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misunderstood. Further, the paper argues that the misunderstandings
resulting from differences in cultural communication styles
contribute to incorrect attributions of motive and intent. The paper
then presents a comparative review of the literature concerning
Japanese and American communication styles along with results of a
survey of 168 Japanese managers and 135 of their American co-workers
in Southern California. The paper concludes that a dichotomy exists
between what the Japanese want and feel themselves to be, and what is
perceived about them by the Americans. Contains 19 references.
(Author/RS)

Communicative Competence: The Cultural Factor in Language Training

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TITLE: COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: THE CULTURAL FACTOR IN
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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that language training should logically be founded on an initial student familiarization with the dimensions of intercultural communication. Using as exemplars, problems encountered by Japanese familiar with English but unfamiliar with communication theory, it is argued that, while limited linguistic competency may make it difficult for the speaker to understand or be understood, unfamiliarity with the variability of communication styles between cultures frequently causes the speaker to misunderstand or be misunderstood. Further, it will be shown that the misunderstandings resulting from differences in cultural communication styles contribute to incorrect attributions of motive and intent. A comparative review of the literature concerning Japanese and American communication styles along with results of a survey of Japanese managers and their American coworkers in Southern California will be presented in support of the authors' argument.

Introduction

A failure in communication is defined as the incorrect interpretation of an intended message (Samovar and Porter 1991). Normally, the breakdown is seen as the receiver's failure in decoding the message or as the sender's failure in encoding.

In contrast, in intercultural communication, although the message is perfectly encoded according to the communication patterns of the sender and perfectly decoded according to the communication patterns of the receiver, misinterpretations of intended messages are common.

Predictably, the greater the differences between the communication patterns of the sender and receiver, the more frequently misinterpretations occur (Mishier 1965). Unfortunately, training which has as its target linguistic competency has not traditionally concerned itself with the cultural aspect of communicative competency.

Language programs which do include culture training as part of the curriculum most frequently take an anecdotal approach. The meanings of various holidays, dating, wedding and funeral customs are common topics presented to students. The instructors are at home with various language acquisition theories but are largely unfamiliar with culture and communication research.

Following a discussion of the Japanese and American communication dimensions of context, power distance, and individualism, the results of a survey of Japanese management personnel in Southern California and their American coworkers will

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be presented to illustrate the misunderstandings resulting from the differences in Japanese and American communication patterns. Interactions between these two groups clearly demonstrate the impact of culture on communication.

Japanese and American Communication Dimensions

Communicative behavior is governed by culturally generated and contextually bound rules (Samovar and Porter 1991). The effectiveness of intercultural communication is, therefore, directly affected by the degree of divergence in the rules that are dictated by the communicants' cultures. Japan and the United States are at opposite ends of the spectrum on most indices of cultural characteristics (see, for example, Hall 1984; Okabe 1987). As would be expected, given the cultural origin of communication rules, this divergence is seen in each culture's communication patterns.

Intercultural communication researchers have differentiated between cultural communication patterns along a number of dimensions. The most commonly studied of these are context, power distance, and individualism.

Context

Nagashima (1973) described communication in terms of "minimum message" (low context) and "maximum message" (high context). He explains these communication patterns on the basis of the information content explicit in the messages of each, stating that, in a high context communication:

> "[t]he success depends not upon the quality of the message but also upon the receiver's instinctual

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understanding of it" (Nagashima pp. 94-95);

while in a low context communication:

> [t]he success of the communication depends almost
> entirely upon the sender's ability to compose a logically
> consistent message, the receiver being only required to
> understand the language used. (Nagashima pp. 94-95).

In other words, high context communication is receiver-centered communication and low context communication is sender-centered (Yum 1991).

Samovar and Porter (1991), comparing cultural communication patterns on the dimension of context, classified the Japanese as the highest context culture of the eleven studied. American culture was among the lowest. A study by Cambra, Ishii, and Klopf (1978) found that, in comparison with Americans, the Japanese spoke less frequently and for shorter periods of time, were less likely to initiate and maintain conversations, were less inclined to talk, and were less fluent. Kunihiro (1976) states that language is _a_ means of communication for the Japanese while it is _the_ means of communication for Americans.

Power Distance

On the dimension of power distance, as measured by the power distance index (PDI) (Hofstede 1983), the Japanese are categorized as a high PDI culture while the Americans are low. Hofstede (1980) found that PDI has a high correlation with authoritarianism. This is consistent with Nakane's (1973) finding that the Japanese value vertical relationships while in the United States, categorized as a low PDI culture, horizontal relationships are valued.

