A Critical Analysis of the Interjections ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ as Pragmatic Markers in MEXT Authorized English Textbooks

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to critically analyze both quantitatively and qualitatively how the interjections ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ are presented in English textbooks for junior high school students. Frequently used in oral discourse, ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ have been traditionally regarded just as grammatically optional ‘fillers’ with empty meanings. However, linguistic studies have shown their noticeable functions as pragmatic markers. This paper first discusses pragmatics of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ in order to show how their pragma-functional meanings contrast in one way or the other and at what token frequencies they are used in naturally occurring discourse. Then in comparison with those in naturalistic discourse token frequencies of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ in MEXT textbooks are analyzed. The appropriateness of their uses in the text and context is also examined in reference to the discussion on ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ pragmatics. The results of the quantitative analysis demonstrated an extreme discrepancy, contrary to the prediction based on a general token tendency in naturalistic discourse, that ‘Ah’ was rarely used in the textbooks while ‘Oh’ was extensively used at over 200 tokens. Furthermore, the results from the qualitative analysis indicated that there existed certain contentious cases where ‘Ah,’ instead of ‘Oh,’ seemed more or less appropriate in the context. On the basis of these results, this paper concludes with implications for textbook writers and English teachers suggesting that it is necessary to raise their awareness toward pragmatic aspects in oral discourse as a means to improve texts in English textbooks and to enhance students’ discourse competence as part of the total communicative competence.

1. Introduction

“One short interjection may be more powerful, more to the point, more eloquent than a long speech” (Müller, 1862, p. 308).

This paper aims at critically analyzing how the interjections ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ as pragmatic markers are presented in MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology)
authorized English textbooks used nation-wide in junior high schools in Japan through both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Though these interjections, among other short words such as ‘Now,’ ‘So,’ ‘Well,’ and ‘Yeah,’ are frequently used particularly in oral discourse, they have been traditionally regarded as grammatically optional ‘fillers’ with no propositional meanings (Brinton, 1996; Levinson, 1983). However, studies in applied linguistics and pragmatics have argued that among interjections some serve not only as interlocutors’ exclamations to express surprise, sadness, happiness or disgust, but also as pragmatic markers to express their mental attitudes, make a spoken discourse coherent, and therefore enable their interlocutors to follow the discourse easily (Aijmer, 1987; Archor, Aijmer & Wichmann, 2012; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Norrick, 2009; Uchida, 1985, 2011). This paper first discusses subtleties of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ from a pragmatic point of view to show in what way the pragmatic meanings of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ contrast with each other in relation to their context. Second, all of the MEXT authorized English textbooks published by six publishers are analyzed in terms of their token frequencies and the appropriateness of their use in the context on the basis of the contrastive pragmatic meanings discussed in the first section. Then the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses are shown and finally a conclusion with implications for textbook writers and English teachers is made.

2. Pragmatics of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’

2.1 Interjections

‘Oh’ and ‘Ah,’ as shown in (1) below, along with other words or phrases such as ‘Well,’ ‘So,’ ‘You know,’ ‘Say,’ ‘Yeah,’ ‘Sort of,’ and ‘I mean’ have been traditionally treated just as ‘fillers’ which are grammatically optional and semantically empty, though they do occur relatively frequently in spoken discourse (Brinton, 1996; Schourup, 1982).

(1) a. Oh, how nice to see you!
    b. Ah, there she is! (Leech, Cruickshank & Ivanič, 2001, p. 153)

Having being treated as such, little attention has been paid to how they are used and what function they play in spoken discourse.

In the traditional grammar framework, those small words or phrases have been called ‘particles’ or ‘interjections’ as one part of speech in grammar (Heritage, 1984; Jespersen, 1924). They are used to express surprises, pains, sadness, pleasures, hesitations, and the like. Recently, however, in concordance with the development of research in applied linguistics and pragmatics, another role those words play in conversation discourse has attracted much attention among linguists. They are often used in communication to organize and sequence speakers’ messages for the benefit of their listeners and in collaboration with them. Specifically, they play a role in
making discourse coherent in order to help interlocutors understand what happened, is happening, or will happen.

