DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 579   FL 015 120

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TITLE   Effects of Social Environment on Japanese and
                American Communication.
PUB DATE   85
NOTE   16p.
PUB TYPE   Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Comparative Analysis; *Cultural Differences; English;
                *Group Behavior; *Individualism; *Intercultural
                Communication; Japanese; Literature Reviews; *North
                American Culture; *Social Environment
IDENTIFIERS   *Japanese People

ABSTRACT
        The social backgrounds of Japanese and Americans
differ in ways that impede complete communication. The Japanese
people, historically controlled by the forces of nature, have formed
groups as the minimum functioning social units. The individual is
only part of the group, and individual rights and obligations have
not been clearly developed. Disagreement, if expressed, is expressed
ambiguously. Relationships are vertical, and people must determine
the level of politeness to use in interactions. To maintain
harmonious relationships, good speakers place themselves below the
listeners, sometimes not saying enough and expecting the listener to
understand by inference. Since the subject of a sentence is often not
stated, speakers may give their opinions as someone else's or someone
else's opinions as their own. In contrast, native English-speaking
peoples historically have not been as dependent on each other for
survival; individualism and privacy are well-developed, and
individual rights and obligations are clear. Individuals express
their own opinions and emotions clearly. Human relationships are
horizontal, and people like to think of themselves as equal to
everyone else. This is expressed in gestures, manners of speaking,
and eye contact. Teaching these cultural differences in language
classrooms would help improve intercultural communication. (MSE)

EFFECTS OF SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT ON JAPANESE

AND AMERICAN COMMUNICATION

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The purpose of language is communication, but communication cannot be achieved through language alone. Communication is part of a total cultural pattern, so good communication requires a shared cultural understanding.

Culture dictates, to a great extent, assumptions in communication and norms in physical contact and distance, time and place of communication, tone of voice, sex, etc. Because Japanese and Americans do not share this knowledge, understanding of the total message is impeded.[1]

The discussion of the cultural backgrounds of Japanese and Americans can include two aspects: natural environment and social environment.

First of all, natural environment affects ways of thinking, attitudes, and language. Natural calamities on their islands contributed to the Japanese sense of passive resignation toward nature. The Japanese see nature as the overall universe, of grammar, where actions and emotional atmosphere are emphasized rather than actors and receivers of actions. In England, where the English language developed, nature is milder and so people have the perception, at least, that they control it. They see the universe as a background for human action. The actor is given primary emphasis in the English language, as the writers have already discussed.[2]

Japanese people had to help each other cope with their harsh natural environment. They formed groups, in part, to do this. The group became the minimum functioning unit in the society, of which an individual person was only a part. Cultivating rice had

made the sense of group stronger. A long feudal history
strengthened this "group sense" further, and many kinds of groups
were born: families, relatives, neighbors, occupations, social
classes, etc. Thus, clear individual rights and obligations were
not developed, and individualism and privacy were not strongly
held concepts. Once they became a member of a group, they usually
remained there forever. It was not easy to change groups.

In traditional Japan, the individual persons in the group
were governed by the group, and they lived as a part of the
group. Harmony within a group was very important, and as long as
the members didn't disturb it, they could stay there comfortably.
The first constitution of Japan, which was proclaimed by Prince
Shotoku in the early seventh century, pointed out the importance
of "wa" [harmony] in civil life. The first of the seventeen
articles of the Constitution reads: "Harmony is a virtue, and
make it a rule not to dispute. People tend to form factions and
few men are reasonable.... When superiors maintain harmony while
subordinates keep good company among themselves and do not argue,
reason will stand on its own."3 These early Japanese protected
one another and strictly distinguished their group from others.
It was very difficult to enter a new group, and members were very
afraid of being expelled from their own groups. Murahachibu
[ostracism] was one of the major punishments. If people were
ostracized by the villagers, they lost all friends and means for
living.