In high PDI cultures, relationships are clear. As Klopf

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(1991) noted:

> [k]eenly aware of superior/subordinate relationships in daily communication, the Japanese find it difficult to initiate and maintain communication with strangers and other out group members whose backgrounds are unknown (p 137).

In low PDI cultures, communications are less status-conscious. Barnlund (1989) notes that "American resistance to formal, status-conscious, routine exchanges is at least as strong as Japanese resistance to their opposites" (p. 131), adding that American social behavior is noted for its excessive informality.

Individualism and Collectivism

The degrees of individualism and collectivism are also frequently cited dimensions of intercultural communication. Individualism is "the tendency of people to look after themselves and their immediate family only" (Hodgetts and Luthans 1991, p. 48). Collectivism, on the other end of the spectrum, is "the tendency of people to belong to groups or collectives and to look after each other in exchange for loyalty." (Hodgetts and Luthans, p. 50).

Andersen (1991) states that this communication dimension also determines cultural values and communication style. Triandis, Brislin and Hui (1988) elaborate. According to these authors, in a collectivist culture, "behavior is largely a function of norms and roles that are determined through tradition or interactions among ingroup members" (Triandis, Brislin and Hui p. 273). Given the dependence of individual identity on ingroup membership, a change in ingroups or in leadership can produce "major changes in

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attitudes and behavior" (p. 273). Further, if a large portion of the group adopts a different attitude or behavior, the rest of the group also shifts. Decision by consensus is, therefore, a feature of the decision making process in collectivist societies.

There is, again, a sharp contrast between the Americans and Japanese on Hofstede's (1983) individualism index. The Americans score among the highest in individualism, while the Japanese are categorized as low in individualism; in other words, the Japanese are highly collective. Collectivism has been explained as mutual dependency from the point of view of cultural adjustment (Inamura 1980; Okazaki-Luff 1991). Doi (1973) describes this mutual dependency of the Japanese as amae. Nakane (1973) analyzed Japanese collectivism in interpersonal relationships using the terms uchi (inside) and soto (outside). She categorized three different groups in Japanese interactions: the primary groups comprised of people with long-lasting relationships (e.g., with family and colleagues), the secondary group consisting of an individual's acquaintances (e.g., persons known only by name), and the tertiary group consisting of all other relationships (e.g., those with foreigners). Japanese communication, requiring shared assumptions for its high context, would clearly be more effective with Nakane's primary and secondary groups.

Conclusion

In summary, the differences between Japanese and American communication patterns are numerous. The Japanese are socially organized by and their world view is largely shaped in a series of

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concentric, widening circles. Values, beliefs, traditions and tastes are shared. Relationships between group members are clear and the appropriate behavior toward each member in any given circumstance is known to all parties. Adherence to group behavior is enforced by each individual's concern for his or her peers' regard. When dealing with persons who are not members of the same group, the Japanese feel stress because of the uncertainty and the unknown qualities these outsiders introduce. In general, the Japanese employ a high context, high power distance, collective communication style.

For the Americans, on the other hand, values, beliefs, traditions and tastes are highly variable. Interpersonal behavior is predicated on acting as if all the parties involved in a communication act are relatively equal in status. Group or peer pressure is most commonly seen as a negative and not a positive influence. Similarly, ambiguity in language is perceived as negative. In communication, the Americans are generally low context, low power distance and individualistic.

The Survey

In order to test whether or not these differences in communication patterns would be reflected in misunderstandings resulting from failed communicative interactions between the Japanese and Americans, two questionnaires were developed. The first was directed to Japanese working in the Southern California area and dealing with, on a daily basis, at least one American worker. The second was directed to Americans in Japanese-held

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organizations who had daily interactions with at least one Japanese national.

Business people were targeted as the sample group for two reasons. First, it was felt that the nature of workplace interactions would limit the types of misunderstandings to be discussed. Second, in a work situation where instructions are being given and acted upon, both the Japanese and Americans would be expending maximum effort towards understanding and being understandable to others.

The questionnaire targeting the Japanese consisted of fifty-three items. Each question on the Japanese form was typed both in English and in Japanese. It was felt that this would minimize the probability of false answers based upon language problems. The first section solicited general information about the expatriate. The format of the majority of these questions was multiple-choice with, in some cases, a space for written-in comments or additions to the choices provided.

The second section was designed to elicit the expatriates' adjustment and perceived adjustment to the American culture, people and communication styles. The items in this section were presented as a series of statements. The respondent circled one of five letters corresponding to his degree of agreement with the statement made. Finally, a section was provided which solicited additional comments on the topic of improving the communication between Japanese and Americans.