Before discussing pragmatics of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah,’ we need to touch upon a terminology issue. ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ and other short words or phrases have been called with different terminology such as ‘discourse markers’ (Bolden, 2006; Fung & Carter, 2007), ‘discourse particles’ (Schourup, 1982), ‘evincives’ (Schourup, 1982), ‘maxim hedges’ (Levinson, 1983), ‘mystery particles’ (Longacre, 1976), ‘pragmatic particles’ (Levinson, 1983), ‘pragmatic noises’ (Archer, Aijmer & Wichmann, 2012), or ‘pragmatic markers’ (Aijmer, 2013; Brinton, 1996; Carter and McCarthy, 2006; Fraser, 1996). However, those terms have been used with slightly different meanings. For example, Schourup (1982) among others uses ‘discourse particles’ as a neutral term for small linguistic items that avoids presumptive judgments on their functions or grammatical categories. Carter and McCarthy (2006) use the term ‘pragmatic markers’ as a macro-term and sub-categorize them into four: ‘discourse markers’ (to indicate the speaker’s intentions with regard to organizing, structuring and monitoring the discourse), ‘stance markers’ (to indicate the speaker’s stance or attitude vis-à-vis the message), ‘hedges’ (to enable speakers to be less assertive in formulating their message), and ‘interjections’ (to indicate affective responses and reactions to the discourse). In this paper, we use the term ‘pragmatic marker’ as a general cover term which incorporates the first three subcategories by Carter and McCarthy (2006).

2.2 Pragmatics of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’: Adversative vs. Resultative

Pragmatic markers, especially those which Carter and McCarthy (2006) called ‘stance markers,’ allow the listener to access to what is going on in the speaker’s mind at the time when talk-in-interactions between them are taking place or immediately afterwards (Aijmer, 1987). In other words, the speaker’s mental processes will be reflected in pragmatic markers in the form of mental attitudes to trace what is going on in the speaker’s mind (Aijimer, 2013).

Uchida (1985) recognized the importance of pragmatic functions of the interjections ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ that express people’s emotions, and explored a contrastive description of these as pragmatic markers. ‘Oh,’ for instance, in a general term, mirrors an ‘adversative’ mental attitude that something happened unexpectedly or came to the speaker’s mind which he or she did not know or had not predicted (Uchida, 1985, 2011). In other words, as the interaction between Talmadge and Caroline in (2) below, an extract from a novel, shows, the pragmatic marker ‘Oh’ makes a link up between Caroline’s reactive surprise and what Talmadge said just immediately before: ‘It’s blood—’. ‘Oh’ pragmatically marks the Caroline’s mental attitude, namely, her big surprise at an unexpected point of view provided by Talmadge.

(2) ‘Have the two ever even spoken? I mean, since you found Della? Do they want each other? Does Angelence even want her, Talmadge?’
   ‘It doesn’t matter what we want,’ he said. ‘It’s blood—’
‘Oh, Talmadge,’ said Caroline, surprised. . . . (Amanda Coplin, The Orchardist, p. 262, slightly adapted by the present writer)

As a pragmatic marker, therefore, ‘Oh’ serves a function to adversatively relate what is said by the speaker to its unpredicted reaction by his or her interlocutor in oral discourse (Aijimer, 2013). Uchida (1985, 2011) called this type an ‘adversative’ (‘Gyaku-setsu’) pragmatic marker. Because of its adversative connotation, ‘Oh’ is often followed by negative expressions such as ‘Oh, I didn’t know that.’ ‘Oh, that can’t be true.’ ‘Oh, this doesn’t look so bad.’ or ‘Oh, I wouldn’t do that.’

