-to-site  
sottyoku-ni II seiri-o si-te EEE kangaekata-o OO nobe-tai-to  
omot-te ori-masu

(The underlined parts represent vowel fillers.)

Permanent tax reduction or tax reduction in a permanent sense has been

discussed widely, but there seems to be no gainsaying that the term fairly gets out of control. On this occasion, I would like to organize and frankly state my opinion.

*Subjects:* 104 students of Nihon University, College of Bioresource Sciences who are all native speakers of Japanese. The subjects had no hearing problems.

*Method:* Each subject was instructed to write down a slash ( / ) in the speech presented on the sheet whenever they heard a vowel filler. There was a short practice session before the task, and the subjects learned how to do the task while making sure of the volume of the listening material. To allow the subjects to become familiar with the content of the speech, a couple of minutes were given for reading the material before the task.

## Results

The total number of vowel fillers (both "ordinary" and "neutral" vowel fillers<sup>(4)</sup>) presented in the task was 14,456 (139 vowel fillers x 104 subjects=14,456). The total number of vowel fillers that were perceived was 7,900 (54.6%), and the number of those that were missed was 6,556 (45.4%).

Table 1

Total Number of Vowel Fillers in the Samples	Total Number of Vowel Fillers Perceived by the Subjects	Total Number of Vowel Fillers Missed by the Subjects
14,456	7,900 (54.6%)	6,556 (45.4%)

The results are shown in detail in the following tables in terms of duration and quality of the vowels. In the following tables, I indicate "vf" as "ordinary vowel fillers", and "nvf" as "neutral vowel fillers". Duration ranges are from vf5/nvf5 to vf/nvf, which were

categorized according to the length distribution. The categorization was made based on the tokens of the two speakers, Obuchi and Kan, obtained from the same data. Vowel fillers in vf5 are around 1100 ms or over; vf4 ranging 800-950 ms, vf3 ranging 450-700 ms, vf2 ranging 200-300 ms, and vf ranging 80-150 ms (see more details in Yokoyama (2002)).

Table 2

No. of perceived Vowel fillers (vf+nvf) —Obuchi's 13th & 16th Turns—

	vf5	VQ	vf4	VQ	vf3	VQ	vf2	VQ	vf	VQ	TOTAL
	0		94	A	96	A	93	A	23	A	
			79	E	85	A	91	A	69	E	
			39	O	93	E	71	A	61	E	
					87	E	64	A	57	E	
					102	E	64	A	57	E	
					103	E	60	A	2	I	
					77	E	26	A	17	O	
					82	I	23	A			
					82	I	20	A			
					80	I	8	A			
					95	O	2	A			
					71	O	95	E			
							93	E			
							69	E			
							48	E			
							30	E			
							29	E			
							46	E			
							67	I			
							64	I			
							60	I			
							57	I			
							41	I			
							41	I			
							22	I			
							14	I			
							87	O			
							76	O			
							61	O			
							56	O			
							56	O			
							55	O			
							45	O			
							36	O			
							36	O			
							29	O			
							90	U			
							88	U			
							77	U			
							28	U			
							100	nvfE	53	nvfE	
							95	nvfE			
TOTAL (vf+nvf)	0		212		1053		2311		339		3915
SD	--		28.43		10.1		26.9		25		
MEAN	--		70.67		87.8		55		42		

Table 3

No. of Perceived Vowel fillers (vf+nvf) — Kan's 28<sup>th</sup> Turn—

	vf5	VQ	vf4	VQ	vf3	VQ	vf2	VQ	vf	VQ	TOTAL
	87	O	84	A	65	A	71	A	24	A	
			63	E	90	E	67	A	19	A	
					53	E	65	A	30	E	
					47	I	65	A	26	E	
					36	I	64	A	16	E	
					74	O	52	A	19	O	
					85	U	42	A			
					51	U	40	A			
							31	A			
							31	A			
							91	E			
							89	E			
							83	E			
							74	E			
							62	E			
							59	E			
							54	E			
							52	E			
							39	E			
							47	I			
							36	I			
							34	I			
							28	I			
							75	O			
							64	O			
							62	O			
							52	O			
							51	O			
							48	O			
							46	O			
							41	O			
							35	O			
							26	O			
							25	O			
							17	O			
							13	O			
			87	nvfE	71	nvfE	58	nvfE	45	nvfE	
			87	nvfE	32	nvfE	59	nvfE	36	nvfE	
					75	nvfE	71	nvfE	26	nvfE	
					80	nvfE	67	nvfE	73	nvfE	
							32	nvfE	69	nvfE	
							84	nvfE	43	nvfE	
							68	nvfE			
							46	nvfE			
							76	nvfE			
TOTAL (vf+nvf)	87		321		759		2392		426		3985
SD	---		11.59		19.13		19.26		18.93		
MEAN	87		80.25		63.25		52.42		35.5		

