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Culturally Influenced Communication Patterns: Overview, Implications and Applications

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Abstract

Culturally influenced preferences affect the way speakers and writers organize and communicate information, as well as how they respond to other communicators. This paper provides an overview of a number of culturally influenced communication patterns in speaking and writing, focusing on prominent differences between Japanese and English.

Specific areas of contrast in oral communication include listener behavior, simultaneous talk, and pauses in conversation; they also include the communicative functions of requests, invitations, and refusals. The discussion of written communication focuses on culturally influenced rhetorical patterns of organization and discourse features related to rhetorical organization.

Some of the specific implications of these contrasting cultural preferences in speaking and writing are explored in relation to their effects on cross-cultural understanding and problems in intercultural communication. Finally, several pedagogical applications of the findings are suggested for teachers and learners of both English and Japanese.

Introduction

An overview of a number of culturally influenced communication patterns in speaking and writing will be presented, focusing on prominent differences between Japanese and English. In addition, some of the specific implications of these contrasting cultural preferences will be explored in relation to their effects on cross-cultural

understanding and problems in intercultural communication, and several pedagogical applications of the findings will be suggested for teachers and learners of both Japanese and English.

The paper will be divided into two sections: the first discussing primarily oral communication and the second, mainly written communication. The first section will discuss cultural contrasts in conversational styles and in particular communicative functions related to speech act theory. The discussion in the second section will focus on culturally influenced rhetorical patterns of organization and discourse features related to rhetorical structure in writing.

Oral Communication

Conversational Style

Crucial differences have been identified between Japanese and American interaction styles in conversation. These include such diverse aspects as attitudes toward verbal and nonverbal communication and degrees of self-disclosure (Barnlund, 1989), as well as systems of politeness (Kitao, 1989; Sakamoto & Natsuoka, 1982; Shibamoto, 1985). Here I will focus on three areas of contrast in conversational style between English and Japanese: listener behavior, simultaneous talk, and pauses.

Backchanneling. As pointed out by LoCastro (1987), Japanese conversational partners tend to show attentiveness and interest to the speaker with encouraging verbal and nonverbal behavior. Known as *aizuchi*, common verbal expressions include *hai*, *ee*, and *so desu ne*, and nonverbal signals most frequently involve smiling and head nodding. Although English conversational partners also engage in varying degrees of supportive listener behavior, known in the linguistic literature as backchanneling (Yngve, 1970), the amount is less than among Japanese speakers, particularly of simultaneous backchanneling (Kuroda, 1992).

Simultaneous speech. Kuroda (1992) studied simultaneous speech in Japanese and American talk shows. From her data she identified six kinds of information-bearing simultaneous speech in their conversations: (1) overlapping (where one speaker starts talking before the other speaker has quite finished, but the first speaker still finishes the utterance), (2) two speakers starting to speak at the same time, (3) compatible simultaneous talk (similar to backchanneling, except that it adds some information or asks a question), (4) two kinds of successful interruption (where the second speaker begins a turn in the middle of the first speaker's turn, and the first speaker stops before completing the utterance), (a) interruption for clarification and (b) interruption to take the floor, and (5) unsuccessful interruption (where the second speaker tries but gives up the attempt to take the floor). By comparing the frequency per minute of speech, she found that the American speakers overlapped each other, started speaking at the same time, used compatible simultaneous talk, and interrupted to take the floor more than twice as often as the Japanese. The numbers of interruptions for clarification were not significantly different, but the number of unsuccessful interruptions in Japanese was only 1/5 that of the Americans. This last finding could suggest that if someone interrupts in Japanese, the first speaker tends to yield the floor rather than competing to retain it.

Some of the above differences appear to relate to a cultural difference in attitude toward silence. As pointed out by numerous researchers (e.g. Barnlund, 1989; Hinkel, 1994; Land & Whitley, 1989), silence is highly valued by Japanese and other Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist influenced traditions, where meditation and reflection are important. In these traditions, one shows respect for other people's questions by taking the time to think about them and formulate an appropriate response. In contrast, the proverb "speech is silver, silence is gold" notwithstanding, silence in conversation is seen as a failure and is generally stigmatized by English speakers (Miller, 1988). Thus,

longer pauses between turns, less overlapping and fewer instances of two speakers talking at the same time after a pause among Japanese as compared to American conversational partners could be seen as reflecting different attitudes toward silence.