In contrast, ‘Ah’ is often used to express a surprise at a natural recognition or identification of what the speaker knows or assumes with the interlocutor’s preceding utterance or the context of situation (Uchida, 1985, 2011) as the following extract from the same novel shows:

(3) From behind Angelene’s ear he pulled a mountain daisy, the face spanning no more than a centimeter. ‘Ah,’ he said. ‘A flower! A flower for a flower!’ (Amanda Coplin, The Orchardist, p. 166, slightly adapted by the present writer)

This is a scene at a carnival. A man, who is a magician, was pulling objects from behind people’s ears. He came to the woman and pulled the flower probably because he ‘knew (or assumed)’ the flower was what suited the gorgeous (like a flower) woman most. ‘Ah’ is likely to mirror a ‘resultative’ (‘Jyun-setsu’) conception that something came to the speaker’s mind as a result of some positive anticipation (Aijimer, 1987).

The adversative (‘Gyaku-setsu’) vs. resultative (‘Jyun-setsu’) contrast between ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ is clearly described as part of word usage (‘Go-hou’) in some of the popular English-Japanese dictionaries published in Japan. For example, let us take an example for the ‘Ah’ entry in Taishukan’s Genius English Japanese Dictionary (Konishi, 1988):

【‘Oh’ to no chigai [Different usage from ‘Oh’]] ‘Oh, you’re leaving tomorrow!’ ‘E, asu tatsu no? (sore wa odoroita) [What? You’re leaving tomorrow? (Surprised to hear that!)] / ‘Ah, you’re leaving tomorrow!’ ‘Aah, asu tatsu datte ne (sore wa iikoto da) [Ah, you’re leaving tomorrow. (That’s good.)]. (p. 37, emphasis in original and the English sentences in the square brackets by the present author’s translation into English)

This explanation is well in accordance with the descriptions by Uchida (1985, 2011) and other applied linguists as discussed above.

As shown by the discussion so far, ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ as pragmatic markers can be called an ‘adversative’ pragmatic marker and a ‘resultative’ pragmatic marker respectively. Nevertheless, one reservation should be made concerning the choice of either ‘Oh’ or ‘Ah’ in (4) and (5) below.
As having been considered in the traditional grammar paradigm, they are optional and therefore either ‘Oh’ or ‘Ah’ is grammatical in those utterances. However, what matters at the pragma-functional level is the varying degree of appropriateness, not the dichotomous right-or-wrong of accuracy, of choosing either of the pragmatic markers for a given context. In other words, the speaker is in a sense free to choose either ‘Oh’ or ‘Ah’ as far as grammar is concerned, but has to do so in a way relevant to the context of situation. For example, Kevin in (4) might have chosen ‘Ah’ instead of ‘Oh’ when he knew, therefore expected, the traffic was very slow at that time of the day and well predicted Jill’s delay. On the other hand, Sarah in (5) might have said ‘Oh, I see.’ if she knew Taro’s English was not so good, so she was surprised at his getting the unexpectedly high English test score. Accordingly, when we decide which is more appropriate ‘Oh’ or ‘Ah’ in a certain utterance, we should take a whole account of the context into consideration in order to make the total discourse coherent.

2.3 Token Frequencies in Naturalistic English Discourse

Now we examine at what token frequencies ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ are used in naturally occurring English discourse. Table 1 shows their token frequencies in two comparatively large linguistic corpuses: A Corpus of English Conversation (Svartvik & Quirk (1980), quoted by Aijmer (1987), and Corpus of Contemporary American English (Brigham Young University, Online). The former contains about 170,000 words from face-to-face conversations and the latter about 520,000,000 words from spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic texts.