As a result of this historical background, individuals in
modern Japan are very passive and receptive in their group. They
keep silent rather than argue. They tend to wait until they are
asked to speak. When they do speak, they do not give their own
opinions but suggest opinions representative of their position in
the group or express their own opinions as if they were someone
else's. They seldom express their "honne" [real intention] in
public but instead express "tatemae" [facade of what one is
expected to say, given his position and role.] Honne and tatemae
may be very different and sometimes even opposite. Group members
seldom disagree openly among themselves. They do not express
their emotions and their true reactions. Most sounds are pro-
duced at the back of the mouth and the lips do not move much in
talking.4 They try to do as they are supposed to do in a group.
Even if they do not express themselves clearly, others can under-
stand them because they have close relations among themselves.
They set a high value on haragei [psychological interpretation in
silence] and ishindenshin [telepathy.] 5

In contrast, people in Britain did not need to expend as much effort in defending themselves against nature. They could concentrate on their own activities. They were not faced with the strong necessity of forming groups that the Japanese were. People were more mobile, and in their society the rights and obligations of individual persons became clear; individualism and privacy had been well developed. Even the feudal age, individual persons were independent, and they belonged to the group by agreement. Rights and obligations were clear. They could change groups if they did not like them or if they did not receive any benefits.

Influenced, at least in part, by this background, the British (and, by extension, Americans) in modern times do not have the strong group ties that Japanese people have. Since their group ties are not close, they must express themselves more clearly than Japanese people do to be understood by others. Individuals may express their opinions and emotions more clearly. They use many different channels, including facial expressions and gestures, to ex-. press themselves. Many sounds are produced at the front of the mouth, resulting in more lip movements in English.[6] Thus, they try to express themselves well in order that others can understand them better.

Even now a strong sense of the group exists in Japan. Many companies and schools have uniforms. Many companies provide lunches for their employees, and everybody eats the same lunch together. The employees are provided with entertainment during lunch and on weekends. They may take trips in a group. Once people join a group, they receive many other benefits and are under obligations besides the main ones. It is not easy to enter a group and become a real member, and it is not easy to withdraw from one. Many Americans don't understand the reasons for this,[7] but to the group members, harmony in the group is more important than the different interests of each individual. People try to enter good groups because once they belong to a group, they can belong permanently. The alumni of each college form a group,[8] and one reason that many people try to go to a good college is to belong to a good alumni group.

Japanese people feel as if they are just part of the group. They do everything as a group and dislike being too independent.[9] Barbara and Nancy Okada have pointed out that "basically the Japanese business man thinks and makes decisions as a group; The American businessman thinks individually."[10] Masaaki Imai also

has pointed out decision making in Japanese companies has been born out of collective participation of people at many different levels of management.[11] Most Japanese tourists travel in groups. They remain together from departure to return. Members try to keep harmony in their group.

The sense of group is expressed in these Japanese proverbs. These proverbs are well known in Japan and often used in daily life.

Tabi no haji wa kakisute. (It is all right to be ashamed where no one knows you.)

Yoraba taiju no kage. (Rely upon a powerful person (or a group).)

Deru kui wa utareru. (A taller stake is hit, and all stakes will be even.)

Nouaru taka wa tsume o kakusu. (An able hawk hides its nails.)

Nagai mono niwa makarero. (You'd better not disagree with more powerful people.)

Tenseki koke musazu. (If you often change your occupations, etc., you will never achieve anything.)

Individualism has been developed in the United States as well as in Britain. Americans like to be independent. If they go abroad for trips, they may be in a group in order to get cheaper rates on chartered flights, but they like to travel by themselves after they arrive at their destination.[12] In American tourist groups, members are seldom restricted by their groups.[13] Thus, they pay less attention to others in a group than do the Japanese.

In a group, Americans might pursue the main goals together, but they tend not to do other things together. Thus, they do not have extra benefits and obligations. Once the main goals are achieved, and the purpose for the group has ceased to exist, the group is disbanded.

Another expression of the value that is put on group harmony is in the family. The Japanese would put harmony within the

family about the happiness of the individuals. Americans, par-
ticularly in recent years, tend to put the fulfillment of the
individual above the family. Advice columns reflect this dif-
ference. When responding to a letter from an unhappy wife,
advice from Japanese and non-Japanese advice columnists may be
very different. The Japanese is likely to give the wife advice
as to what she can do to improve the relationship; a non-Japanese
may advise the wife to at least consider leaving her husband.[14]

James N. Gillespie and Gordon W. Allport studied the atti-
tudes of youths in ten different countries toward their personal
lives and future careers. They found that Japanese young people
especially valued the qualities of "good citizenship," "social
usefulness," and "service to society," which are obviously con-
nected with their strong sense of social obligation to their
society. On the other hand, they found that the Americans empha-
sized their rights rather than their duties to their social group
and put much emphasis on the value of individuality.[15] This
study supports the assertion that the sense of group in Japan and
of individualism in the United States reflect the different at-
titudes of those people.

