

Intercultural Communication Issues between Japanese & Americans

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1945, the bilateral relationship between the United States and Japan has been one of the most important economic and diplomatic ties in the world. Maintaining this relationship offers challenges to the peoples of both nations as they face a variety of issues when attempting to communicate with each other given the disparity of their respective cultures. It is often pointed out by various commentators that the Japanese people are much more akin to the people of Great Britain than with the people of the United States. Great Britain and Japan are both small, island nations and have economies dependent on international commerce and banking ; while the United States sits upon a huge land-mass and abundant natural resources. Despite the importance of this strong bilateral relationship, it remains a challenge when Japanese and Americans come together in the communication arena both at the international level and in day-to-day contact.

SILENCE AS COMMUNICATION

“One cannot not communicate,” is one of Paul Watzlawick’s axioms, and communication professors have confounded freshmen students for years with

this observation (29). It is a natural tendency to believe that when we are silent, the communication pipeline is shutdown — but as Watzlawick intuitively suggests in his axioms, silence speaks volumes ; the communication pipeline pours forth a gush of information. For example, some outwardly appearing non-communicative techniques such as The Cold Shoulder, The Silent Treatment, or The Stonewall deliver the powerful messages of icy disdain, suffocating silence, or a wall of impenetrable, unscalable hardness. One should note that both Americans and Japanese make full use of these three modes of silence in signaling displeasure towards another person — but the Japanese are much more comfortable with a silent pause during normal conversation than Americans, who become discomfited and want to fill the silence with talk. Inverse to this, during telephone conversations, the Japanese become uncomfortable when Americans listen intently, trying to catch every word and nuance, and failing to say *hai, hai* (a Japanese utterance that indicates hearing sound from the speaker and loosely translates as *yes, yes*) ; this silence causes the Japanese speaker to start repeating *moshi moshi* (roughly translates to *hello, hello*), believing that the telephone connection has been lost.

TECHNOLOGY

Modern life adds new twists to the Cold Shoulder, The Silent Treatment, or the Stonewall with the intrusion of technology into our lives. The latter half of the 20th Century ushered in a surge of consumer electronics that eliminates face-to-face contact and adds layers of high-tech impenetrability to the communication process. From the 1950s onward, as telephones became a

standard household item, to signal disdain or anger, one could merely refuse to pick up the telephone when it rang. With the subsequent invention of the telephone answering machine, incoming calls could be screened as to whether the receiver of the communication would deign to respond to the caller. The inevitable next technological step, ushered in by the power of computing, incorporated into smartphones, has created software that sets up 'ignore' features in various Social Network Services that erects an unscalable wall of cold, deafening silence.

Interestingly, video telephone technology was created in the 1950s but failed to find a consumer market. Apparently, people did not want the person on the other end of the telephone line to see their yawns of boredom or looks of irritation during a communication session. Recently, many users of Internet chat services set their preferences to 'voice only' and do not enable the video feature — preferring to conceal their facial expressions or failure to comb their hair or apply makeup.

SPEAKING DISTANCE

Japanese and Americans employ similar speaking distance (called proxemics by Edward T. Hall), with both cultures comfortable with an arm's length of space between speaker and listener. However, Japanese will stretch this distance for safety concerns when engaging in the act of deep bowing. The deep bow requires the participants to retreat further than arm's reach in order to keep from striking heads while executing the maneuver. Immediately after the bow, participants will regroup to the arm's length range when continuing conversation. But spatial limitations in Japan often put communicators well

inside the normal speaking range. As the cities of Japan have always been crowded and space a premium, rooms are small, and seating finds Americans forced into the squeamish situation of having to sit with their shoulders brushing their neighbor. Americans and other westerners may be observed before meetings attempting to move chairs a little further apart in order to gain a modicum of distance ; however, most situations find this impossible to achieve, and Americans wedge themselves into tight seating arrangements in traditional restaurants or other venues in Japan. Through necessity, Japanese have adapted to tight living situations and automatically shutdown their desire to be at arm's reach when entering rooms that require tight seating ; Americans have to learn to adapt to the Japanese environment and consciously disarm their squeamishness at the close proximity of fellow diners or meeting attendees.

Another communication issue of a more lighthearted nature involves the use of the nonverbal *wink*. Traditionally in Japan, the *wink* as a communicative device has not been used in day-to-day communication activities and is mostly found in the entertainment or advertising worlds. As a means to convey secret information, running the gamut from inside jokes to romantic flirtation, Americans and many other western cultures employ the *wink*. But why is India the only Asian country to make use of this nonverbal ? The answer may be two-fold for Japan : 1. The culture of Japan requires one to keep the face clear of emotion ; 2. Simple, facial physiology. Children in Japan are taught to conceal their emotions and speaking the Japanese language requires very little facial movement ; hence, using a facial expression as the *wink* violates this cultural tenet. And as to physiology, most Americans and other

westerners tend to have larger noses than Japanese and other Asians, making it possible to hide the wink from some of their audience — *excluding* them from the secret information — while *exposing* it to targeted listeners. This nonverbal technique simply would be physiologically impossible for many Japanese as they would not be able to conceal the *wink* behind the ridge of their noses, and turning their heads greatly to the side would reveal the nonverbal, communication subterfuge.