The questionnaire designed for the Americans consisted of

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thirty-three items. It asked for general information about the respondents, about their perceptions of their Japanese coworkers' knowledge of American culture and their assessment of their communication styles. As on the Japanese questionnaire, a space for additional comments was provided.

A written assurance of anonymity was given at the top of both the American and Japanese questionnaires. In addition, both the Japanese and American respondents were asked to return their questionnaires individually, using the separate, pre-addressed, pre-paid envelopes provided.

A cover letter, two pre-paid return envelopes and one each of the Japanese and American questionnaires were sent in early January of 1993 to 658 companies. The purpose of the study and the instructions for completing and returning the questionnaires were printed on one side of the cover letter in Japanese and on the other in English.

Twenty-five percent (n = 168) of the questionnaires given to the Japanese and twenty-three percent (n = 135) of the questionnaires directed to the Americans were completed and returned within a month.

Results

The Japanese Responses

Sixty-two percent of the Japanese in the survey had had no prior overseas experience; however, sixty-eight percent have been in the United States for two or more years on the present assignment. Seventy-seven percent were given no cultural or

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communication training either before or after their arrival in the United States; while forty-four percent have had previous intercultural experience. The sample evenly split between language, culture and communication, and job-related training on the question of what they would emphasize if asked to create a pre-departure training program. When asked the same question about post-arrival training, the importance of language training increased. Fifty-nine percent cite English as the main problem in communication; however, only forty-six percent are doing anything to improve their English.

Seventy-three percent of the Japanese answered that they lived close to either most or some of their Japanese colleagues and seventy-one percent stated that they use Japanese goods and services either often or very often. Fifty-five percent have little or no contact with Americans outside the workplace and sixty-one percent are doing nothing to improve their knowledge of American culture; however, seventy-seven percent agree or strongly agree with the statement that Japanese sojourners should try to understand and adopt the American lifestyle while living in the United States. Interestingly, only seventeen percent said that they do not understand Americans and their culture.

Sixty-five percent either agreed or strongly agreed that they were as capable in the United States as in Japan. The majority also agreed or strongly agreed to the statements that the Japanese were more sensitive than the Americans and that it was easier for the Japanese to understand American culture than for the Americans

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to understand the Japanese. The majority (fifty-five percent) disagreed with the statement that they were uneasy with Americans of different ethnicities and they believed that the Americans understood what they said to them.

The American Responses

Twenty-one percent of the American respondents stated that they had worked one or more overseas assignments and fifty-two percent spoke another language in addition to English. Fully seventy-two percent stated that they have had prior intercultural experience.

Seventy-nine percent stated that they would, if asked to create a training program for the Japanese, focus on culture and communication, not on English. Only eighteen percent thought the main problem in communication with the Japanese was the English language. They were evenly split between agreement and disagreement with the statement that directions from the Japanese are unclear; however, four times as many of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement as strongly disagreed with the statement. A small majority of those who responded to the statement that the Japanese treat the Americans as equals either disagreed or strongly disagreed (forty-two percent compared to 31 percent agreement) and a larger majority disagreed with the statement that it was easier for the Japanese to understand them than _vice versa_ (forty-nine percent compared to twenty-five percent agreement).

Seventy-seven percent stated that the Japanese in the office

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stay together and eighty-two percent felt that the Japanese should talk informally with the Americans in the workplace more often in order to improve relations between the two groups.

Comments from Respondents

A little over twenty percent of both the Japanese and American respondents used the section at the end of the questionnaires which solicited any additional comments they might wish to make on improving communication between the Japanese and Americans in their organization.

Interestingly, thirty-five of the total thirty-six comments written by the Japanese concerned what they (the Japanese) should do to improve relations. Of the twenty-seven comments written by the Americans, only one referred to what they (the Americans) should do. The remaining focused on Japanese attitudes and behaviors.

Typical Japanese comments were that the Japanese should learn more about American culture, make an effort to explain more clearly, include Americans in corporate decisions, interact informally more often with the Americans, and improve their English ability. In reference to the Americans the majority of comments were positive.

> The Americans' bright and cheerful culture is different from ours.
>
> Capable Americans are more sensitive and more punctual than the Japanese.
>
> They are clearer in their speaking and thinking than the Japanese are.
>
> The Japanese have some kind of feeling similar to

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yearning for the Americans.

The only somewhat negative comment directed to the Americans was:

> Americans are very kind to English-fluent Japanese. But they don't try to dea! with Japanese who don't understand American jokes and the Japanese who don't greet them in the morning.

