

Japanese Culture and Japanese Language

—A Comparative Study on Communication Between Japanese and Non-Japanese—

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Abstract

This paper highlights the importance of culture awareness to efficient communication between Japanese and non-Japanese. It analyzes certain Japanese cultural patterns and argues that the uniqueness of Japanese cultural patterns contributes much not only to forming a language as being different in every way from any other in the world, but also a way of communication which is heavily culture-laden. The paper concludes that language and culture are interdependent, thus, communication between Japanese and non-Japanese must be carried out in a culture-oriented way and a good understanding of culture is indispensable to successful communication.

概要

本論文は、日本の人々と日本以外の人々との間でコミュニケーションを効率的におこなうためには、文化に意識的であることが重要であることを強調する。いくつかの日本文化の型を分析し、そのユニークさが、世界の他のいかなる言語ともあらゆる面で異なったありようで生成される言語によるばかりでなく、文化と深く結びついたコミュニケーションの様式によるところが大であることを論ずる。結論として、言語と文化とは相互に依存しあっていること、したがって、日本の人々とそれ以外の人々によるコミュニケーションにおいては、文化の重視が必須であり、文化への正しい理解が不可欠であることを述べる。

Background

Culture and Communication

Communication is an element of culture, it has often been said that communication and culture are inseparable. Culture is a code people learn and share, and learning and sharing require communication. Communication requires code and symbol that must be learned and shared. Godwin C. Chu (1997, Cited in Jandt, 2002, 25) observed that every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication. To be understood, the two must be studied together. Culture cannot be known without a study of communication, and communication can only be understood with understanding of the culture it supports.

When communicating with people from different cultures, it is even more important to remember that culture and communication are strongly connected. The way that people view communication—what it is, how to do it, and reasons for doing it—is part of

their culture.

In intercultural communication situations, it is natural for people to be aware of the potential for various misunderstandings and to want to avoid them. However, despite of the best intentions, serious misunderstanding and even conflicts can occur. One reason for this is that even though people are consciously attempting to avoid problems, they still are making ethical judgments as they are communicating. Cultural differences affect both their communication decisions and interpretation of what others communicate.

In general, people from Asian and Western cultures have the greatest chance of misunderstanding each other, with Japan and the United States at the two extremes. People who want to be intercultural communicators should try to understand, respect and accept individual's ethical perspective (Jandt 2003, 44).

Japanese and Uniqueness

Japan, eastern and old, is isolated from any continents. Prior to Meiji Restoration, the Tokugawa Shoguns placed severe restrictions on contact between Japanese and *gaijin* (foreigners). Japanese who left Japan were forbidden from returning under penalty of death. There were not many contacts between Japan and the outside world before Commodore Perry "opened" Japan to outside contact in 1853. Japanese history shows it to be a very special unique culture (Condon 1984, vii). It is difficult to find on this earth a more homogeneous society, or one more exclusive. To be Japanese is to be born of Japanese parents, to look Japanese, to speak the Japanese language, and to act Japanese—the full set. Change any part and you spoil the symmetry, like a sour note in a sonata. Thus, it is that Japanese often report their surprise, when visiting other countries, that they are mistaken as non-Japanese. Meanwhile few Japanese expect outsiders to take to *onigiri*, to thrill to *kendo*, or to resonate with *enka*.

For the borrowing from other cultures during the past century or so, the Japanese have remained a fairly clear distinction between what is traditionally Japanese and what is borrowed. These distinctions are reflected, for instance, in the use of words and in the writing system. All foreign and borrowed words—even the words for "glass" or "bread" which have been used in Japan longer than America has existed—are written in a syllabary which is different from the standard Japanese characters. It is as if every word that English could identify as derived from another language is italicized. Not is it only native and borrowed words that are symbolically distinguished, clothing, building design, foods are also divided symbolically. Thus the Japanese who excel in borrowing, adapting and, often, improving on what they borrow, are also skilled in keeping tabs on what is traditionally Japanese and what is not (Schilling 2000, 9).

The Japanese constitute a culturally and socially homogeneous racial entity, whose essence is virtually unchanged from prehistoric times down to the present day. Japanese culture is very different from all other cultures (Gudykunst 1993, 24). Great contrast can

be drawn between Japan the West, and in many cases , even other Asian countries.