As you can see, ‘Oh’ is overwhelmingly more often used in either of the naturalistic English corpuses and the ‘Oh’ to ‘Ah’ ratio is roughly about ten to one. This overall tendency is more or less consistent with the comparative results of token frequencies for a film and novels as shown in Table 2.
Table 2 Token frequencies of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ in a film and novels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Movie and Novels</th>
<th>Oh ( (t) )</th>
<th>Ah ( (t) )</th>
<th>Oh:Ah ( (r) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>W. Wyler, <em>Roman Holiday</em>, 1953</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Victoria Aveyard, <em>Glass Sword</em> (Red Queen), Harper Teen: New York, 2016</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( (t) \): token frequency; \( (r) \): ratio  

\(^{*}\) The number stands for the ratio value of ‘Oh’ to which ‘Ah’ occur in each linguistic source.

However, it should be noted that there is one case (No. 2) where ‘Ah’ is used twice as many times as ‘Oh’ \((r) = 0.5\), and that there are no cases where ‘Ah’ is never used. We can say from the results that in general the token frequency of ‘Oh’ is approximately 10 times higher than that of ‘Ah’ in naturalistic English, and that though at a lower token frequency ‘Ah’ is steadily used to a certain extent.

3. The Study

3.1 Research Questions

Based on the discussion on the interjections and pragmatics of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ in the previous sections, the following research questions (RQs) are posed for this study:

RQ1: Are ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ presented in MEXT English textbooks in a similar token frequency ratio to that of naturally occurring discourse?

RQ2: Are ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ presented appropriately in MEXT English textbooks in relation to their context of use?

It has been often said that teachers in practice should not teach students English textbooks themselves, but teach them English with the textbooks (Torikai, 2012). Even as is said, what is presented in the textbooks serves as fundamental language sources for the student to learn English.
and for the teacher to teach English in the classroom. Therefore, it is of significance to find the answers to those RQs posed above.

3.2 Research Methods

In this study all of the MEXT authorized English textbooks (for 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders) published by six publishers in 2011 and 2015 below are used for the sources of analysis:

- TB-A: *Columbus 21 English Course* (2011, 2015, Mitsumura Tosho)
- TB-C: *New Horizon English Course* (2011, 2015, Tokyo Shoseki)
- TB-D: *One World English Course* (2011, 2015, Kyoiku Shuppan)
- TB-E: *Sunshine English Course* (2011, 2015, Kairyudo)

We first count token frequencies for ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ presented in main texts and others such as basic dialogue, exercises, grammar and usage points, etc. (2015 editions). Then based on the contrastive pragma-functional differences between ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ discussed in 2.2 we decide whether or not the interjections as pragmatic markers sound natural in all the contexts given in the MEXT textbooks (2011 and 2015 editions).

3.3 Results for RQ1: Token Frequencies of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ in the MEXT Textbooks

To begin with, we examine RQ 1, that is, whether ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ are used in the MEXT English textbooks in a similar token frequency ratio to that of naturally occurring discourse. Table 3 shows token frequencies of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ in main texts (MTs) or other than main texts (Non-MTs) in the MEXT textbooks published by six publishers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textbook</th>
<th>Oh</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Ah</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MTs</td>
<td>Non-MTs</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>MTs</td>
<td>Non-MTs</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB-A</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB-B</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB-C</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB-D</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB-E</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB-F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As you can see in Table 3, the total token frequency of ‘Oh’ is 53.3 times extensively higher than ‘Ah’ (215/4 in total). When it comes to the use of ‘Ah,’ we see only three cases in Non-MTs and one case in MTs (TB-D Book 3) as follows.

TB-B Book 2 (Kaiwa wo hirogeyou [Let’s expand a conversation], p. 49) (Non-MTs)
   Ken: I like watching J. League soccer on TV.
   Meiling: Ah, J. League.

TB-B Book 3 (Tsunagi kotoba [Linking words], p. 96) (Non-MTs)
   Well, /Let’s see, /Let me see. /Ah, /Uh, /I mean, /You know,

TB-D Book 3 (p. 35) (MTs)
   . . . It’s opening its mouth! Aaaahhh!