The American comments were, as mentioned above, primarily directed to the Japanese. There were three main complaints. Sixteen percent of the comments mentioned that the Japanese used their own language to exclude the Americans in the office. A typical example is:

> Many times the Japanese staff talk in Japanese among themselves in the presence of Americans, and do not attempt to explain in English. Thus, excluding any input from them. It can be viewed as slight discrimination.

Sixteen percent also made references to racial and/or sexual discrimination. On the topic of sexual discrimination, one worker wrote:

> Their attitudes toward women are the same as in Japan---which is not tolerated here in the U.S. More women should be in managerial positions. And they should pour their own coffee!! That is not a woman's job!!!

In reference to racial discrimination, another wrote:

> Japanese are naturally racists. However, nothing in their culture or training teaches them that racism is a negative characteristic. Someone needs to help them understand how Americans feel when discriminated against purely because we aren't Japanese.

Twenty-seven percent of the American comments expressed opinions about Japanese formality and apparent feeling of superiority. Examples of this type of response are:

> The Japanese need to be more flexible with other ideas and not always have it that their way is the correct and only way.

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The gap between the Japanese workers and their superiors is much wider than for Americans. Informality in the work place is sometimes taken as an insult.

They should lighten up and not take the world so seriously.

Finally, a small number simply expressed general dissatisfaction.

My observation is that the accumulated experience of the U.S. and Japanese staff is so different that there are incongruous assumptions and expectations on virtually every project and aspect of our work!

There seems to be a genuine degree of mistrust and misconception among both groups, directed at each other. This situation greatly hinders communication and, ultimately, productivity.

I have discovered that working for a Japanese company is not that easy. I sometimes feel that we have nothing in common.

In summary, the Americans expressed the opinion that the Japanese have adequate English skills. They felt, however, that culture and communication skills training are needed. The majority of the Japanese, on the other hand, thought that their main communication problem is limited English.

The overwhelming majority of the Japanese, high on the collectivism scale, live close to other Japanese and use Japanese goods and services most of the time. This collectivism was seen by the Americans in the work place where the Japanese were perceived as staying together in groups.

The high/low context of the Japanese and Americans was seen primarily in the strong response of the Americans to the question of whether or not the Japanese should talk more informally with Americans in order to improve relations. As high context communicators, the Japanese among themselves speak less often than

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Americans do, and are less inclined to talk and less likely to initiate and maintain conversations than Americans are. This disinclination to chat may be interpreted by their low context American colleagues as excessive formality or even a display of unfriendliness or superiority.

The high PDI of the Japanese is also seen in the American perception that the Japanese are standoffish. It is difficult for the Japanese, because of their high PDI communication pattern, to communicate informally. In contrast, the low PDI Americans resist formal, status-conscious communication. The difference in PDI may also be reflected in the comments of the Americans referring to Japanese racism and sexism. All of the Japanese respondents to the survey were management level. Among the high PDI vertically-related Japanese, it is natural to treat subordinates differently than equals or superiors. This could be misunderstood by the low PDI, horizontally-related Americans. Unused to such finely divided hierarchies based on status, the perceived discrimination would be attributed to race or sex prejudice.

The high correlation of PDI with authoritarianism would also make it unlikely that the higher positioned Japanese would feel the Americans should have upper level decisions explained to them. This might explain the American perception that they are not treated equally and are purposely excluded from work discussions.

Discussion

The survey revealed that there is a dichotomy between what the Japanese want and feel themselves to be, and what is perceived

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about them by the Americans. This is a problem of miscommunication. The Japanese believe that the burden of communication lies with them, the Japanese in America. They believe they are sensitive and understand American culture; however, they feel they are unable to enter into the "bright, sunny American culture" because they are not fluent enough in English. The Americans, on the other hand, assess the Japanese' language ability as adequate. As a consequence, they see the Japanese as exclusionary, preferring to stay together in and outside the workplace, and using their own language in order to discuss work-related problems without American input. They see the Japanese as sexist and racist, stiff and formal. The differences between the Japanese and American perceptions are explained by differences in communication patterns.

The lone comment directed by one of the Japanese to the Americans reflects the misconception that linguistic ability is the only or most important aspect of communication. English fluency was seen by the person who wrote the comment as prerequisite to greeting Americans in the morning or laughing at their jokes, the ability to do these things being the key to getting along with Americans. It is a sad but understandable mistake on his part. Less understandable is that this kind of mistake is common among professionals in the majority of language programs.

It must be stressed again that language is much more than words and structures. Verbal skills are only a subset of language. Language, both verbal and nonverbal, achieves communication. Its

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patterns are culturally variable and, in order to learn or teach communicative competence in a second language, one must be sensitive to the variations in those patterns.

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