Many researchers see Japanese as a homogeneous, vertical society based on hierarchy, shame, duties, harmony, and dependence. The West, in contrast, is viewed as a heterogeneous, horizontal society that is based on equalitarianism, guilt, rights, rupture, and independence. Communication in Japan is viewed as being based on a language that prizes reticence, sentiment, silence, ambivalence, emotions, subjectivity, situational logic, and particularity. Communication in the West, on the other hand, is viewed as being based on languages that value rhetoric, logic, talkativeness, rationality, objectivity, rigid principles, and universality (Maynard 1998, 2).

The uniqueness of the Japanese society makes it compulsory that many concepts must be integrated into comparative studies if we are to better understand Japanese language as well as Japanese culture.

1. Japanese Cultural Patterns

Critical to understanding the cultural patterns of the Japanese is the homogeneity of its population. Although some would argue that Japan is not all that homogeneous, the cultural myth of homogeneity is believed and therefore is an important cultural concept (Martinez 1999, 2).

Because it is an island country and hence borders on no other countries, Japan had been little affected by foreign influence until 1853. Japan's isolation means that its history is its own. Everyone shares the same ideas and, lacking outside influence, has no reason to doubt them.

Additionally, as a small densely populated country, its ideas and information are easily shared. Even the traditions of rice growing contributes to a society based on cooperation, minimizing conflict, and enhanced cooperation, which, like the rice, are all necessary for survival.

Japan's homogeneity contributes to its people's "communication without language" (Tsuji-mura 1987, cited in Jandt, 2003, 220), which is part of the typical Japanese style of communication. It is said that being monolingual and monoracial makes it easy for Japanese to understand each other with few words. On the contrary the United States with its high level of diversity, is verbose—more talking is required to overcome diverse languages, diverse lifestyles, and diverse ways of feeling and thinking. Japanese axioms teach that verbosity is dangerous: "Least said, soonest mended" and "out of the mouth comes evil."

Today, the education system maintains those same cultural value. All schools have the same curriculum. Schools have uniforms and encourages students to take part in after-school activities (Fred, p.220).

This makes a great contrast to other cultures, particularly the West cultures.

Japanese have many everyday expressions to announce the beginning and endings of activities. There are set expressions in Japan for when one leaves the house and when one returns, when one begins a meal and when one is finished. Bus drivers may announce when the bus is starting and when it is stopping, and the television announcers will state that the program has began and that it has come to the end. Such expressions always relate the individual to the group or help synchronize homogeneous activities. Department stores begin each day with a formal opening; chimes ring out, uniformed attendants swing open the doors, and the personnel in every section bow to the first arriving customers and bid them welcome. At closing time, it is the tune of “Auld Syne” that announces the store or restaurant or bar is closing.

Japan has often been described as a society in which conflicts are avoided by emphasizing homogeneity and dismissing differentness as incidental (Yoshio 2004,183). The Japanese do not have the same perception of self as an individual that is typical in the U.S. Instead, the Japanese feel most comfortable with others who empathize. To be completely understood, people have to cooperate in the same context, and in doing so, there can be no differentiation of individuals. In such an extremely homogeneous society, you are not seen as individual, nor do you regard individualism as a positive trait.

Most scholars agree that the United States is an individualistic culture and Japan is a collectivistic culture where *ittaikan* is shared widely (Gudykunst 1993, 30).

It has been said that group life is to the Japanese what individualism is to the Americans. Homogeneity is the core value of society that substantially defines other value and permeates all areas of life. This social interdependence has been referred to by Takeo Doi (1973, cited in Samovar, 1996, 99) as *amae* (noun that comes from the verb *amaeru*, which means to look to others for support and affection).

In contrast to most western cultures, the average Japanese adults is first and foremost a member of “one” specific group and tends to show great loyalty toward it. For a female this group usually consists of her family (with special emphasis on her own children). For an adult, urbanized male the most important group tends to be located at his place of work. Members have relatively few contacts outside their group, which makes in-group interaction, reciprocal obligations and expectations all the more intense. Since members tend to be inside such a group from the time of entry in their late teens or early 20s until their retirement, they get to know each other exceedingly well—their family life, love affairs, capacity for drink, etc. Among fellow members a single word suffices for the whole sentence. The mutually sensitive response goes so far that each easily recognizes the other’s slightest change in behavior and mood and is ready to act accordingly.

If one identifies strongly with a group, it is especially important to maintain good relationships and avoid conflicts with others in the group. Even away from the group, the

family, school or business, one must be careful not to act in such a way that might cause embarrassment to the group.