CULTURE & LANGUAGE

Any student of foreign language eventually comes to understand the interwoven nature of language and culture, and that cultural studies are a corollary to language studies. One must learn the plethora of cultural details of the land where the target language is spoken. For example, American students of the Japanese language living in the city of Sendai, Japan will be confronted with an avalanche of Japanese vocabulary distinct to Miyagi Prefecture that may or may not be found in a dictionary. The students will be assaulted with the names local food items such as *sasakamboko* (fish paste), *gyutan* (beef tongue), and *kaiten sushi* (revolving sushi), or local place names such as Yaotome, Komegafukuro, or Yagiyama. But as overwhelmed and intimidated Americans may find themselves in the morass of new vocabulary, it also brings the challenges and joys of experiencing a new culture.

Robert Gibson describes culture as a mixture of sharing attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavioral traits. And in the same vein, Martin Soley defines culture as sharing a similarity of perception. Notwithstanding the relevance of these two views, one would extend the definition further to encompass the

utilitarian aspect of culture as the means and techniques that a people have developed to survive in a given environment. The strategies necessary for survival in a desert culture diverge significantly from the strategies needed to exist in an island, water culture, or a hot, southern-climate culture as opposed to a cold, northern-climate culture. The survival techniques and strategies are very different, and not transferable to existence in a radically different environment. The people of a sub-Saharan Africa — where water is reserved strictly for the consumption by humans and livestock — would be shocked at the lavish use of water for daily showering and bathing as per Japanese island culture, or the American habit of using huge amounts of water for ornamental lawns and car washes. Moreover, few cultures on this planet would be able to emulate the abilities that the Japanese people have in surviving on a string of islands, or more precisely, a string of volcanoes arising from the most dangerous and misnamed ocean in the world, balanced precariously astride an extremely active earthquake zone.

As mentioned above, the culture of Japan tends to be more attuned to Great Britain than the United States, and this analogy holds true for the mutually held view on royalty between the two island nations. Both Japan and Great Britain have a long history of royal families ; moreover, it has only been 147 years since the Meiji Restoration brought an end to the feudal era in Japan — scant time since samurai strode the marches of Japan and shoguns ruled supreme, leaving the influence of feudalism on the structure of the Japanese language. Japanese word order of /Subject/ (often omitted) /Object/ /Object/ /Verb/ permits the bringer of ill tidings to avoid the business end of a Japanese sword by holding off the bad news throughout the sentence, speaking indi-

rectly, and being able to change the entire meaning of the sentence with the verb in the final position. Literally a sentence structure that can *Save the Messenger*.

Even before the American Revolution, the English, for hundreds of years were gaining more rights from the Crown : The Magna Carta Libertatum in 1215 CE is a major milestone in the development of modern democracy, and anticipates the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 CE. With their victory in the War of Independence from Great Britain, Americans have thrown away the concept of royalty, declaring all men equal — every man a king, every woman a queen ; hence, Americans tend to speak much more directly and loudly than the British and the Japanese. Where Japanese language structure can *Save the Messenger*, English sentence structure of /S/ /V/ /O/ commits a speaker to a fixed meaning early in the delivery of a sentence that allows little room for the messenger of bad tidings to escape the wrath of his leader, and may find his head on the chopping block ; a sentence structure that *Kills the Messenger*, and when combined with American directness, the messenger has even less chance to avoid incurring the anger of his leader. However, since the pretense exists in America that everyone is royalty, the messenger supposedly cannot be killed — but reprimand, demotion, and employment termination are modern equivalents of *Kill the Messenger*.

In reference to terminating employees, both Japanese and Americans use figurative speech : the Japanese revert to their recent samurai past and the power of the sword and use the idiomatic expression *kubi* (decapitation by sword) ; while Americans revert to their recent frontier past and the power of the gun and use the idiomatic expression *fired* (killed by a firearm).

For Americans interacting with Japanese, they must be aware of the historical and cultural reasons that Japanese speak softly and indirectly, and vis-a-vis, Japanese must remain aware of the cultural heritage that has Americans speaking forcefully and directly.

HIGH CONTEXT & LOW CONTEXT CULTURE

When discussing the concepts of High versus Low Context in relation to culture and communication, one must refrain from the value judgment implicit in the adjectives *High* and *Low*. These words refer only to the amount of shared background information underlying culture — context — that each speaker brings to the communication forum. Edward T. Hall postulated the concepts of context and culture in his book *Beyond Culture* (1976). For the purposes of intercultural communication analysis, Japanese culture exhibits High Context (HC) features while American culture exhibits Low Context (LC) features.

