# COMMUNICATION GAPS BETWEEN EUROPEAN AND JAPANESE SPEAKERS

(This paper was read at the 5th International ENCoDe seminar held at Preston, U.K. 4-5 February 1993. "Language and Culture Bridges to International Trade")

**Hidasi Judit Prof. College for Foreign Trade Budapest HUNGARY**

Communication problems usually occur for linguistic or for cultural reasons, or for both. The two, however, often overlap for the simple reason that languages normally reflect, to some extent, their cultural and social background. It is, nevertheless, well-known that whereas a foreign language can in principle be learned in the classroom or form textbooks, the communication rules of that language are far more difficult to acquire.

Japanese communication rules, both linguistic and cultural, differ considerably from those of European languages. Still, however dramatically European languages and cultures may vary, yet on the basis of the European cultural inheritance they can be treated as "one community" when contrasted with Japanese. This assumption is supported by the fact that the communication problems encountered with Japanese are more or less the same for all Europeans.

During the couple of years I spent in Japan, I often listened to the Japanese spoken by Europeans. No matter which country they came from, and no matter what their native tongue was, many of the mistakes they made, and much of the trouble they experienced when communicating in Japanese with Japanese native speakers, were common to all. I found this rather striking, since their native language backgrounds were entirely different. I couldn't help wondering how it

was possible that a native speaker of French or English experienced more or less the same problems as I myself did, a native speaker of Hungarian. If one looks at the problem from a linguistic point of view, one would suppose that speakers of Indo-European languages such as English, German, French, Spanish and Russian would encounter problems different from those met by, say, speakers of Hungarian or Finnish - in other words, by speakers of languages belonging to another language group. However this assumption, apparently, does not hold. Why is this?

In attempting to resolve this mystery, I realized that two factors were important. The first is that the Japanese language itself has certain grammatical characteristics which are unusual in any of the languages spoken in European language communities.

Although grammatical categories like agreement, tense and conjugation for person, for instance, do exist in Japanese, just as in most if not in all European languages, they do not manifest themselves on those paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels which a speaker of a European language would expect on the basis of his "European tradition".

Still, one has to admit that Japanese is difficult to learn for Europeans not mainly because it is so very different linguistically, but rather because it represents a totally different culture. The same is true the other way round: European languages are extremely hard for a Japanese to learn, largely owing to the difference in socio-cultural traditions, with all the linguistic implications that this entails.

So far I have touched upon some of the difficulties that Europeans may experience when trying to use the Japanese language. Now let us have a look at the other side of the coin: let us see what happens when Europeans talk with a Japanese in a European language. For this purpose we can take any European

language, not necessarily the mother-tongue of the European communicator. Language-specific characteristics apart, let us try to briefly examine why misunderstandings occur between Japanese and European communicators. What are the communication rules that the Japanese do not hesitate to transfer even when using foreign languages?

Generally speaking, foreigners, even when using a foreign language properly in the grammatical sense, unconsciously tend to preserve the communcation rules of their mother-tongue and of their own society. This is especially so in the case of Japanese people, since communication rules and conventions in Japanese society are observed more strictly than in Europe.

1./ In Japanese communication in general is much less open than in European cultures. When communicating with Japanese, one notices that there are always points in the discussion left unexplained and undeveloped, thus creating the possibility for further consideration and meditation.

2./ This explains among other things, the communicative value of <u>pause</u> in Japanese people's speech. While people in Europe tend constantly to sustain the discussion, possibly not permittting any "empty space" during conversation in order to avoid embarrassment, Japanese people prefer to leave space in conversation for meditation. This phenomenon can be observed not only in the "art of speech", but in practically all forms of Japanese art.*

3./Japanese people are not fond of definite, clear-cut, unambigious statements. They prefer to put things in a vague, ambiguous way. This attitude in

---

*Take, for example, the interiors of Japanese houses (which seem empty to foreigners' eyes), or <u>ikebana</u>, - which, in contrast to European symmetrical bunches of flowers, are loosely composed arrangements of just very few but delicate branches of flowers. Or think of Japanese scrolls - traditional Japanese paintings - where "space" (<u>**ma**</u> in Japanese) plays an important role in the composition.