TB-E Book 2 (Basic Dialogue, p. 12) (Non-MTs)
   A: I saw your sister in the park this morning.
   B: Oh, really? What was she doing?
   A: She was playing tennis with her friends.
   B: Ah, that’s one of her hobbies.

A closer look at the ‘Ah’ use in TB-D Book 3, however, reveals that according to the context ‘Aaaahhh!’ is just a screaming word without any pragmatic function.

In contrast, there are 84 uses of ‘Oh’ in MTs in total, 84 times more than the use of ‘Ah.’ This concludes the answer to RQ1; that is, ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ are not presented in the MEXT English textbooks in a similar token frequency ratio to that of naturally occurring discourse because ‘Oh’ is used roughly about 10 times more often than ‘Ah’ in naturalistic discourse. In sum, in the MEXT textbooks ‘Oh’ is used with rather exceedingly high token frequency and ‘Ah’ with extremely low token frequency.

Table 4 shows vocabulary explanations of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ attached at the end of the MEXT textbooks analyzed as the vocabulary list. ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ are categorized as interjections (part of speech) with their Japanese equivalents (surprise or sadness screaming voices).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textbook</th>
<th>Oh</th>
<th>Ah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TB-A</td>
<td>Interj. *ああ、まあ (Aa, Maa)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB-B</td>
<td>Interj. おお！、まあ！、おや！、あら！；えーと。 (Oo! Maa! Oya! Ara! E’ito)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To our surprise, the ‘Ah’ entry can’t be seen on the vocabulary list of TB-B, though there found two cases of ‘Ah’ use in the Non-MTs category (see Table 3). It is not clear whether or not this inconsistency is due to the textbook writers’ ignorance or underestimation of the word ‘Ah.’

3.4 Results for RQ 2: The Appropriateness of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ in the Context of Use

We next examine the answer to the second RQ; that is, whether ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ are presented in the MEXT English textbooks in a natural way in relation to their context of use. A closer examination was done for all of the ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ uses in the MEXT English textbooks of both 2011, 2015 editions in relation their contexts of use. It was found that generally the uses of both ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ were very natural in the six MEXT textbooks published. That is, ‘Oh’ was used in an adversative context where the interlocutor did not predict the content of the speaker’s message as shown in utterances such as “Oh, I didn’t know that.” “Oh, I don’t have time now.” “Oh, that’s too bad.” “Oh, I sorry.” In contrast, ‘Ah’ was used in a resultative context where the interlocutor assumed the speaker’s utterance. However, we found five questionable cases of ‘Oh’ use, four in 2011 and one in 2015 editions respectively, where ‘Ah’ seemed more natural than ‘Oh’ according to the context of its use. In the following three sections we will see representative extracts of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ use as pragmatic markers in both natural and questionable cases.

3.4.1 ‘Oh’ in Naturalistic Contexts of Situation

In (6), an extract from TB-A Book 1, Taku’s having a cold is a new piece of information for Tina. Therefore, ‘Oh’ in (6) implies that Tina’s expectation or knowledge about Taku was not in harmony with Min-ho’s preceding utterance. This pragmatic configuration coincides well with the ideas on pragmatics of ‘Oh’ we discussed in 2.2.

(6) . . .

Min-ho: He has a cold. He called me this morning.
Tina: Oh, that’s too bad. Poor Taku! (TB-A Book 1, 2015, p. 124)
‘Oh’ in (7) from TB-B Book 3 below shows Raj’s surprising reaction against his assumption or expectation toward Paul’s behavior. It is highly possible that Raj had never thought about their graduation yet.

(7) Raj: Hi, Paul. What’s up?
Paul: Hi, Raj. I’m thinking about our graduation.
Raj: Oh, are you? What about it?
Paul: I’m going to give a present to Mr Oka. Do you have any good ideas? (TB-B Book 3, 2015, p. 97)

In (8) from TB-C Book 2, Mark was deceiving Eric by saying only seeing, not eating, donuts was really scary. ‘Oh’ in (8) gives Eric a surprising impression about unexpected recall of something he had never thought of.