The above differences can also be interpreted in relation to differences in conversational styles identified by Tannen (1986, 1991). The American's overlapping and simultaneous starts appear to reflect features of a "high involvement" style, whereas the Japanese simultaneous *aizuchi* could be seen to signal high involvement in a slightly different way. The American's relatively frequent unsuccessful interruptions and interruptions to get the floor appear to be associated with a "competitive" style. On the other hand, most of the features identified above as Japanese conversational style appear to fit Tannen's "cooperative" style. The American tendency to wait until a speaker pauses to give encouraging utterances, rather than carrying out backchanneling simultaneously, may also relate to a "cooperative" style in the sense of showing deference to the speaker's turn.

Implications. Looking at implications of such differences in conversational style, it is easy to see that English speakers may be given the impression that Japanese speakers are quiet, shy, passive, nonassertive, and lacking in confidence. Unfortunately, such an apparent lack of self-confidence could ultimately lead English speakers to question the underlying competence or ability of the Japanese speakers. In addition, the frequent use of certain kinds of backchanneling transferred from Japanese, such as "yes-yes-yes" and head nodding, could be misconstrued as agreement with the content of what the speaker is saying rather than simple polite attention to support the speaker's turn. At the same time, the differences easily lead to impressions of English speakers as overly talkative, nonreflective, superficial, insensitive, and aggressive/pushy—qualities that tend not to inspire trust. Furthermore, their relative lack of simultaneous backchanneling could be interpreted by a Japanese conversational

partner as coldness, distance, or a lack of interest.

Considering these findings in relation to possible pedagogical applications, several recommendations suggest themselves. First, given the contrasting cultural styles and expectations, English and Japanese conversation teachers should help their students become conscious of the different attitudes toward silence and turn-taking. Japanese EFL students may find it advantageous to learn ways to fill pauses and respond more quickly to questions, and they may wish to become aware of strategies for getting the floor and preventing interruptions. In contrast, English speaking JSL students may benefit from learning to pause and reflect before responding to questions in Japanese, practicing simultaneous *aizuchi,* and attempting to allow for longer pauses, i.e. developing patience for silence in conversation in Japanese.

Communicative Functions

A second particularly prominent area of cultural contrast in oral, as well as written, communication involves communicative functions of language, based on the notion of speech acts, for example invitations and their acceptance or refusal. For the last fifteen years, researchers in language philosophy, pragmatics and sociolinguistics have been investigating cultural preferences in choices of linguistic expressions and underlying semantic formulas for these social functions in relation to such factors as the relative age and status of the participants, the degree of intimacy between them, their genders, and the social setting, and comparing the preferred patterns across cultures (e.g. Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Wolfson, 1989; Wolfson & Judd, 1983). To give examples of the types of differences there are between English and Japanese and the problems that arise, this section will consider three of the functions that appear to differ somewhat in Japanese and English, potentially causing misunderstanding: requests, invitations, and refusals.

Requests

Many American and British teachers in Japan, myself included, have been shocked the first time they were approached outside of class by a student holding a paper written in English and saying, "I want you to correct my English." In fact, colleagues have reported to me that even after several years in Japan they are still offended by this way of requesting their help, which sounds "arrogant and pushy." This reaction no doubt stems from the often unconscious awareness that in English, superiors (bosses, teachers, parents) formulate requests in this way to subordinates (employees, students, children), whereas peers or subordinates do not tend to use this form. One British English teacher in Japan recently suggested to me that the more indirect and thus ostensibly more polite, "I would like you to correct my English" sounded even worse to him, because it had an "edge of imperiousness" (i.e. a nuance of arrogance, as if it were a command coming from a royal person). While native English speakers have reported to me that they find "I would like you to correct my English" acceptable from student to teacher, further investigation is necessary to determine whether native speakers of English would ever actually use this form, and if so under what circumstances.

Preliminary data collection suggests that the most common forms of polite requests in American English involve the use of modals, such as "Could you...?" and "Would you...?" (Anecdotal evidence suggests that British English speakers may use "Will you...?" more frequently and/or find it more polite than "Would you...?" but this hypothesis requires further research.) The politeness marker for requests that is learned earliest is undoubtedly the word "please." This word is explicitly taught to children, who from a very young age are exhorted with "What do you say?" any time they make a request, often in the imperative form, without the word "please" in it.