speech and discussion is expected and appreciated in Japanese etiquette. However, one can imagine how odd it would sound in English if one's question as to whether a Japanese friend was about to get married was answered by the word "Perhaps". The reason for such a strange reply is that even "yes or no" questions are often answered by Japanese people in non-Japanese languages according to their own mother-tongue etiquette. One can generally accept that communicative interaction is guided by cultural conventions or "frames/scripts" (as formulated by Tannen) which influence the interpretation of the interaction (see also Hidasi:)

Let it be admitted, however, that at present very little is known about the underlying cultural conventions that influence Japanese linguistic behaviour. Achnowledged experts on psychology and sociology (Doi, Nakane, and others) have produced valuable studies in their respective fields with the aim of introducing the reader to the Japanese mind and to Japanese society, but the scientific literature lacks adequate linguistic feedback concerning their findings.

Since the cultural conventions or "frames" that in fact guide linguistic and communicative behaviour are difficult to perceive in successful communication, they are best studied when disfunction occurs; in other words, situations exhibiting cases of miscommunication should be analyzed. Cross-cultural interaction is a fruitful area for this kind of analysis. More and more studies along these lines are being conducted all over the world. /cf. the collection of case studies by Kataoka/. For illustration let's take two examples from his book:

*"17. Terrible Son*

*Bob's family has been hosting a Japanese exchange student, Tomio, for about 6 months. Tomio is a model guest and a model student: he gets along with everyone in the family, he helps the family with household chores, he is outgoing and has made numerous friends, and he receives excellent grades at school. He has truly been a joy for the entire family.*

8

*One day Tomio's father visited Bob's family during a business trip to the United States. He thanked Bob's parents for taking care of his son, who "couldn't do anything himself, has very bad manners, and is selfish." He even apologized that he and his wife had not done a good job of bringing up their son to be a gentleman like Bob. When Bob's parents disagreed with these criticisms and praised Tomio, Tomio's father looked really embarrassed and apologized even more about his "stupid and terrible son." Tomio, however, was smiling as his father was saying horrible things about him! Bob started to get angry with Tomio's father and wondered what was wrong.*

***What was wrong? Why did Tomio's father say such things?***

*A. At home in Japan, Tomio was actually what his father described. Japanese youngsters are expected to behave outside of the home to avoid hai or shame to the family name.*

*B. Tomio's father had extremely high standards for his son: unless the son behaved absolutely perfectly, he would not recognize his son's accomplishments at all. This type of parenting is not unusual in Japan, where everyone strives for upward social mobility through self-improvement.*

*C. Tomio used to be what his father described, but his life in the U.S. has changed him completely. An international experience has a beneficial effect on many young people.*

*D. Tomio's father really doesn't believe what he says. In his heart he knows that Tomio is an outstanding young man, and he is very proud of his son. Japanese people often show their respect to others by humbling themselves, howeveer, and this often takes the form of denigrating themselves and their family members".*

(The right answer is D.)

## "46. Have a Nice ....!

*"Thank God, it's Friday!" Steve finished his work and was about to leave the office. Since during his time in Japan he had been studying the language, he thought he would try using a little Japanese. As he walked to the door, he said to his colleagues, "Yoi shuumatsu o!" ("Have a nice weekend!") Steve was curious to know how they would respond in Japanese, but they just smiled and gave no reply.*

*At the subway station, Steve came across another colleague, Mr. Nakamura. He had heard that Mr. Nakamura was going on a sightseeing trip to Kyoto this weekend, so he said to him, "Yoi tabi o" ("Have a nice trip".). Mr. Nakamura had the same reaction or nonreaction as the other people at the office.*

### Why do you think Steve's colleagues didn't respond to him?

*A. Having a nice weekend/trip is a personal matter, so one should never ask or state such wishes.*

*B. Steve did not get his message across because its sentence structure was incomplete.*

*C. Japanese people never say, "Have a nice weekend or trip" as Steve did.*

*D. Steve left the office when other people were still working, which is not allowed in Japanese society."*

(The right answer is C.)