(8) . . .
(Mark starts eating the donuts.)
Eric: Hey, you said you’re scared of donuts!
Mark: Yes. Seeing donuts is really scary. So I’m eating them. Oh, I forgot to tell you. I’m scary of milk, too. (TB-C Book 2, 2015, p. 86)

Furthermore, in (9) from TB-D Book 1, Kenta saw a big structure. Kenta told Bob that it was a roller coaster, but it wasn’t. Instead it was an art object. Bob never realized that such a big structure was an art object.

(9) Bob: What is that?
Kenta: It’s a roller coaster.
Bob: A roller coaster?
Kenta: Just kidding! That’s an art object.
Bob: Oh, that’s a big object. (TB-D Book 1, 2015, p. 30)

With ‘Oh’ in (10), it is possible to infer Mike’s mental attitude; that is, with Momoko’s utterance “It was more interesting than just traveling.” he had not expected Momoko’s having any kind of trouble during her homestay, which evidently gave Mike an unexpected mental move.

(10) . . .
Momoko: It was more interesting than just traveling. But I was at a loss at first.
Mike: Oh, were you?
. . . (TB-E Book 2, 2015, p. 89)
In (11) from TB-F Book 1, Hiro was surprised to find a rabbit’s making rice cakes in one of Ben’s pictures by chance.

(11) Hiro: Are you taking pictures of the moon?
    Ben: Yes, I am. This camera can take good pictures. I have a lot of pictures of the moon and the stars.
    Hiro: Oh, look at this picture. A rabbit is making rice cakes. (TB-F Book 1, 2015, p. 102)

‘Oh’ in (11) evidently relates Hiro’s lack of knowledge about the patterns on the moon to a piece of new information he got from one of the pictures taken by Ben.

3.4.2 ‘Oh’ in Questionable Contexts of Situation

On the other hand, five questionable cases were found where ‘Oh’ was used in a rather pragmatically resultative, not adversative, context. In (12) below, an extract from TB-A Book 1, Taku’s utterance “No. We can’t start. Tina isn’t here yet.” clearly shows that they are waiting for, therefore expecting, Tina to join them. Min-ho finds her coming and is very pleased with (as a result of) her arrival. Consequently, a resultative pragmatic marker ‘Ah,’ instead of ‘Oh,’ sounds more or less natural in this context.

(12) Min-ho: Nice place!
    Aya: We can use it every week.
    Min-ho: Great. Let’s start.
    Taku: No. We can’t start. Tina isn’t here yet.
    Min-ho: Oh — here she is.
    Tina: Sorry I’m late.
    Taku: Are you OK?
    Tina: Yes, fine. Let’s practice. (TB-A Book 1, 2015, p. 98)

Kumi in (13), an extract from TB-B Book 1, is highly likely to know what kabaddi is. If she didn’t know what it was, she should have asked Raj what it was or what the sport looked like by saying something like “Kabaddi? What is it?” which will follow right after the utterance “Oh, kabaddi.”

(13) Kumi: What’s your favorite sport?
    Raj: It’s kabaddi.
    Kumi: Oh, kabaddi. Where do you play it?
    Raj: I play it near the river. (TB-B Book 1, 2011, p. 56)
Just as the same reason for (12) above, in (14) from TB-C Book 1 ‘Ah’ sounds more natural than ‘Oh.’ Kevin and his friends expected for Mei and Bin to come as the utterance “We’re waiting for Mei and Bin.” which preceded the sentence “Oh, that’s Mei.” obviously shows. For this reason, ‘Oh’ sounds a little clumsy in this context.

