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## THE INTERRELATION OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

### INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, the study of Japanese language and culture has become very popular in the United States. This trend is due in part to the enormous success of the Japanese economy worldwide, particularly during the late 1980s. According to the Modern Language Association, enrollment in Japanese went up by 94.9% between the years 1986 and 1990 (Saito). Increased exposure through improved global communications has also sparked Westerners' interest in the Japanese. Unfortunately, many American students encounter great difficulty in learning the Japanese language. In addition to the grammatical differences that exist between Japanese and English, there are many cultural aspects of Japanese society that do not easily translate into American equivalents. In an effort to improve the learning process, many Western universities and business schools teaching Japanese as a second language have incorporated the study of language and culture together. This technique has been implemented at Thunderbird, the American Graduate School of International Management in Glendale, Arizona.

### ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

As a native Japanese person who has taught Japanese as a second language at Thunderbird for more than twenty-three years, I have encountered numerous occasions in which the students' learning process was hindered by culture rather than grammar. This is not to discount the complexity of the Japanese language. It is written using a combination of two different alphabets and thousands of Chinese characters. In order to read a Japanese newspaper, for instance, the American student must know at least 800 Chinese characters. Furthermore, structurally, its sen-

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tence order is reversed from English, often making the subject of the sentence ambiguous to a native English speaker. Nevertheless, in my experience, students' greatest challenge to successfully communicating in Japanese has been their own cultural bias. Often, in order to act appropriately in the Japanese culture, American students may have to conduct themselves in a fashion completely opposite to what their upbringing in America would deem appropriate.

The following anecdotes indicate the importance of knowing not only how to "translate" from English to Japanese, but to understand the cultural context in which the communication occurs.

#### "WHY DIDN'T I GET OFFERED A JOB?"

An American student, after studying all of his required Japanese language course work at Thunderbird, applied for an internship program through the school. He was eventually accepted by a Japanese company. Because he enjoyed working for the company as an intern, the company offered to make him a contractual employee for another three months. As he had hoped to work full time for a Japanese company after graduation, he decided to look for a permanent position with a Japanese company while interning in Tokyo. Despite the fact that he received five interviews with five different Japanese companies, ultimately no companies made him an offer of employment.

Upon the completion of the internship, he returned to Thunderbird and enrolled in one of my advanced Japanese conversation courses. Based on his approach in the classroom, I suspected that although he had learned the Japanese language at Thunderbird, he did not pay enough attention to the cultural aspects of the language. This may have been a major factor in his not receiving a job offer.

#### DIRECT AND INDIRECT APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATION

I observed that while his sentences were all grammatically correct, they were still unacceptable in the context of the Japanese culture. His responses were often too direct, conveying a confrontational attitude to a Japanese listener. His conversation style also demonstrated an aggressiveness that might be construed as threatening to a Japanese person, even though his intention was not to put the listener on guard. His fundamental mistake was made in merely translating his sentences from

English to Japanese in a mechanical fashion, without regard for the cultural expectations of his audience.

I explained to him that, in communication, the Japanese prefer to speak indirectly. Because the Japanese culture is a high context culture, they also prefer to talk figuratively rather than get right to the point. From an anthropological standpoint, this characteristic may stem in part from Japan's relatively high population density. Such an environment necessitates a system of communication that enables people to interact with one another in a civil, predictable fashion. Since Japanese culture is high context in nature and American culture is relatively low context, it would be easy for an American student to misunderstand or miss some subtle contextual hints dropped by a native Japanese speaker.

#### NOT ONLY A THANK YOU, BUT A REQUEST

For example, a while back, a Japanese friend who lives in the States stayed at our house for a couple of days. Within a week, I received a thank-you letter for letting him stay in our home. It is very important to the Japanese to send thank-you letters. In fact, I have never heard of any occasion like this in which a Japanese person ignored writing such a letter. At the end, my friend wrote: "By the way, the grapefruit tree in your back yard must have lots of grapefruits by now." The next day I sent a box of grapefruits to my friend. His mere mention of the fruit was all that I needed to see that he would like some. It would of course be rude for him to directly ask for them. In American culture, however, it would be perfectly acceptable to directly ask for some grapefruit (politely, of course).

One of the benefits of studying culture and language simultaneously is the realization that what is considered important in the student's native culture may not be as important in the target culture, and vice-versa.

#### "WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR US?" VS. "CAN YOU GET ALONG WITH US?"

A case in point is the difference between American and Japanese employers in terms of which personal attributes they value the most when interviewing candidates. Typical questions that an American interviewer might ask are, "What can you do for us?" and/or "What makes you more qualified to assume this position than any other candidate?" The em-

ployer asks these questions in an effort to find out how skillful and productive the candidate might be.