Table 2 and Table 3 show the distribution of 65 tokens by Obuchi and 74 tokens by Kan respectively, hence 139 tokens in total of vowel fillers. The 139 vowel fillers were presented to 104 subjects. Table 4 and Fig.1 show the average perception proportion of vowel fillers in different duration ranges.

Table 4

		Perception of Vowel Fillers					
		vf5+nvf5	vf4+nvf4	vf3+nvf3	vf2+nvf2	vf+nvf	Total
Obuchi	Total No. of perceived fillers	0	212	1053	2311	339	3915
	Average	0	70.67	87.8	55	42	58.3
Kan	Total No. of perceived fillers	87	321	759	2392	426	3985
	Average	87	80.25	63.25	52.42	35.5	51.8

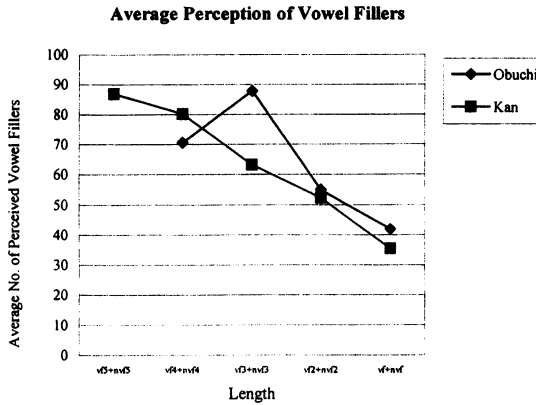


Fig.1

In the next section, I will analyze the properties of vowel fillers, from the viewpoints of duration, vowel quality, and the surrounding environment that may play roles as factors leading to this perceptual result.

#### IV. Discussion

*Duration:* From both Table 4 and Fig.1, we see a tendency that the number of the perceived vowel fillers decreases when the duration becomes shorter. The results show that subjects perceived longer vowel fillers better than the shorter ones.

*Vowel Quality:* Since there was a large distribution of perception

rate found in vf2 in both speakers, I examined the data statistically to see if there were significant differences in vowel qualities, i.e., among "AA", "II", "UU", "EE", "OO", and the neutral "EE," which may affect the perception rate with the analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results show that in Obuchi's speech, there was no significant difference among all these vowel qualities,  $F(5,36)=1.84$ ,  $p=.13$ . All vowels were perceived with no significant differences in vowel qualities. However, in the tokens of Kan's, significant differences were found in the pairs of "EE" and "II" ( $F(1,11)=10.21$ ,  $p<.01$ ), "EE" and "OO" ( $F(1,20)$ ,  $p<.01$ ), "EE (nvf)" and "II" ( $F(1,11)=9.46$ ,  $p=.01$ ), and "EE (nvf)" and "OO" ( $F(1,20)$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Thus, the vowel fillers with /e/ are perceived more readily than /i/ and /o/, and the neutral vowel fillers (/e/) were perceived more readily than /i/ and /o/. The incompatibility between the data of Obuchi and Kan may lead us to conclude that vowel quality itself does not play a main role in perceptual achievement.

*Prosodic Factors:* The number of vowel fillers perceived by the 104 subjects varied from 2 to 103. In order to examine the factors for such a wide distribution, I looked into another factor, namely the prosodic environment. For this purpose, I selected five samples of vowel fillers that were most successfully perceived and another five samples that were least successfully perceived from Obuchi's vf2 speeches. This time I focused on the linguistic environment that may make the vowel fillers salient in speech. Thus, I investigated the length of the silent pause arising "before" the vowel fillers occurred.