Moreover, in Japan, school loyalties and company employment last a very long time. Transferring from school to school or company to company is uncommon. To want to change suggests that the person may not have been able to get along well with others and raises questions about how well the person can fit into the new situation. Changing is also discouraged because the person who enters laterally simply will not be able to draw from experiences shared with others who have been together for a longer time. Changing one's affiliation from one school to another or from one company to another is perceived as disruptive; it doesn't contribute to the harmony of the group.

Efforts to maintain harmony are reflected in many ways including cautious and indirect speech, taking time to sense another's mood before venturing an opinion, and avoid as much as possible public disagreement.

Deru kugi wa utareru (The nail that sticks up is hit) is a well-known saying in Japan. Japanese children hear it continually from parents and teachers. It reflects an important culture attitude. Japanese are fond of the saying because it suggests their adherence of egocentricity and their wish to avoid being singled out (for praise or blame). More importantly, this saying reminds them of the pain experienced when one fails to blend harmoniously into a group. It is this great desire to lose oneself within the confines of a group that is most characteristic of the Japanese.

About the worst thing that can happen to a Japanese is to be excluded from his group. Historically, the most severe punishment short of death was to be exiled from one's village. Whereas an American mother who is angry at her child might tell him that he is "grounded" and he can't leave the house for a number of hours or days, the Japanese threat is to send the child out and not allow him into the house for a period of time.

Japanese try, in different ways, to maintain and enhance group synchron—frequent meetings at work, dining and drinking with co-workers after hours, and college dorm meetings. Sometimes Westerners might regard these as "ritualistic" and hence a waste of time.

2. Japanese Way of Communication

Verbal communication is far less important than other forms to the Japanese. They live in a culture that fosters elegant, standardized human interactions (Brannen 1997, 175).

How well do the Japanese communicate, with each other or with non-Japanese? With a penchant for self-depreciation, most Japanese would say they communicate poorly with foreigners, but effectively within themselves. There are, they are likely to add, special

problems in communicating with the foreigners: Japanese is too difficult for foreigners to use properly; English too difficult for Japanese. Such judgments reflect everyday experiences of problems in communicating with foreigners, in Japan or abroad.

Among themselves, the Japanese perceive few communication problems, believing that they have perfectly indirect, nonverbal ways of communication that are efficient, sophisticated, and elegant. Silence, indirect expressions, intuitive understanding, use of euphemisms, nonverbal language, and gestures and the like, are also regarded by the Japanese as esthetic acts, because they are done with style to effect communication with the minimum of words or effort (Masao 1996, xv).

Speech-minimizing behaviors are considered both elegant and efficient. Japanese use them stylistically to communicate feelings or uncomplicated ideas. This ability to simplify is very important in Japan, because the speaker must be sure that the words chosen are appropriately respectful to the subject or the listener. Nonverbal communication such as gesture or euphemisms that do not directly “call a spade a spade” are socially “safer” for the Japanese to use and much “cleaner” because they lack the nuances and overtones of direct verbal reference that might give offence or lead to misunderstandings. Such nonverbal messages have an obvious economy, clarity, efficiency, and directness that words cannot achieve (March 1996, 33).

2. 1. Indirectness and Harmony

Non-Japanese complain that the Japanese use vague words and ambiguous expressions so that it is hard to know where they stand. Sometimes even other Japanese say that they are not sure of what to conclude about some discussions in Japanese (Condon 1984,38).

This is one of the many ways that Japanese culture is reflected in its language. The value of harmony is reflected in that the Japanese language has at least 16 ways to avoid saying “no” and makes use of many *aisatsu*, or “lubricant expressions,” that serve to reinforce feelings and interdependence and harmony. In English, “yes” and “no” clearly mean acceptance and rejection. In Japanese, however, where creating a mood is more important than the judgment, “no” is rarely used and “yes” may mean “I hear what you are saying” or even “yes, but....” Thus, arise misunderstandings in communication between Japanese and non-Japanese.

For example, in 1969, President Nixon asked Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato to impose quotas on textile exports in exchange for the return of Okinawa. Sato replied, “*Zensho shimasu*,” which can mean “I’ll take a proper step” or “I’ll take a favorable action,” Sato means “no”; but Nixon’s translators heard “yes”.

Today, though, that reluctance to say no may be fading. When President Clinton asked for measurable trade targets, Prime Minister Hosokawa said “*Totei doi*

dekimasen” — “There is no way I can agree with that.”

Nevertheless, Communication differences continue between the United States and Japan. In April 1997, House Speaker Newt Gingrich visited Japan and spoke to the Japan National Press Club. According to newspaper accounts, Gingrich drew sustained but nervous laughter as he professed admiration for Japanese negotiators: “ We’d love to buy something very soon, but we can’t quite figure out how to buy something, but we are really glad you’re here and soon we are going to actually make progress on something where you and we can agree, but we can’t quite explain yet, but we absolutely will in the not-very-distant future. We really are glad you’re here, and would you like some more tea?”