The objective of a Japanese job interview is to find out whether the candidate is well matched to the company. Sincerity and honesty are highly valued qualities. When it comes to Japanese interviewers, they tend to place very strong emphasis on cooperation and rapport with other employees. In Japan, the nail that sticks up is often hammered down. For this reason, if an American student, interviewing for a job in Japan, tries to emphasize the points that are important in an American job interview (e.g., strong individual performance), he will miss the point.

Unfortunately some American students assume that what is permissible behavior in their own cultural environment will also be acceptable in Japan. An example of a behavior that falls into this category is the case whereby a student, speaking with a Japanese interviewer, crosses his legs while sitting during the interview session. This would be considered unacceptable to the interviewer. Crossing one's legs in Japanese society demonstrates either a challenging or a highly offensive posture, which is especially inappropriate in a job interview.

#### THE ROLES OF INTERVIEWER AND INTERVIEWEE

The Japanese interviewer considers that he has a higher position than the student interviewee. As a result of this perceived difference in status, it is expected that at least 70% to 80% of the interview will be initiated by the interviewer and that the remaining 20% to 30% will be comprised of responses by the candidate. In a Japanese interview, the candidate should only ask questions when asked to do so by the interviewer. It is important for the candidate to maintain a modest, reserved attitude. In contrast, American students often feel that their role should be more proactive in an interview. By asking questions at least 50% of the time, they attempt to maintain an equal balance between themselves and the interviewer.

#### GIVING AND RECEIVING GIFTS

One final example, emphasizing the differences between American and Japanese culture, relates to the giving and receiving of gifts in a business relationship. When a Japanese businessman visiting the United States brings a gift to an American businessman for the first time, the Japanese businessman will feel that it is acceptable for the American to

open the gift in front of him after permission is asked. If a gift was given in Japan, however, even if the American businessman asked for permission to open the gift, it would not be considered acceptable to the Japanese. When the gift exchange takes place in Japan, the Japanese custom, which does not allow gifts to be opened in front of the giver, supersedes the American custom. Typically, the recipient wishes to open the gift to know what he is receiving. In Japan, however, what is important is not the content, but the effort made to present it. In general, the more an American businessman understands the Japanese culture and fluently speaks the language, the more the Japanese will expect him to act Japanese (Nakajima).

These anecdotes highlight the need for students to be simultaneously introduced to the native culture of the foreign language they are learning. Generally speaking, successful communication with people requires an understanding of their underlying culture (Koike). Not surprisingly, one of the most effective ways to teach a foreign language is in the context of its particular cultural background. By incorporating the cultural aspect of the language, students are exposed to a more in-depth understanding of the native speaker's mind set.

#### THUNDERBIRD CURRICULUM AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING METHODOLOGY

At Thunderbird, students are required to attain a proficiency level equivalent to passing core course work in a foreign language by the time they graduate. The objective of reaching this proficiency level is for students to be prepared to conduct business within a specific country (e.g., Japan) in the native language. American and Canadian students attending Thunderbird are required to become proficient in one of the following languages: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese, or Russian. Cultural training is incorporated into the curriculum of all Thunderbird language classes.

Ideally, a student should be fully immersed, such as by living abroad for an extended period, to fully appreciate the subtleties of a people's language and culture. Thunderbird has campuses located in several countries, one of which is in Tokyo, Japan. It has often been the experience of American students spending a semester studying in Tokyo that the material previously learned in the US suddenly takes on new meaning

in Japan. Once the language learned in the classroom is applied to real life situations it becomes firmly ingrained in the students' minds. Visiting students will also encounter many cultural experiences that they can mentally place in the context of the cultural training they received at home.

In addition to the many overseas campuses available to Thunderbird students, the school also offers a unique campus environment with a truly diverse student body. Native Japanese students comprise one of the largest contingents of the more than eighty countries represented on campus. This setting provides many opportunities for American students to interact with native Japanese in social, academic, and work-related situations. This aspect of Thunderbird distinguishes it from most other American MBA programs.

Thunderbird also offers several courses dealing with the topic of cross-cultural communication. In the spring of 1993, I conducted two workshops to determine how effectively cross-cultural communication enhances language learning. The results of the workshops were obtained through participant surveys. Statistical analysis of the results confirmed the premise that cross-cultural workshops are highly beneficial to the study of language.

## CONCLUSION

In order for American students to learn the Japanese language and to conduct business successfully in that language, they must not only be skilled linguistically, but culturally knowledgeable and sensitive. Since the Japanese and American cultures are so different, it is an absolute necessity to study the language in the context of the culture, in order to identify subtleties that might otherwise go undetected. As Professor Suzuki of Keio University wrote in his book, *Language and Culture*: "When it comes to foreign matters, one has to go and see them in a foreign country" (125). Visible differences in behavior cannot be recognized and understood for what they are unless the observer always consciously asks himself, "Why is it this way?" It is also important for the observer to remember that the concept of "normal" behavior is purely subjective. For Americans interested in establishing relationships with the Japanese, the most important benefit of this cultural understanding will be the appreciation felt by the Japanese upon seeing efforts made to respect their ways.

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