Features of American LC culture find the message is in the expressed words ; communication sessions are of shorter duration, using direct speech, and are task- oriented ; accuracy in content emphasized over accuracy in form, and ability emphasized over age ; social life separated from professional life, and individual orientation rather than group orientation ; and temporary relationships with unclear, group boundaries. Features of Japanese HC culture finds the message is in the physical context or the person, and using indirect speech ; accuracy in form over accuracy in content, and age emphasized over ability ; long-term relationships and clear sense of in-group and out-group boundaries ; and group orientation over individual orientation, and social and

professional life blended. With these two divergent contexts separating Japanese and Americans, it remains a wonder that common ground can be established when interacting with each other, and the features of HC and LC are readily observable in the respective cultures. Examples of *Form over Accuracy* in Japanese society can be observed when Japanese are practicing *Kyudo* (traditional archery), where more instruction is delivered on form and spirit rather than hitting the center of the target, although if the center of target is struck all the better. American archery instruction will place the greatest emphasis on striking the center of the target and will not be concerned with posture, poise or even if archers contort themselves in some strange fashion as long as they can deliver the arrows on target. The focus and drive to hit target center affects American target design : the highest score on a target is the ten-point, center ring — the Bullseye — but the American target further includes an extra tiny ring, sometimes referred to as the *X Ring*, in the center of the target *Bullseye* to break ties in the situation where several archers placed all of their shots in the *Ten Ring* : the competitor who has placed the most arrows in the *Ten Ring* and the *X Ring* wins the contest.

Another example of *Form over Content* may be seen in the classroom with students involved with the activity of writing sentences on the blackboard. When a Japanese student makes a tiny mistake with a single letter in a word, they will erase the word or the *entire* sentence and start over, demonstrating their desire *for* and emphasis *on Form*. American teachers in attendance will become impatient with the slowdown in class momentum, patiently waiting for the student to laboriously re-write the sentence, so they can discuss the grammar or communication *Content* of the sentence. Observing an American stu-

dent in the same situation will find them erasing or striking over the offending letter and continue writing out the sentence, demonstrating the emphasis on *Content*. Furthermore, Japanese and Americans in team-teaching situations finds the Japanese teacher in dismay when observing the American teacher mixing cursive and capitalized letters in the same word or sentence — violating their sense of *Form*, and leading them to believe that the American lacks discipline or education ; the American teacher will be incensed at the waste of class time fiddling with making perfect letters when they want to dig into the *Content* of the sentence.

HUMOR & LAUGHTER

As *humor* and *laughter* tend to be culturally based, American and Japanese styles of humor diverge, and both nationalities may laugh for different reasons. The Japanese people find sarcasm discomfiting, while Americans employ sarcasm constantly. Japanese living in America occasionally may be heard to say the grammatically incorrect question : “Are you *sarcasting* me?” This question shows an irritation with the constant flux of sarcasm prevalent in the conversations of Americans. However, this author has had on several occasions to witness Japanese enjoyment of sarcastic humor. During a volunteer trip to the 2011 tsunami destruction zone in Miyagi Prefecture, my volunteer group passed a steel construction hut that had been crushed by the power of the tsunami with the brand name *Super House* written in *Katakana*. As we stared at the horribly mangled building, one of the Japanese volunteers observed sarcastically : “Not a very *super* house.” It was exactly what I wanted to say but did not want to offend my fellow volunteers with my American sarcasm. Every-

one laughed, and it added a bit of merriment to our grim chore. On another occasion after the Great Eastern Japan Disaster, I was standing at an intersection in the winter with a fellow colleague. Feeling an unseasonably warm breeze blowing from the south, we were talking about how warm it felt in the dead of winter. I took a communication gamble with humor and said that the reason it was so warm was that it was coming from the nuclear reactors melting down in Fukushima Prefecture. After delivering my poor joke, I watched my colleague's face to see if I had offended him since he may have had friends or family living close to the nuclear plant. But he seemed to enjoy the sarcastic, black humor and laughed heartily. I further checked his reaction to make sure that he was not merely laughing out of anxiety from the uncomfortable situation of an American making an insulting attempt at humor.

Japanese laugh when uncomfortable, embarrassed, or in a stressful situation. This cultural trait has led many inveterate boors to believe that they are great and gifted comedians when running through their litany of jokes, mistaking that their Japanese audience laughs with merriment at the wit of their humor when in fact they are laughing merely out of embarrassment for the lame American jokester. The majority of Americans will only laugh if something is humorous or out of derision but not when in a stressful situation — except for people from the upper-Midwest of the United States where laughter *is* employed when uncomfortable or in a stressful situation just like the Japanese. Of course, both Japanese and Americans laugh when something is truly funny, and both nationalities enjoy *slapstick* humor ; moreover, both Japanese and Americans employ the derisive laugh when witnessing situations where unpleasant persons get their just desserts, such as when arrogant driv-

ers, weaving through traffic, and speeding dangerously, get arrested by the traffic police.

CONCLUSION

As the world remains confronted with ever new challenges and dangers, it has become even more important for the freedom loving people of Japan and America to maintain and enhance close, international ties and cooperation for security, trade, and cultural exchanges. And it is through a deep understanding and respect for each other's culture and communication styles that will strengthen the bond of the United States and Japan through the 21st Century and far into the future.

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