(14) We’re waiting for Mei and Bin. Oh, that’s Mei. And that’s Bin. Kevin is running to them.
(TB-C Book 1, 2011, p. 83)

According to the sentence ‘I know Peter Rabbit.’ after ‘Oh’ in (15) from TB-C Book 1, Saki already has some knowledge about Peter Rabbit. What she has just received from Jane, that is, “How about *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*? It’s a story of a naughty rabbit.” got related to her knowledge about the tale in a resultative manner in her mind.

(15)...
Saki: Do you know any other good books?
Jane: How about *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*? It’s a story of a naughty rabbit.
Saki: Oh, I know Peter Rabbit. I like him very much.
... (TB-C Book 1, 2011, p. 88)

The interaction between Clerk and Kevin in (16), an extract from TB-C Book 2, depicts a scene where Kevin is looking for a jacket at a department store. The clerk recommended him a green jacket but it was too small for him. Then she asked him to try a larger one, and so he did. In this context it is quite natural for the customer to expect a larger one in hope of the shop clerk’s professional selection. Indeed, as he had expected, a larger green jacket actually fit Kevin nicely.

(16)...
Clerk: What color are you looking for?
Kevin: Something dark.
Clerk: How about this green one?
Kevin: Oh, that’s cool. But it’s too small for me.
Clerk: Shall I show you a bigger one?
Kevin: Yes, please. Oh, this is nice. How much is it?
... (TB-C Book 2, 2011, pp. 80-81)

This doesn’t exclude, however, the choice of ‘Oh’ in this context because if Kevin never trusts the clerk for some reason or another (e.g., the clerk once made him try a bad selection.), he may say “Oh, this is nice.” to express his surprise of an unexpectedly nice selection. In a similar vein, ‘Oh’
can be possible even in other contentious cases above, though less appropriate as far as the context given for each of the cases is concerned. In this way, what matters pragmatically is the degree of appropriateness. This depicts quite a different picture of right-or-wrong grammatical selections.

3.4.3 ‘Ah’ in Naturalistic Contexts of Situation

Finally, let us examine how ‘Ah’ is presented in the textbooks. As the results in the quantitative analysis show, we found only four cases in which ‘Ah’ was used in the textbooks. Among them, however, we can regard ‘Ah’ as pragmatic marker in only two cases. In (17) from TB-B Book 2 below, it can be interpreted that Meiling is a fan of J. League and therefore knows a lot about it. Ken’s mentioning of J. League soccer hence made her recognize it in her mind, which allowed ‘Ah’ to sound natural in this context of situation.

(17) Ken: I like watching J. League soccer on TV.
    Meiling: Ah, J. League. (TB-B Book 2, 2015, p. 49)

By the sentence ‘that’s one of her hobbies’ after ‘Ah’ in (18), an extract from TB-E Book 2, it is quite clear that B is well familiar with her sister’s hobbies including tennis. Thus it was no wonder at all for B that her sister was playing with her friends in the park. Based on the situation and the discussion on the pragmatics of ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ in 2.2, we can say that ‘Oh’ as adversative pragmatic marker sounds awkward in this context.

(18) A: I saw your sister in the park this morning.
    B: Oh, really? What was she doing?
    A: She was playing tennis with her friends.
    B: Ah, that’s one of her hobbies. (TB-E Book 2, 2015, p. 12)

All in all, both ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ were presented in natural contexts of situation in the MEXT textbooks. However, it is also the fact that there were some, if not so many, cases where ‘Ah’ seemed more natural than ‘Oh.’ Textbooks writers and teachers should take this seriously and try to improve texts with these contrastive pragmatic markers in future years.