The selected samples are indicated in Table 5, under the vowel quality followed by the number of responses. For example, "AA 20" indicates that the vowel is /a/ and there were 20 responses



of perception. This time only “ordinary” vowel fillers were selected. The five samples from both ends are shown below. I calibrated the silent pause duration with *PITCHWORKS*. 10 samples from Obuchi’s vf2 are shown below.

Table 5

10 Samples of Good and Poor Perceptions

Good perception	Length of the preceding silent pause (millisecond)	Poor perception	Length of the preceding silent pause (millisecond)
EE95	523	AA2	54
EE93	572	AA8	91
AA93	642	II14	165
AA91	453	AA20	20
UU90	230	II22	48
Average	484	Average	76

The first group with good perception shows a relatively long silent pause occurring before the vowel fillers. On the other hand, the length of the silent pause in the group of poor perception is short, though the given samples show a relatively wide distribution, ranging from 20 ms to 165 ms. The average length of the silent pause before the vowel fillers in the group with a high rate of perception is 484 ms, while that with the low rate is 76 ms. As for the variation in the samples, e.g. 230 ms of “UU 90” and 165 ms of “II 14”, there may be other factors, not only from the prosodic point of view, but also from other aspects that may account for the data, which we may need to investigate further.

## V. Conclusion

This study investigated listeners’ perceptions of vowel fillers uttered by two male Japanese politicians. The results from the experiment were fairly compatible with what Reynolds (1984) obtained from her data, showing that Japanese listeners do not

have a keen perception of vowel fillers that take place in Japanese discourse. The factors that may affect the listeners' perceptions of vowel fillers were analyzed in two ways. From the linguistic viewpoint, duration and the prosodic environment of vowel fillers were considered to be the factors. The listeners achieved higher rates of perception when the vowel fillers were longer and when they occurred after a certain length of pause. This shows that the lengths of the vowel fillers and the silent pauses occurring before them can facilitate listeners' perceptions. From the socio-psychological perspective, on the other hand, the listeners' poor rate of perception can be accounted for by their strong expectations of the stereotypical speech patterns that male politicians make.

In her recent writing, Reynolds (2002) refers to a female politician, Makiko Tanaka, by saying that she did not use vowel fillers in her speech. The present prime minister of Japan, Junichiro Koizumi, is another one who makes speeches without using vowel fillers. The use of vowel fillers may need to be studied further in terms of both observation and analysis, i.e. with a wider range of data including the speeches not only by male politicians but also by other types of speakers in other situations, and with more analytical investigation both from linguistic viewpoints and those from paralinguistic areas.

#### Notes

A part of this paper was written based on my presentation given at the Workshops of Gendai Nihongo Kenkyuukai, on August 3, 2003, at the National Women's Education Center, Japan.

- (1) The sentence was originally written in Japanese. It was translated into English by the author.

- (2) The data employed in this paper is a 1-hour-and-47minute-long interpellation session of the 143rd Budget Committee, The National Diet (The House of Representatives) of Japan, held on August 17, 1998. The data was recorded on a 120 minute-long videotape. There were other speakers from the government party and a witness in the material. However, I did not refer to others' data in this study (see details in Yokoyama (2002)).
- (3) These speeches were selected as samples because they contained a sufficient number of vowel fillers.
- (4) Here I call "ordinary vowel fillers" as those showing the lengthening of the preceding vowel. "Neutral vowel fillers" are the types of vowel fillers that behave independently of the quality of the preceding vowels (Reynolds: personal communication). "Neutral vowel fillers" are frequently found in the very beginning of the speech, or in the beginning of a set of phrases. Speakers employ /e/ most frequently, but not necessarily (see Reynolds, 1984).