“I believe this is done with such elegance and charming that it has taken Americans 30 years to break the code.” (Jandt 2003,153)

Japanese believe that what is heard is only a fraction of what is meant, the tip of the meaning iceberg (March 1996, 34).

Even in everyday verbal discourse, the Japanese tend to avoid categorical comments. If one Japanese asks another, “Are you tired?” the likely answer will be , “Not specially,” or at most, “A little,” but certainly not a forthright, “Yes, I am.” The social point of this kind of behavior in Japan is to appear undemanding, flexible, or non- egotistical, all of which are desirable qualities. Asked to make choices, such as, “Will you have coffee or tea?” or “Will you eat or bathe first?” good manner in Japan dictate that first response should be, “Either is fine.” The questioner is then likely to follow up with, “Which do you prefer?” so that the respondent is forced to make a choice. Everyone in Japan knows the rules of social interaction and customary language, and thus the system works well. But put Japanese with such social / language habits among foreigners, and things will not proceed as smoothly. Foreign flight attendants are baffled when, in response to the question, “Coffee or tea?” some Japanese passengers answer, “Either is fine.”

Indirect expressions sometimes become sources of irritation in communication with foreigners. The Japanese many ways of indicating “no” without actually saying so explicitly often mislead the non-Japanese. “That will be difficult,” and “I’ll think about it” are common circumlocutions. Japanese who hear such statements have a pretty good idea that the answer is definitely “no”, but non-Japanese usually interpret the word “difficult” literally, as meaning inability or incompetence. If a non-Japanese tries to assist the Japanese to solve apparent problems of inability or incompetence, confusion and misunderstanding can escalate quickly, for the apparent problems do not in fact exist. Being “difficult” is merely a Japanese euphemism for “impossible”. Misunderstanding is also likely if a “think about it” response is taken literally as a promise to consider the matter.

Just as the foreigners can become confused when faced with Japanese indirectness,

Japanese can become confused about Western directness, feeling that it must have some ulterior motive or meaning, as would likely be the case in Japan. An American writer, who worked from his suburban Tokyo home, was under heavy pressure to meet a deadline. Rather brusquely, he said to his Japanese wife, “The children are making too much noise. I can’t concentrate. Take them to your mother’s place, and don’t come back until tonight.” But the wife believed that the husband was actually telling her and the children to leave permanently, and did not return. It took sometime for this particular misunderstanding to be clarified.

Western managers of foreign company in Japan commonly experience problems of this kind. One English manager decided to award good work by a young Japanese woman staffer with a trip to the parent company office in London. He expected her to be pleased, but she remained stone-faced and showed no interest. After repeated questioning, she eventually said, “I know what you are really trying to do. You are just trying to create an obligation in me so that I will have to stay with this company.” This seemingly paranoid reaction is certainly not typical in Japan, but it does illustrate how Japanese tend to look behind what they are told, in search of the “real meaning” (March 1996, 36).

Such indirectness and allusiveness indicate that the Japanese attitude to language is different to that in the West.

What’s more, the West preference is for linear—lines of argument, lines of reasoning. In contrast, the Japanese style favors the curve. To go around something rather than “straight to the point” is preferred. Points stick out, points might injure someone. In Japan one takes care to avoid either eventually.

From the Japanese perspective, being direct and to the point can mean being insensitive to the other’s feelings as well as lacking in aesthetic subtlety, at least in the setting of a formal occasion (McClure 2000, 125).

The Japanese often perceive self-disclosing communications as inappropriate in social relationships. They view harmony establishing or harmony maintaining as a dominant function of communication. Communication is a means of seeking consensus and, as such, is by nature intuitive, emotional, and adaptive (Blaker 2002, 9). Said a Japanese professional interpreter: “Japanese indirectness is a part of our way of life.”

2.2. Speech-Minimizing Behaviors and Context

Japanese grumble about Americans’ talking too much: they seem uncomfortable with silence and as a result chatter on about meaningless things.

When comparing Japanese communication style to American, one Japanese manager said, “The Japanese probably never will become gabby. We are a homogeneous people and don’t have to speak as much as you do here. When we say one word, we understand

ten, but here you have to say ten to understand one” (Jim Kennedy and Anna Evenest, 1991, cited in Jandt, 2003, 52).