4. Implications for Textbook Writers and English Teachers

The main findings in this study fall into the following three categories:

1. Overutilization of ‘Oh’ and extremely low token frequency of ‘Ah’
2. Use of ‘Oh’ in more or less questionable contexts
3. Negligence of the pragmatic role of interjections in English discourse
Based on these findings, we can draw implications for textbook writers and English teachers. Firstly, at the grammatical level ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ look the same because of no propositional meanings in themselves, just voices of surprise, sadness etc. as the vocabulary list and explanations show (Table 4). However, they contrast with each other at the pragmatic level: adversative vs. resultative. Consequently, textbook writers and teachers should keep the conception in mind that at the pragma-functional level the varying degree of appropriateness, not the dichotomous right-or-wrong of accuracy, matters in choosing either of the pragmatic markers for a given context. What they ought to do is to check out texts in the textbooks with special focus on pragmatic properties of words or phrases including the interjections we have discussed here in mind in order to make oral discourse sound natural and coherent (Murahata, 2017).

Secondly, pedagogically speaking, teachers can ask students to discuss “Which do you think sounds more natural in this context of situation, ‘Oh’ or ‘Ah’?” Or they can give students a chance to think of how they interpret someone’s mental attitude expressed in an utterance with one of these interjections if the other is used there instead. Let us take one example below.

(19) (Bill and Junko are at a costume party.)

Bill: Can you see Superman by the table. He’s cool.
Junko: Oh, that’s Carlos.
Bill: He is a big fun of Superman.
Junko: I love Superman too. Let’s talk to him. (TB-E Book 1, 2015, p. 85)

In this discourse, judging from Junko’s choice of ‘Oh,’ she was surprised to find Carlos there because she hadn’t expected him to join the party, or she was just surprised to find Carlos in the costume of Superman. Teachers can ask students what mental attitude Junko has if she says “Ah, that’s Carlos.” in place of the original utterance “Oh, that’s Carlos.” Some students may invoke Junko’s easiness of identifying who is who at the party. Others may think of her well knowing of Carlos’s preference of movie character costumes. In this way, students will be able to experience a contrast in pragma-functional meaning the interjections ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ produce in oral discourse, which no doubt facilitates their discourse competence, one of the important parts of the total communicative competence in English (Celce-Murcia, 2007).

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyze quantitatively and qualitatively how the interjections ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ were presented in junior high school English textbooks. The significant outcome of this study was twofold. Firstly, as the quotation by Müller (1862) at the beginning of the introduction section describes, we revealed that the interjections ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’, albeit very short words, were very powerful pragma-functional devices to express interlocutors’ contrastive mental
attitudes, that is, adversative vs. resultative mental reactions to something contrary to or in accordance with their expectation or preceding utterances in oral discourse. As Müller (1862) mentions, they are more eloquent, if not always, than other words with well-established propositional meanings. One of the most important consequences of this study then was to be able to shed light on the communicative function those short words achieve in oral discourse. Secondly, to our regret, however, some problems as to the use of the interjections ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ were found in the MEXT textbooks. One was the overutilization of ‘Oh.’ The other was the contentious use of ‘Oh’ in cases where ‘Ah’ seemed more natural than ‘Oh.’ These problems are sure to invite the improvement of texts in textbooks in years to come with textbook writers and teachers’ awareness toward pragmatic aspects of language as a means to enhance students’ total communicative competence.

Yet there remain some issues to be examined in future research. Firstly, as mentioned at the onset of this paper, other short words or phrases other than the interjections ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ are also used as pragmatic markers. To obtain a full understanding of the subtleties of their pragma-functions in oral discourse, it is of necessity, therefore, to explore how other pragmatic markers such as ‘Now,’ ‘So,’ or ‘Well’ are used in the MEXT textbooks in a similar way as we have done in this study. Secondly, the token frequencies and the context in which ‘Oh’ and ‘Ah’ are used in the textbooks can produce some effect on second language users’ knowledge and use of English. For example, what we can predict from the results of this study is Japanese students’ excessive use of the interjection ‘Oh’ in almost all emotional contexts of surprises, pleasure, sadness and the like, even in a resultative context where ‘Ah’ sounds more natural. It is then worthwhile to examine in future research how Japanese second language users of English such as junior high school students or high school students actually use those pragmatic markers in oral discourse.

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