Since pragmatic and pragmalinguistic conventions are more culture-bound than language specific, the mere description of pragmalinguistic rules or case-studies is not sufficient. This description should be complemented by the necessary explanation concerning the socio-psychological motives behind these rules or case-studies.

As has already been mentioned, linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour are sometimes difficult to separate; very often the two are different manifestations of the same deep-lying cultural principle.

If we analyse communication failures between European and Japanese speakers, we find that misunderstandings arise from different interpretations on both sides. European negotiators often claim that it is extremely hard to make out the real intentions of their Japanese partners, who  seem to behave in an unpredictable way. No agreement would be reached because even after protracted negotiations these partners would  come no nearer to the point.

There are, however, some deeply-rooted principles of Japanese cultural behaviour which, when understood, give some clues  as  to  Japanese communication patterns. Once we are conscious of these, we are already one step closer to an understanding of them, and hence to the correct interpretation of their meaning in the context of intercultural communication.

The underlying principles that guide the communicative behaviour of Japanese speakers are not easy to indentify precisely, but can roughly be formulated as follows:

1. consciousness of hierarchy and non-equality;

2. the supremacy of relative categories as opposed to    absolute ones; and

3. striving for harmony in interaction.

These principles sometimes overlap when we endeavour to analyse concrete examples of communicative behaviour.

1. According to the Japanese way of thinking, in all situations of life and interaction the speakers are never equal: they represent from one point of view or another a partnership of superior and inferior. Superior and inferior categories are defined according to sex, age and social status. A man is superior to a woman, an elder person is superior to a younger one (even a one- or two-month difference in age between class-mates creates a hierarchy), and a person of higher social rank is of course, superior to a person of lower social rank.

In all situations Japanese try to identify the hierarchy among those present - this is necessary for them to know which register of language usage to mobilize. (Incidentally, there is no "neutral" register of language usage in Japanese, except in text-books.) This explains the importance and ritual of giving visiting cards that convey at a glance the position of the giver. Furthermore, this explains why foreigners are asked so often about their age, even at a very early stage of acquaintance or conversation. It is amusing to see how embarassed foreign women can become when they are not prepared for this.

If none of the three main co-ordination criteria (age difference, sex, and social status) can determine the hierarchy, then the given communication situation decides the ranking. If two housewives of the same age attend the same ikebana school, then the one who started the course earlier is the senpai (foreunner), as opposed to the kohai (latecomer), in the context of that particular situation. The same two housewives, nevertheless, might exchange the roles of senpai and kohai in a different interaction context. If they go to an aerobics-class, then the one with more experience will be senpai in the new context, independently of her earlier kohai role.

We now come to the principle of the supremacy of relative categories over absolute ones.

2. According to the Japanese way of thinking, there are no clear-cut truth-values, no absolute categories. Everything depends on the situation, on the time and the place. Japanese speakers do not give - and not expect - exact, unambiguous formulations. On the contrary. Expressed confidence, definiteness, and exactness both in behaviour and communication are considered aggressive and rude. Softness, vagueness and uncertainity in judgment are seen as consideration, thoughtfulness and seriousness.

Much of the legendary Japanese politeness is due to the cautiousness of Japanese speakers in their formulations, and their avoidance of expressions of extreme standpoints. This is why Japanese verbal expression tries to circumscribe "no"-s; this is why negotiators should be rather cautious in evaluating promise-like clich‚s of the "we will consider your suggestion" and "we will think about it" type. This is why the pragmatic value of a Japanese statement is often totally different from its semantic meaning. In all languages there is, of course, a certain leeway in this respect. It is sufficient to mention the famous British "understatement" phenomenon. The peculiarity in the case of Japanese is the scale. For one thing; this phenomenon - the gap between pragmatic and semantic meaning in Japanese - is very widely used; it pervades all spheres of language usage. Secondly: the gap between the pragmatic and semantic meaning is usually larger than in European languages; usually Japanese speakers do not mean what they say.

If you want to give a present, then in Eastern and Southern Europe you have to mention its merits. You say what you think of it, or what you want your partner to think of it. For example:

- This is a bottle of very fine old wine; I hope you'll like it.