Imagine a situation where one brings a roll of film to a photo shop and place it on the counter to ask a clerk to have it developed and printed.

Many Japanese would just say, “*Onegaishimasu*,” which would be literally translated as “I have a favor to ask you.” This much is usually sufficient. The clerk would most likely reply, “*kashikomarimashita*” (a polite way of saying “OK”), and never ask the customer what it is. It would seem rather hard to imagine a thing like this happening at a shop of the same kind in the United States. When American say, “I have a favor to ask you,” the other person responds, “What’s it?” or the like. American would say specific things like “I’d like to have this film developed, please,” instead. This expression commonly is used in other service counter situations of a similar kind, though it is possible to say otherwise.

Hinds (1986, Cited in Gudykunst, 1993, 22) noted the following episode when he flew from Los Angeles to Tokyo on a Japanese airline with a Japanese friend, which clearly shows a contrast of the usage between the two languages under discussion: “When we were close to landing, the stewardess came around to see if we had filled the forms out yet. She said to me, “Have you filled out the form yet?” To my friend she said, “*yoroshidesuka?* ”

Yoroshidesuka would be translated as “All right?” with no overt subject. The point is not the ellipsis of the subject here, but rather the fact that this way of saying things, including the ellipsis, is possible by virtue of the context provided. We see here that you are expected to specify what is being talked about in English while you are not in Japanese.

What would Japanese say to offer a friend some beer when they are drinking? “*nomimasenka?*” (Won’t you drink?) or “*ikagadesuka?*” (How about it?) would be the most likely. It would not make sense to Americans to say, by analogy with the Japanese phrase, “Would you care for?” or “Do you want to have?”

All of these examples suggest that Japanese is heavily dependent on context whereas English is not as dependent. Hall (1976, cited in Gudykunst, 1993, 111) identified two types of communication: high context and low context. In a high -context communication, speakers do not have to encode every detail of meaning in the message because most of the relevant information is already stored in the context to which they are sensitive. In a low-context communication, however, people have to encode most of the meaning in the linguistic message. Given the distinction, it is obvious that Japanese is an example of the former type, whereas, English exemplifies the latter.

Japanese way of high-context communication sets it apart from other cultures and there stands the barriers to intercultural communication between Japanese and non-

Japanese.

2. 3. Nonverbal Culture

Language is communication, and physical movement is also part of it, for it transmit as much as the verbal language.

As example of commonly used Japanese gestures, if the thumb and index finger are joined into a circle to represent a small saké cup, then tossed toward the mouth while looking at a friend across the room, this is an invitation to go for a drink. An upright thumb means man, or boss, or boyfriend. If someone sees a female friend talking to a man, an interested look, a raised eyebrow, and a raised thumb would be sufficient to inquire, "Was that your boyfriend?" This would be regarded as much more delicate, elegant means of communication than a direct question. An equally elegant, not to say humorous response could be a tilt of the head (signifying uncertainty in Japan) with a mysterious smile. Although this episode still leaves the inquirer wondering who the man was, it is emotionally complete and satisfying for the Japanese. This inquire does not feel shut out as one might if the response had been verbal, for example, if one's friend had replied "No comment," implying that one was prying (March 1996, 33).

A Japanese points to his nose when he says, "Who, me?" and fans his face when he says "No, no more, thank you" or "No, I can't". When he says "Excuse me" when passing in front of another person, a Japanese man bows and makes a chopping motion with his hand near his face.

It is important to remember that all cultures do not share the same nonverbal behaviors or the same interpretation of them.

Once a Japanese student gestured "come here" from the corridor to an American teacher sitting in the room. The teacher waved back at him and said cheerfully, "Good-bye!" The student looked puzzled and was continuing the gesture. It turned out to be that the student was too shy to come in and was motioning the teacher to come out into the hallway. The Japanese up and down motion of the hand, palm down, is "come here," but the same gesture is read "good-bye" in the West.

Being able to understand each other requires a deep insight into cultural patterns if we are to know not only what other people say, but what they mean.

We should also consider the use of the silence in communication. Rather than a void of communication, silence can communicate agreement, apathy, awe, confusion, contemplation, disagreement, embarrassment, obligation, regret, repressed hostility, respect, sadness, thoughtfulness, or any number of meanings. Traditionally, Eastern societies such as India, China, and Japan have valued silence more than Western society. Oliver (1971, cited in Jandt, 2003, 112) observed that: "Silence in Asia has commonly been entirely acceptable, whereas in the West, silence has generally been considered socially

disagreeable.”