Another study, Dean C. Barnlund's contrasted profiles, shows
the differences between these two nationalities well. Barnlund
conducted a study of 122 Japanese students and 42 American students
in Tokyo. He asked them to describe the attitudes of the two
nationalities when they talk by selecting five adjectives from a
list of thirty-four.[16] The adjectives most favored in describing
the Japanese people were "reserved," "formal," "silent," "cautious,"
"evasive," and "serious;" and those favored for describing the
Americans were "frank," "self-assertive," "spontaneous," "informal,"
and "talkative."[17]

In another study on how the Japanese people react toward
other people, Barnlund asked his Japanese students at Interna-
tional Christian University in 1968 to write ten sentences to des-
cribe themselves. The most frequent ideas given were:

    I try to behave according to my role and circumstance.
    I try to be as polite as possible.
    I try to pretend to be calm and cool even when I am not.
    I rarely show my true self.
    I don't say all of what I think.
    I avoid difficult questions.
    I try to keep the conversation pleasant.
    I use words that won't hurt anybody.
    I try to behave smoothly.
    I never talk about inner feelings.
    I try not to disagree.[18]

In Japanese society, keeping a good position is important, and people are afraid of causing shame to other members of their group. In Japanese homes, when parents want to tell their children not to do a certain thing, they say that if the children do it, others will laugh at them. So children learn what they are not supposed to do and say. They learn not to express their true feelings in public.

Anthropologist Chie Nakane called the Japanese society a vertical organization and analyzes human relationships in groups and intergroups in her book, Japanese Society.[19] Sumako Kimizuka, scholar of teaching English, supports Nakane's idea and characterizes Japan as a nation of vertical, human relationships, and the United States as a nation of horizontal relationships.[20] Since human relationships are vertical in Japan, people have to judge whether other people are higher or lower than or equal to themselves, and they have to decide on a level of politeness to use when they talk with them. When people meet each other, they often exchange name cards that tell which group they represent and what title or position they hold in those groups. Then they can decide who is higher. On the phone, it is more difficult to decide, and people use the politest expressions until they find out their relative positions. Even in English, there are several ways to express politeness, but in Japanese there are many more. One characteristic of a good speaker is his ability to assume a position lower than that of the people he is talking with in order to be polite to them.

People are often referred to by their positions, particularly in the cases of superior people, using their family name and title, for example, teacher, manager, chairman, president, etc. Often, the position or title is used instead of the name. Some people use their position or title instead of "I." For example, a teacher may say, "You have to listen to the teacher."

There is a stronger tendency for a Japanese speaker to put his listener in the center of the conversation than for an American to do so. This is a matter of politeness in Japan, and there are many words or expressions which make the listener the reference point. For example, in Japanese, the use of "yes" and "no" does not show the affirmative or the negative content of the speaker's judgement but whether his answer (judgement) agrees or disagrees with the question. For example, in Japanese if one asks, "You don't like this, do you?" the answer is, "No, I do," if he does, and "Yes, I don't," if he does not.

Japanese people try to respond according to the expectations of their listeners. They try to avoid saying "no" clearly because they do not like disagreements, particularly with superior people, as Seiji Yamaoka has pointed out.[21] "(Saying no) is rude, impolite, uncivilized, demoralizing, and might hurt the other person's feelings. Saying no is a cardinal sin in Japan," Masaaki Imai says.[22] If disagreement is necessary, there are sixteen ways to avoid saying no.[23] One of the most common ones is saying yes and then following this with an explanation which may last half an hour and which, in effect, means no. Another one is saying no ambiguously.[24] Though the speaker does not express disagreement clearly, listeners are expected to understand by inference. Since, in Japanese, the conclusion appears at the end of a sentence, speakers can change their conclusions according to the reaction of the speaker as they speak. Also, the subject is often not stated, and speakers can give their opinions as if they were someone else's or someone else's as their own. "It is said..." is a commonly-used expression in Japanese. Yamaoka has pointed out that American newspapers are very strict to state clearly whose opinion they are giving, but not so Japanese newspapers.[25] Speakers can omit the conclusion at the end and let listeners guess. Japanese is good for ambiguous expressions.

In contrast, in English the speaker is usually the center of utterances. His judgement of "yes" or "no" may be based on his own idea and not in agreement with the question. For example, if one asks "You don't like this, do you?" the other answers "Yes, I do," if he does and "No, I don't," if he does not. Americans are more likely to state their opinions clearly. They show their disagreement more openly than the Japanese. Americans tend to assert their ideas directly and clearly as their own ideas, even if they go against the listener's wishes.