In England you would use some slight understatement:

- I wonder whether you'll like this; most people think it's quite good.

A Japanese speaker however, is expected to belittle the present he wishes to give:

- This is a poor quality cheap wine; still, please accept it.

In all three cases the pragmatic intention is the same. The semantic realization, however, differs. The gap is the smallest in the first example, where the semantic formulation almost covers the pragmatic meaning completely; the British usage is more sophisticated one, whereas the Japanese goes so far that it produces the gap-effect, i.e., that the semantic formulation is almost the opposite of the pragmatic meaning.

13

3. As we have seen up to now, it very often is the case that what is said by Japanese speakers is not really meant by them. Some European speakers tend to interpret this either as timidity or as dishonesty. Neither is the case. The true motive underlying it is a striving for harmony. In the Japanese mind, harmony between partners in interaction, and harmony between human attitude takes priority over truth and the real facts in life.

To demonstrate this harmony, the Japanese are ready to sacrifice their individual likes or dislikes. If you ask a Japanese what he wants to drink, he will answer: "What you like." If a boss decides to order iced coffee, then all his colleagues - irrespectably of their tastes - will blindly follow him in ordering the same.

The aim of conversation in Japan is to preserve harmony, to establish or maintain good contact between partners. The topic or content of the conversation is of secondary importance. However, to assure your partner of your good will and attention you must send signals to him or her. For contact signals in European cultures we often use body language, facial expressions, or eye-contact. This cannot be done in Japanese communication, since body language in general and eye-contact in particular are much less used in Japanese communication. In fact, a high level of eye-contact is interpreted as agressiveness. There is, however, a need to demonstrate togetherness, an attentive, listening attitude. For this purpose the Japanese use verbal signals, the so-called aizuchi. After each syntactic syntagma (that is, after about 3-6 words, depending on structure and meaning) they issue some word of affirmation, agreement, independently of whether or not they really agree saying something like, "I see", "Well, well", "Really", "Oh, yes, yes", "You don't say so". etc. These aizuchi are very important means of maintaining the harmony and flow of conversation. If a foreigner fails to produce aizuchi with sufficient frequency, then communication may even break down as often happens during telephone conversations.

To preserve harmony in conversation, one must be very cautious not to bring the topic to a point at which a definite "yes" or "no" reaction would be required. To overcome this difficulty, linear argumentation is avoided by Japanese speakers, and a spiral approach is favoured instead.

This non-linearity is a good guarantee for the negotiators involved in that at any point in the conversation an escape route is available either by rechanelling or by reformulating the topic. By this method risk of conflict is reduced to a minimum, a precondition for the satisfaction of the Japanese striving for harmony.

Many more characteristics of Japanese communication strategies could be mentioned, although lack of space prevents their discussion in the present paper. Cross-cultural studies are dealing more and more with this issue. There is a great need to conduct contrastive analysis of the differences between the communication strategies of the Chinese, of the Korean and of the Japanese - to mention only the most populous nations of the Far East. Because of generalizations and misunderstandings, we are still paying too high a price for lack of precise knowledge in this field.

### References:

1./ **DOI, T.**    "Amae" no kozo. Tokyo: Kobundo, 1976.
2./ **HIDASI**,    European versus Japanese, 1984.
                Proceedings of AILA '84. Brussels, 1988.
                'Pragmatische Aspekte des   Japanischunterrichts'
                Referate des VII. Deutschen Japanologentages in Hamburg 1987.
                l08-116.

3./ **KATAOKA C.** Hiroko and Tetsuya **KASUMOTO**:
                Japanese Cultural Encounters and how to handle them
                (Passport books, NTC)   Lincolnwood, Illinois, 1991.

4./ **NAKANE**, C.  Japanese society. London:Pelican Books 1973.
The social system reflected in Interpersonal communication.
In: Condon, J.  C. and M. Saito  eds.:
Intercultural encounters. Tokyo: Simul Press 124-131.

5./ **TANNEN**, D. ed.  Discourse in cross-cultural communication (text, 6:2),
Amsterdam: Mouton  de Gruyter,1986.