The Westerners often cannot stand the Japanese silence and will often consider it even rude, since to be sociable and congenial means a constant flow of words. The Japanese, on the other hand, are not afraid of the absence of speech, since the unsaid sometimes communicates more than the said. In business negotiations an understanding of this difference in the "tempo" of action and reaction can be important in tying up a deal. Interpreters who are insensitive to the subtleties of these cultural differences often prove to be more of a detriment than a help (Taylor 1997, 35).

Cultural injunctions against excessive verbalizing still affect everyday behavior in Japan.

Most Americans are familiar with the expression "Silence is golden," but few know it in its most familiar form in Japan "Speech is silver, but silence is golden." Indeed, Japanese proverbs indicating distrust of words and the value of silence are numerous. "Hollow drums make the most noise" is a favorite. One also commonly hear "Keep your mouth closed and your eyes open," and occasionally even the old Chinese saying, "In your speech, honey; in your heart, a sword." Americans tend to believe that if something hasn't been put into words it has not been communicated, and that if someone has something to say, he should say it. Conversely, Americans usually associate silence in social situations with something negative—tention, hostility, awkwardness, or shyness.

The Japanese attitudes towards speech and silence are quite different. Speaking in itself is not regarded as highly as it is in the West generally.

Speaking too much is associated in Japan with immaturity or a kind of empty-headedness. It is also associated with women. There is a Japanese character made of three kanji (Chinese characters) for "woman": the character means "noise."

Silence, on the other hand, have many meanings in a Japanese setting. Silence is not simply the absence of sound or speech, a void to be filled, as Americans tend to regard it. Not speaking can sometimes convey respect for the person who has spoken or the ideas expressed. Silence can be a medium that the parties share, a means of unifying, in contrast to words which separate. Silence in conversation is often compared to the white space in brush painting or calligraphy scroll. A picture is not richer, more accurate, or more complete if such spaces are filled in. To do so would be to confuse and detract from what is presented.

Japanese and Americans often confuse each other in the way they speak and treat silence. An American asks a Japanese a question and there is a pause before the Japanese responds. If the question is fairly direct, the pause may be even longer as the Japanese considers how to avoid a direct answer. The American, however, may assume that the pause is because the question was not clearly understood and hence he may rephrase the question. It often happens that the American is himself just uncomfortable

with the silence and trying to fill in with words to reduce his own uneasiness. In any case, the additional verbalization is only likely to make the situation more difficult for the Japanese. Not only has the American asked two or more questions in the space appropriate for one, he has separated himself by not sharing in a thoughtful silence.

Japanese history has influenced current day attitudes towards speaking and keeping silence. To fit in was to know one's space; to speak out might well mean to lose one's head. Along with so many other features of Japanese society, attitude towards speaking have changed considerably; older people complain that younger people talk too much these days. Listening respectfully is an appropriate behavior for one in a subordinate position—that is, one who is younger, of lower rank, serving a host, and so on. While this pattern has its counterparts in America, age, seniority, rank, and role as host or guest are not nearly as influential as in Japan. An American supervisor may admire an employee who speaks right up—depending upon what the person has to say. In Japan, it is more likely that the “speaking right up” in itself would be offensive. The American “bright” young man becomes “brash” young man in Japanese terms.

A top American executive based in Tokyo discovered after working in Japan for several years that he had been misjudging Japanese associates by evaluating them largely on the basis of their styles of listening and speaking. “I just didn't realize that I had been taking quick, clear, direct questions as a sign of an alert listener and a good staff member. I wonder how many Japanese I have misjudged, in and out of the office, simply because they didn't give me that kind of response. Now I wonder if I hired the worst—least typically Japanese—and dismissed some of the best.”

Knowing people of another country must inevitably involve knowing its culture. To really know a language is to know how the mind works and responds to certain things.

Verbal communication, especially of concepts and ideas, is far less important in Japan than is in the West, even among the well educated. Japanese live in a culture that fosters elegant, standardized human interchange and teaches people to project to others a formal persona using an established calculus of standardized words and gestures.

Only in private and with people they feel comfortable with are Japanese likely to reveal the many facets—gritty, funny, wacky, creative, sensuous, intuitive, easygoing, sharp, perceptive, kindly—of their real humanity (March 1996, 150).