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## Appendix

Speeches of Obuchi's (the 13th and the 16th turns) and Kan's (the 29th turn)

### ●Obuchi (13th turn)

恒久減税あるいは恒久的な減税について種々議論されておりますが、やや言葉がひとり歩きしている面も否めませんので、お許しをいただきまして、この際、私として率直に整理をして考え方を述べたいと思っております。

すなわち、単年度単年度で行われる特別減税という用語に対しまして恒久減税という用語は、消費喚起の観点から一年限りの減税でなく将来に向かって継続される減税を行う方が効果があるという意味でこれまで新聞等で多く用いられてきておりまして、総裁選での私の公約におきましてその意味で恒久減税という言葉を用いました。

つまり、私が公約で申し上げたかった趣旨は、将来どうなるかは不確定な一年限りの減税ではなく、期限を定めなくて制度改正を行い、その後、特に法律改正を行

わない限り継続していくというものでございまして、このような私の公約の具体化につきまして、大蔵大臣と党幹部との間で調整をしてもらった結果を踏まえまして、私としては、今回の減税が、御案内のとおり、所得・住民税の最高税率の引き下げ、定率減税及び法人課税の実効税率の引き下げを内容とする制度改正を行い、全体として期限を定めない六兆円を相当程度上回る減税とするということとしたものであり、私が公約で述べた趣旨を実現したものであると考えております。

一方、本来税制は、毎年税制改正が行われているように、社会経済情勢に適切に対応するよう不断に見直しを行っていくべきものであり、未来永劫に改正しないということはありません。思っております。

そこで私としては、恒久減税という用語は、私の述べた趣旨を超えまして未来永劫にというようなこととして受けとめられかねない面もありまして、一年限りでなく期限を定めないで制度改正を行い、その後特に法律改正を行わない限り継続していくという趣旨で恒久的な減税と表現したものでございます。

そこで、今委員が御指摘のように、私の総理就任の最初の記者会見でも恒久減税ということを申し上げました。つらつら実はその後思いまして、恒久減税というのは、少なくとも制度的な大きな改革の中、すなわちある意味のグローバルスタンダードの中で、所得課税、法人課税を欧米並みに引き下げるという意味で私自身が観念的にそれを恒久減税という認識をいたしておりましたが、今申し上げたような趣旨で、このことは、恒久減税を少なくとも私の内閣だけで恒久と考えることはいかがかと。すなわち、常に税制につきましてはその時々の中内閣あるいは国会の判断というものが行われますので、正確を期して、私といたしましては恒久的減税と申し上げることがこの際御理解をいただける、こう思った次第でございまして、先ほど実は堺屋長官の御答弁を聞いておりましたが、恒久減税ということをお願いされておりましたので、この際、総理大臣として私の考え方にのっとりまして、今後内閣としては恒久的減税ということで御理解をいただきたいと思っております。

●Kan (28th turn)

私は、堺屋さんの本のファンではありますが、今の答弁はちょっと失望の気持ちを感じ得ないところであります。

この議論は、これからも議論の中で、いわゆる定率減税問題などに関連してまた

議論になると思いますのでこの程度にしておきますが、実は、私たち民主党も6兆円減税の中で幾つかの制度減税をあわせて提案しております。また、今回15カ月の予算の概算要求ということになっておりますが、私たちも給付についても幾つかの提案をいたしております。

幾つか、せっかくの機会ですから民主党として考えていることを申し上げ、見解を聞かせていただきたいと思います。民主党は、基本的考え方といたしまして、自由であって安心できる社会を目指していこう、特に経済の分野においては規制緩和など自由な分野をもっと拡大していくべきだ、しかし、福祉の分野などでは安心できる福祉は確保しなければならない。自民党の場合は、経済の分野は、なるべく国のお金で公共事業をやったり規制緩和もまあまあにして、どちらかといえば政府依存の経済分野を残そうとされている。場合によったら、福祉の方はどうぞ自由に勝手に自分の負担でやってください。何か我が党とはクロスしているようにも受けとめられるわけであります。

そういう中で非常に難しい問題は、両方にまたがる問題として雇用の問題だと思っております。特に、今若い皆さんは、平均の4.3の失業率をさらに超えて、その倍近くは20代の皆さんの失業率はあるのではないかと言われております。そういう意味で、私たちは、いろいろな財政支出を考えたときにも、新しい雇用のいかに創造していくのか、最近ではエンプロイアビリティというような言葉もあるようですけれども、そのことを考えて、例えば福祉の分野、例えば新しい事業がどんどん生まれていくような、そういう規制の緩和、そういったことで、今ある雇用の今のままで守るという、どちらかといえば生産性の低い雇用の国の補助金などで守るという考え方ではなくて、新しい雇用をつくることに対して支援をしていく、そしてそれを、移るところについても、いろいろな研修とかトレーニングというものについては、思い切って雇用保険の時間、長さを長引かせるとか、そういうことでやっていく。