Factors influencing the choice of request form include the perceived difficulty of carrying out the request (the "cost"), and the relationship

between speakers, including status and intimacy (Kitao, 1989). The relative importance of these factors requires further study. Another factor that may affect the choice of possible request forms is the commonly accepted stereotype that English speakers are direct, while Japanese speakers are indirect. In actuality, both English and Japanese speakers often use varying degrees of indirectness in requests, depending on the specific factors (difficulty and relationship) involved. Cross-cultural differences in terms of relative effects of different factors imply that both Japanese and English requesters may be seen as impolite and pushy by the other group. For example, LoCastro (1993) found relatively few markers of politeness in English speech by Japanese speakers, which could be attributed to low pragmatic competence level caused by a lack of experience interacting with foreigners or an acceptance of the stereotype that English speakers are always direct.

Invitations

As pointed out by a number of English textbooks (e.g. Richards, Hull, & Proctor, 1990; Kitao & Kitao, 1991), invitations potentially cause problems across cultures. First, what constitutes an invitation is not always clear to an L2 speaker. As a Japanese learner, I have sometimes felt confused when being asked whether I had already eaten lunch. On several occasions I interpreted this question as an invitation or a pre-invitation to have lunch, only to find it was not. On the other hand, the expression "Do you want to...?" in English is generally intended as an invitation, whereas Japanese speakers of English may be likely to use the same form to ask about intentions, rather than make an invitation, and may be embarrassed to find that the native English speaker responds with an acceptance to an unintended "invitation." Such an incident was reported by an American married to a Japanese woman, who asked her visiting American in-laws, "Do you want to visit Kyoto this week?" and was dismayed when they enthusiastically thanked her for the "invitation" to take them to Kyoto,

whereas she had a full schedule that week and had been merely asking about their plans.

Another area of substantial misinterpretation involves the use of invitation-like formulas as markers of friendliness. Examples of such expressions include "Let's get together for lunch soon" and "Drop by any time"—which may sound like invitations but are not intended as invitations. When there is no follow-up to the offering of these expressions, those who have interpreted them as invitations quite naturally feel slighted because they perceive that the invitation was insincere. These perceptions of friendly expressions as invitations that never materialize have led foreign students in America to perceive Americans as insincere and untrustworthy. On the other hand, either English or Japanese speakers could be trapped into going along with unintended invitations if they feel too embarrassed to explain the misunderstanding. In terms of pedagogical applications, EFL and JSL teachers could present invitation expressions in contrast with commonly confused expressions.

Refusals

When refusing invitations, English speakers tend to give positive evaluation and a specific excuse, whereas Japanese speakers tend to apologize and give less specific reasons (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990). When refusing requests, English speakers tend to give specific reasons why they cannot fulfill the request, whereas Japanese speakers have a well-known reputation as tending to avoid saying "No" and using many indirect expressions (e.g. Ueda, 1974).

As a result of these cultural differences, English speakers may think Japanese refusers do not really want to accept the invitation, and consequently the English speaker may feel rejected. In contrast, Japanese speakers may feel English speakers are egotistical, self-centered, or inappropriately personal, which may limit the possibility of friendship between the two groups. Finally, English speakers may not understand

that their request has been refused—and may thus see the indirect refuser as devious, untrustworthy, or uncooperative.

Further Applications

In the case of all these functions, raising learners' awareness of the differences may be more important than trying to attain fluency with them. One effective consciousness raising approach for EFL students is presented by Kitao and Kitao (1991). Each chapter in the text begins with a conversation between a Japanese and an English speaker, with each of the conversations containing some aspects of confusion or misunderstanding due to differences in cultural expectations involving one communicative function. Students can analyze the conversations, attempting to pinpoint problems and suggest improvements. Alternatively, they can compare the original conversation with a revised and improved version provided in the text, attempting to discover where miscommunications and misunderstandings occur and why.

Written Communication

Rhetorical Organization and Features

Although the above speech acts can be realized in writing, they occur predominantly in oral communication. Other kinds of cultural differences can be seen in expository English writing and public speaking, where the most salient differences between Japanese and English involve rhetorical organization of ideas and culturally influenced features of rhetorical structure.

Researchers have identified prominent cultural differences in rhetorical organization between English and Japanese. English writers tend to develop their ideas deductively, that is, a main point is followed by specific support. The introduction contains a thesis or summary, and tight transitions connect paragraphs. The conclusion restates the

thesis or provides a summary, with no new, unsupported ideas introduced. Generally, the paper contains a thesis taking a strong persuasive position (Bander, 1978; Hinds, 1983, 1987; Kaplan, 1966, 1987; Kobayashi, 1984; Leki, 1989; Reid, 1988; Smalley & Hank, 1982). In contrast, Japanese writers, perhaps unconsciously influenced by traditional Japanese rhetorical patterns like *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* (introduction-follow up-change-conclusion), tend to develop ideas inductively, placing their main point later in their essays. The introduction presents the topic without stating a specific point of view, and paragraphs are connected relatively loosely. The conclusion states an ending point, and may include a summary and/or an expanded idea (e.g. a suggestion for solution to a problem). Generally, more is left up to the reader, with no strong position advocated (Hinds, 1983, 1987, 1990; Kobayashi, 1984; Mok, 1992).