3. Japanese Language

3. 1. Expressions of Hierarchy

Japanese language is a diversity-conscious tongue. Even if one does not assume any direct correlation between language and culture, one must acknowledge that Japanese, which is sensitive to diversity, reflects Japan's culture patterns to a considerable extent. Japanese is a sexist language, differentiating between male and female vocabulary,

expressions, and accents (Oatey, 2000, 199). The male language is supposed to be coarse, crude, and aggressive, while the female language is expected to be soft, polite, and submissive. Even at the level of self-identification, the male expressions for “I”, *boku*, *ore*, and *washi*, differ from their more formal and refined female counterparts, *watashi* and *watakushi*. Japanese is also a hierarchy-oriented language (Yoshio 2004, 8). There is no doubt that hierarchical differences affect interaction between Japanese people in their every day lives.

Indeed, in many situations it is difficult to know how to behave unless one can place the other people present in a hierarchical order to oneself. This begins from the moment of greeting, for bowing is a good example of the expression of status differences. One bows deeply to a superior than to an inferior, and one should stay down longer than one's superior. An amusing situation arises where the relation is unclear, for each side will try to stay down longer, on the assumption that it is better to err on the inferior side than on the superior one. The custom of exchanging name cards on meeting a new person helps to resolve such problems.

Speech in Japanese also varies depending on the relationship between the partners engaged in a conversation. The complicated system of speech levels make it possible to show different degrees of respect or self-depreciation, and the choice of inappropriate levels can sound very offensive. It is even possible to be rudely over-polite. Verb ending vary and some common words, such as “go”, “come”, and “speak”, have completely different forms according to the degree of being used and the location of their use. It is virtually impossible to have a conversation without making a decision about the appropriate level to use (Hendry,2003, 103).

Terms of address also vary. In the family, brothers and sisters are always distinguished according to whether they are older or younger, and this same model is transferred into wider relations between children. As a general principle in the house, inferior members address superior ones with a term of relationship, while superior ones may use personal names, and this same form of distinction is carried into the world at large. Within specific institutions, where members occupy named positions in the hierarchical scale, they will be addressed by their titles by more junior members, whom they will address by name.

3. 2. Loan Words

The Japanese have a genius for importing, borrowing, and then adapting to suit their national purposes. The ease with which Japanese borrows, modifies, and adopts foreign words and idioms is perhaps its greatest asset and in no way detracts from the strength of Japanese culture or its fundamental homogeneity.

Primitive Japanese was probably already an amalgam of various dialect of Korean

type with admixtures of Chinese and other words even before the language started to be inundated with Chinese and its writing system in the sixth century. The Chinese linguistic influx was thoroughly modified and absorbed, but by the ninth century it left a mixed language, natively Japanese in structure but heavily Sinified in vocabulary. After further additions of vocabulary from China over the next several centuries, Japanese emerged as a language in which more words, especially in the learned vocabulary, were of Chinese than Japanese origin (Reichauer 1994, 384).

More recently a second great linguistic wave, this time from the West, swept the country. It started with a sprinkling of Portuguese words in the sixteenth century and subsequently of Dutch, but it became a tidal wave in the nineteenth century. The pseudo-classic Greek and Latin terminology of modern science was adopted, and the German contributed especially in the field of medicine and French in the arts, but most of the words came straight out of English, the rising new international language of trade, brought by American and English teachers and merchants. Hundreds of English words were in common use by the time the militarists tried to turn back the tide in the 1930, and thousands more entered the language with the American occupation and the subsequent emergence of Japan into the world market. English words have become so prevalent that the conversation of a contemporary intellectual, the advertisements on television, or even much household chitchat would be quite incomprehensible to persons who knew only the Japanese of a century ago.

Japanese uses approximately 7000 English words. Once a taxi driver was asked to name all the parts of his car. He mumbled out about thirty items: *handoru* (handle, or steering wheel), *gia* (gear), *taiya* (tire), *heddo raito* (head light), *buleeki* (brake), *bampa* (bumper) and so on and on and on. He called a door that was partially closed a *han-doa*, Japanese *han* “half” and English *doa* “door”—a door that is half shut. The driver goes to a gas station and asks for *man'tan*, Japanese *man* “full” and the shortened English “tank”—“Filled up!”

One would imagine that, after such massive linguistic borrowings from the world's two most widespread languages, the Japanese would be well prepared for verbal communication with the outside world and many foreigners would find an open door to fluency in Japanese, but this is not the case. The basic structure of the Japanese language has remained almost unaffected by either Chinese or English. By sheer accident Chinese and English have become languages in which word order determines meaning (“The cat sees the dog” or “The dog sees the cat”), but Japanese has remained a strictly agglutinative language in which the concluding word, which is a verb or adjective, ties onto itself subsidiary elements that specify such things as tense, mood, politeness, and whether the sentence is causative, passive, negative, or a question. Chinese and English are structurally so alike that a person speaking in English words with Chinese

word order can produce perfectly understandable pidgin English. A similar combination of Japanese word order with either Chinese or English words would make only gibberish. For example, the simple verb *kaku*, “to write,” can be expanded through agglutination into *kakaserarenakattanaraba*, “If (he) had not been caused to write,” or dozens of other forms that would defy direct translation into Chinese or English.