しかし、今回の15カ月予算と言われているものを見ますと、将来の雇用をふやそうとしているのか、それともそれには余り手をつけずに今のことだけを、まあ一年間はいろいろ公共事業をやっていればとりあえず仕事がありますからということで、相変わらずの手当てをやろうとしているのか、理念がはっきり見えてこない。

私たちの考え方は今申し上げたようなところであります。

また、もう一つ、選挙のときに、育児休業、現在休業補償が雇用保険から所得の25%出ておりますが、思い切ってこれを財政出動して60%にしたらどうか。あわせて介護の場合の休業も60%の給付を認めたらどうか。私どもの試算では2300億円毎年かかります。しかし、育児あるいは介護という不安な、子供を産んだときはどうなるんだ、自分の親が倒れたときどうするんだ、こういう不安を少しでも薄めていく、少なくしていく上では必要だと思います。特に、家庭と仕事の両立、女性が仕事につかれることが多かった今日、家庭と仕事の両立を考えたときに、この育児、介護の休業の所得保障は、これはぜひ政府の方でもやっていただきたい。

また、同じ投資においても、例えば小中学生の教育のためのパソコンをもっと、一人一台ぐらい充実させてもそんな何兆円となるお金ではありません。あるいは将来のテレビのデジタル化の問題、あるいはデータベースなんかも、私もかつてさきがけの政調会長時代に、いろいろなものを考えたときに、補正予算というのはどうしても単年度で使ってしまわなきゃいけませんから、建物とかなんとかには使えるのですが、何年も人手とお金をかけてつくり上げなければいけないデータベースの構築にはなかなか補正予算は使えないのですね。しかし、今、日本が一番おくらしているのは、場合によってはそういうソフトの分野、もちろんハードでスーパーハイウエーも必要ですが、データベースなどが大変不十分だと思います。

さらには、同じ公共事業でも環境再生型の事業、三面張りの川を人間が川のそばまで行けるように、あるいはテトラポッドしかない海辺を砂浜へもう一度戻す、そういう新しい事業、こういったことを考えているわけであります。

さらに減税について、私どもは、住宅を取得したときに法人の場合はいわば償却という概念がありますが、個人はありません。そこで、例えば3000万円のマンションを買ったら、1.5%ずつ6年間、合わせて9%ですから270万円が税額で控除されてくる、この程度のことはやっていいんじゃないか。今非常に住宅の建設コストが下がっております。私は、この程度の減税は、特に住宅に注目した減税を行うことは、それを取得する人にプラスになるだけではなく、景気浮揚の一つの要素になってくる、このように考えております。

いろいろなことを申し上げましたが、こうした民主党の提案、政府が予算案をつ

くる中に取り込まれることがあれば私たちとしてはありがたいと思っておりますが、総理、いかがでしょうか。

●Obuchi (16th turn)

まず、対人地雷に対しての国内法の整備でございますが、政府といたしましては、一日も早くこれを国会に提出をいたしまして、御賛同を得るべく最後の努力をいたしております。カナダにおきまして日本は署名をいたしましたけれども、その発効のためには40カ国が批准をいたしますと直ちに発効になりますが、既にかかなりの国々において批准をいたしております。我が国の立場といたしましても、ぜひこれが発効以前に国会において批准をいただきますように最後の努力をいたしてまいりたいと思っております。

第二の、アジア経済につきましてでございますけれども、これは我が国といたしましても、バンコクで始まった金融不安に対しましては、御案内のとおり、日本の厳しい財政状況、金融状況の中でありましたけれども、420億ドルをそれぞれの国に提出をいたしまして、そしてこの危機を乗り越える努力を願っておるわけでございまして、国々それぞれの事情は相異なりますけれども、全体としてこうした国々が、再びアジアの活性化した経済が発展できるように日本としては最大の努力をいたしていかねばならぬ、このように考えております。

(よこやま あきこ)