In a study comparing evaluations by four groups of readers (inexperienced and experienced Japanese university students, Japanese English teachers, and native English teachers), Kobayashi and Rinnert (1993) found that on an analytic topic (i.e. the disadvantages of TV), the inexperienced students tended to prefer the Japanese rhetorical pattern, as opposed to the native English teachers, who tended to favor the American pattern, and the experienced students and the Japanese teachers, who tended to fall in between the first two groups. Specifically, a number of the inexperienced students criticized the American essay for including the main point in the introduction and again in the conclusion, which they perceived as redundant, and for taking too one-sided a stand, thus creating a lack of balance. In contrast, the native speakers and many of the Japanese teachers and experienced students criticized the Japanese rhetorical pattern for such features as not including a thesis statement in the introductory paragraph and not taking a stand in the conclusion.

Finally, Hinds (1992) demonstrates specifically how Japanese readers can find coherence in text that is incoherent for English readers

of the translation. Without the native English speakers' strong expectations for the introduction-body-conclusion schema, Japanese readers are freer to make the necessary connections to make sense of the passage. Specific factors include a heavy reliance on the title to clarify the purpose of the paper, tolerance for placement of the summary statement in the middle, and acceptance of additional specific support for the summary placed in the end position.

Implications and Applications

As pointed out by Hinds (1990), the purpose of writing can vary greatly across cultures. English readers usually expect the purpose to be to persuade or to convince the reader of the writer's position, whereas readers in other languages, including Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai, generally expect the purpose to be "to introduce a set of observations loosely related to a general topic" in order to allow the reader "to sort and evaluate these observations"—ultimately "getting readers to think for themselves, to consider the observations made, and to draw their own conclusions" about something they may not have thought about before (p. 99).

Failure to meet readers' expectations will result in judgments of incoherence, resulting in evaluation as poor quality writing, as shown by Hinds (1983). One obvious implication is that raising Japanese and English students' awareness of the differences in reader expectations across cultures should improve their ability to meet the expectations of their readers, thus leading to better evaluations of their writing. Further, if native-like proficiency in the L2 rhetorical pattern is a goal, then, as suggested by Hinkel (1994), "detailed familiarity with Aristotelian logic and rationality" (p. 374) may be helpful for Japanese EFL students. By the same token, instruction in the Confucian-Taoist tradition may prove beneficial for English JSL students.

Teachers of English to Japanese students can help them recognize features of the English rhetorical pattern, including a thesis located in

the introduction, support for the thesis elaborated with specifics in the body, a tight logical connection between paragraphs, and a conclusion that refers back to the introduction and thesis.

It may be helpful for teachers to realize that many Japanese students tend to prefer inductive (i.e. specific to general) ordering of ideas, and balanced, rather than one-sided presentation of ideas (Harder, 1980), and that they are critical of what they see as redundancy in the American pattern when the thesis appears in both the introduction and the conclusion (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1993). Although little is known about the evaluation of Japanese writing with an English rhetorical organizational pattern, based on the research on effects of rhetorical patterns on L1 and L2 readers' comprehension (e.g. Carrell, 1984, Connor, 1985; Eggington, 1987), we can infer that similar instruction in Japanese rhetorical conventions should prove beneficial to English JSL readers, and perhaps writers as well.

As a pedagogical tool, providing students with short sample essays that demonstrate contrasting L1 and L2 rhetorical features has proved helpful in raising Japanese ESL students' awareness of the rhetorical conventions of American English (Hinkel, 1994). By extension, the same technique should prove useful in teaching native English JSL students to write effectively in Japanese.

Conclusion

As fascinating as cross-cultural differences may be, one of the most rewarding aspects of studying them is often the discovery that there are deeper similarities underlying the differences. If they have looked far enough beyond the surface, many of my students who start by studying differences across cultures come to realize that universal human needs and desires are served by the surface differences. Ultimately, we are all seeking smooth social interaction and harmonious relations in oral communication, and a meaningful connection between

the writer and the reader in written communication. Through research on culturally influenced communication patterns, we can gain the necessary insight to cross the barriers and establish solid understanding between members of our different cultures.

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Notes