Even the individual words borrowed from Chinese and English do not help very much. The Chinese words as used in Japanese were borrowed in now outdated ancient pronunciation and so distorted to fit the limitations of the Japanese phonetic system as to be quite incomprehensible to Chinese. Only a very occasional name or word, such as Taiwan, leaps out as being mutually intelligible. In the case of English, more words may be identifiable but certainly not most. Many curious mispronunciations arise from the Japanese inability to pronounce “l” and several other sounds used in English, and in the ending of all syllables with a vowel, except in the case of “n”. Thus they have *raion* for “lion” and *hoomu* for “home” and also as an abbreviation of *purattofoomu*, “railway platform.” The Japanese also cannot pronounce most groupings of consonants, and thus break them up into multiple syllables, as in *Saruturu*, the Japanese form for the name of the French philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre.

A further complication is the changed meanings Japanese give to many borrowed words. *Handoru*, from “handle,” is a steering wheel, and *kurakushon*, from the outmoded word “klaxon,” is the horn on a car. Even more mystifying are Japanese inventions from English words. *Kuuraa*, from “cooler,” is an air conditioner, a *naita* (“nighter”) is a night game in *beesu-boolu* (“baseball”), a *Guriin-kaa* (“Green Car”) is a first-class coach on a train, and a *saraliman* (“salary man”), as we have seen, is an office worker.

When a Japanese says, “I live in a mansion,” he does not mean an elegant manor house, but just an apartment building. Once, some enterprising real estate salesman glamorized his modern apartment building by calling it the “mansion,” and the name has stuck for any new apartment building with pretensions of being up-to-date. In a restaurant, when rice is requested as *gohan*, it comes in a bowl; if requested as “rice” (pronounced approximately as *laisu*), you will get the same rice served on a plate (Natsuko 1998, 155).

Abbreviations of English words, which tend to become annoying polysyllabic in Japanese, are still more baffling but often ingenious. *Zene-suto* for *zeneraru-sutoraiki* is a general strike, and *pan-suto* means “panty stockings,” more usually called panty hose in America. *Beesu-appu*, or “base up,” means an across-the-board raise in base pay, an important concept for which they have no convenient term, and special honors should be paid to the delightful *sayonara hoomu-ran*, which quite reasonably is a home run that wins the game in the last half of the ninth inning.

If a Japanese friend suggests that you have some “pine juice.” Don’t expect a new

Japanese pine-flavored drink. It is only the abbreviation for pine-apple juice. The man walking up and down the railroad station platform shouting, “*Aisu! Aisu!*” is, of course, selling ice cream. Shopping is done in the *depaato* (department store), and one lives in an *apaato* (apartment).

Such terms are, of course, incomprehensible to English speakers, and Japanese are dismayed to discover that hundreds of the English words they habitually use are so much Greek, or Japanese, to speakers of English. The common witticism that the United States and England are two countries divided by a common language might better be applied to “Japanese English” (Reischauer 1994, 386).

Conclusion

Language is a product of the thought and behavior of a society. An individual language speaker’s effectiveness in a foreign language is directly related to his understanding of the culture of that language (Taylor 1997, 51).

Japanese culture pattern contributes much to the language barrier between Japan and the rest of the world. Its uniqueness—its distinctive culture, its unusual type of language, its unique and very difficult writing system, and its strong patterns of group organization—sets it apart. Above the close-knit family stands the local community, above it the modern company, and at the top the nation, which is geographically, linguistically, and culturally very distinct from all others. To the Japanese, the world seems quite obviously divided between Japan and the rest of the world. Even the use of foreign models and the heavy borrowings from China and the West of political institutions, culture, and language does not change the situation (McCormack 1996, 160). These borrowings become part of Japanese culture and therefore part of the amalgam all Japanese share, but they do not change the uniqueness of Japan (Edwin, p. 196).

Uniqueness makes Japanese language a heavily culture-laden one, which have to be understood and used in a culture-oriented way. Thus, knowing the culture is indispensable for the non-Japanese to communicate efficiently with Japanese.

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