In English, the speaker is the center of utterances, and individualism is well developed; thus, there is tendency for Americans to use "I" and the Japanese, "we." When the President of the United States gives an official speech, he says, "I" instead of "we." The speaker is most important, and many utterances are from the point of view of the speaker. One of the common forms for compliment is along the line of "I like your shirt." In Japanese, a speaker would seldom pay a compliment by stating what he likes. He would be more likely to describe how nice the shirt is or state that its color is nice.

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Japanese people try to avoid saying "I." Japanese prime
ministers usually say "we" instead of "I." The Americans tend to
talk individually and the Japanese, as a member of a group.

The sense of responsibility is treated in the same way. In
the American society, the individual person has his own clear
responsibility, but for the Japanese, responsibilities are not as
clear. Japanese people tend to take responsibility as a group.
In many cases, company decisions are approved with a consensus,
rather than a vote, in meetings, and it is difficult to express
disapproval when other people agree. In many cases, spade work is
done before the meeting, and the majority of people already agree
with the agenda.[26] Even if something goes wrong, an effort is
not usually made to find out who is responsible and assign blame.
Americans, on the other hand, would be likely to try to find out
who was responsible for a mistake. Individual responsibility is
very weak among the Japanese.

Generally speaking, Americans do not like to apologize be-
cause an apology means that they are taking responsibility for
something.[27] On the other hand, the Japanese often say "Sumimasen
(I'm sorry)," even when they are not at fault, to preserve
harmony in the group. One example that demonstrates this dif-
ference is the story of a tour guide who was supposed to meet an
American tourist at his hotel. Due to a misunderstanding about
the place they were supposed to meet, the tour guide did not
find his customer until an hour after the agreed time. When
the guide apologized, the American took this as an admission that
it was his mistake and became angry. However, the tour guide had
not intended to take responsibility for making a mistake but only
to smooth over the situation.[28]

Just as individualism is a highly developed concept in
American society, so is the idea of equality of position among
individuals. Americans tend to think of themselves as equal to
everyone else, in theory, at least. Yoshihisa Narita pointed out
that individualism was well expressed in the use of expressions
such as "please," "thank you," "you're welcome," "excuse me," and
"certainly," because expressions of gratitude, etc., are neces-
sary between individuals, where they might not be in a group,
with its lines of obligation and benefit.[29] In America, a speak-
er may keep his position the same as the listener's. He is more
likely to express his opinions straight-forwardly[30] and show
agreement or disagreement more clearly than a Japanese would.

People are not equal in Japanese society. Relative positions

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are decided by age, sex, social position, economic and social
class, educational background, etc. Levels of politeness are
very complicated. There are many levels of expression. Another
characteristic feature is that Japanese people do not try to
assume a position equal to that of their listeners but rather a
lower one. This is very modest in their view, and to be modest
is very important. The reason for this is that Japanese people
try to keep their positions in their groups, and to do so they
have to keep peace with the others. Japanese people try to
refrain from accepting things offered by other people the first
time. This is a part of Japanese manners, and the host repeats
the offer to them.[31] Takeo Doi followed this Japanese manner
when he visited an American friend, and so received no ice
cream.[32]

The Japanese people distinguish expressions used with the
members of their group from those used with nonmembers. People
are dependent upon one another and interact with one another more
frequently. They expect others to understand even if they do not
express themselves well. Particularly, subordinates expect their
superiors to take care of them well. People try to do as they
are supposed to do, and if they cannot do that, they are ashamed.
They hate to be ashamed, and they do not do anything that is
unnecessary or that they do not have confidence that they can do.
As it is most important to keep peace with others, it is not
important for the individual to be honest about his feelings.
People just try to avoid disagreement, and often affirmatively
nod even though they do not agree. They keep their positions
lower than others; they do not look at each other's eyes, but
look down. This looks dishonest to Americans.

For Americans, eye contact is very important, and this is a
way to keep equal personal relations. If people are walking on
the street and happen to make eye contact, they smile, and even
say "Hi!" even though they do not know each other. This was true
in Hawaii, Michigan, and New York.[33]

Individualism and privacy are very important in American
culture. Making a reverse use of these produces trust and friend-
ship.[34] Americans have more definite personal space around them-
selves, and they try to avoid physical contact with strangers.[35]
If they do touch someone, they say, "Excuse me." To show friend-
liness, Americans use physical contact, such as shaking hands,
hugging, kissing, etc. In shaking hands, an American may put a
hand on the other's shoulder if the relationship has some degree

of closeness. They put their hands or arms on or around each
other to show very close friendliness.[36]

In American culture, the best hospitality is to invite
guests into the home and show them the house.[37] However, this
does not include giving the guest the seat of the host or the
hostess at the dinner table. The host and hostess also keep their
own rooms, not giving them up to their guests, and maintain their
positions as heads of the house. Children often participate in
the hospitality.[38] While guests may not exactly be part of the
family, they are not complete outsiders, and they are treated in-
formally. They do not expect the schedule of the family to re-
volve around them, but they try to fit in with the family's
schedule.

In entertaining, formality is most important for the Japanese.
The best hospitality is to bring guests to nice restaurants. The
hosts seldom have guests at home. If they do, the guests are the
masters of the home, and they are given the best seats at the
table and stay in the best room there. The family's living sche-
dule may be completely changed for the guests. Guests are still
outsiders, and they can see only a part of the house; they may
see only the husband and wife; they may eat dinner without the
host and the hostess, who may just wait on the guests. Except
in very informal cases, guests do not eat meals with all members
of the family. The host and hostess keep themselves lower than
guests. They offer tea and food saying like, "Here is some
poor tea," or "This is nothing special to eat, but please eat
it." The host and hostess have to make best decisions for the
guests and choose the best drink, food, method of cooking, etc.
Since every guest is served the same thing, it is very difficult
to choose what is best for everyone. They even decide how much
sugar and cream should be put in their guest's coffee.

In summary, Japanese people are controlled by nature, and, in
order to cope with it, they must help one another. To this end,
they have formed groups, which have become the minimum functioning
units of society. The individual is only a part of the group.
This group-consciousness has been strengthened by their long
feudal history and by the cultivation of rice. Individual rights
and obligations have not been clearly developed. Harmony in the
group is the overriding concern. Therefore, individuals are pas-
sive and hesitant to disagree. If they do express disagreement,
they try to do so ambiguously.

In Japan, relationships are vertical and people have to

judge whether other people are higher, lower, or equal to them-
selves in order to know what level of politeness to use when
talking to them. In order to maintain harmonious relationships,
a good speaker places himself lower than the listener. Some-
times, the speaker does not say enough and expects the listener
to understand by inference. Since the subject of the sentence is
often not stated, a speaker may give his opinion as someone
else's or someone else's as his own.

In contrast, the people of Britain experienced milder
weather and so were not required to be as dependent on one an-
other for survival. In Britain as well as the United States,
individualism and privacy are well developed and individual
rights and obligations are clear. Individuals express their own
opinions and emotions clearly. Human relationships are horizon-
tal; Americans like to think of themselves as equal to everyone
else. This is expressed in gestures, manners of speaking, and
eye contact.

As has been shown in this paper social backgrounds differ
between Americans and Japanese. These differences impede com-
plete communication. Teaching these cultural differences in
language classrooms would surely help improve intercultural com-
munication.

NOTES

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These thirty-four adjectives were: formal, independent, talkative, close, shallow, serious, dependent, calculating, warm, tense, reserved, frank, trusting, competitive, masculine, spontaneous, open, impulsive, cool, seeking a protective relationship, relaxed, evasive, silent, self-assertive, informal, distant, deep, suspicious, humorous, cautious, indifferent, cooperative, feminine, and responsive.

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36. Barnlund, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 74.

37. Yamaoka (1973), <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 11.

38. Yuji Aida, <u>Nihonjin no Ishiki Kozo: Eudo • Rekishi • Shakai [Structure of the Japanese People's Consciousness: Climate, History, and Society]</u> (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1972), pp. 6-7.

*In this study the writers have referred to many selections of Japanese literature. All translations in this study have been made by him, referring to Koh Masuda's <u>Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary</u> (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1974). In order to keep as close as possible to the original idea in English, he has translated each selection as directly as possible. For the convenience of readers, the writer has translated all titles of Japanese books, articles, and periodicals unless they were given English titles by authors or editors.

In the description of Japanese words, the writer again has referred to the method adopted for Masuda's <u>Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary</u> (p. xiii) and tried to transcribe

them as closely as possible into English pronunciation. Borrowed
words from English were given English spelling even in Japanese
in order to avoid confusion. Japanese words are underscored and
translations bracketed for clarification.