

## Cultural Differences in the Use of Clarification Language

John W. Casey

### Contrasting language functions

Contrastive pragmatics has as its aim the investigation and comparison of the ways in which language functions according to social variables such as gender, social class or ethnic group. Speech acts, as one example of a specific language function, have been treated extensively and studies on functions such as apologies, denials, invitations and others are now common in the literature. Language functions have been shown to vary across cultures so that invitations in one community, to use an example, will not necessarily produce the same effect when offered in a different culture.

A problem that perhaps has received less exposure deals with the area normally referred to as miscommunication, and specifically the different strategies speakers employ to clarify or repair miscommunications. It would seem fair to ask whether clarification and repair strategies might vary across language and cultural communities in ways similar to these other language functions. Considering that the transfer of any speech act or language function into a second language or culture involves some risk of miscommunication, it might be argued that research into possible differences in the area of clarification could have a direct influence on other more specific language functions. If strategies used to repair one miscommunication are in themselves the cause of further confusion, we might expect an ever increasing spiral of misunderstanding. In cross-cultural situations, when problems arise due to the transfer of certain language functions, what recourse do participants have to ensure that miscommunication does not advance to misunderstanding?

## Rules of discourse

Discourse can never be completely free from miscommunication and people cannot easily engage in conversation for any extended period without permitting a certain amount of ambiguity. A speaker can never be fully certain that his utterances are taken in the manner in which they are offered, nor can a listener expect to understand perfectly all that is heard. But having said this, neither can participants in a conversation relinquish the responsibility both to make and interpret utterances in the clearest manner possible. The extent to which ambiguity is tolerated and the points at which clarification is sought may vary with the individual but general patterns are found within any language community. If this were not the case, we would expect to witness a much greater degree of confusion in everyday interactions. That people do, in fact, communicate with relative smoothness seems to point to the workings of some basic rules delimiting the boundaries of ambiguity.

What may not be immediately evident is the applicability of these rules outside the specific community in which they are found. That these rules may not be of a universal nature is a possibility that has sometimes been overlooked. It has been widely accepted that while certain specific language functions will vary across cultures, there are other broader universals which bind all languages. The 'cooperative principle' of H.P. Grice is often cited as applying to conversation in general with the implication that speakers in all language communities will be seen, for example, to offer the appropriate amount of explanation or ensure that comments are always relevant to the topic under discussion. But even if we agree that these last principles are, in fact, generally applicable, is it safe to assume that all cultures lend them equal importance? Might not one culture consider that ambiguity, to use the above example, while troublesome at times, is not to be avoided quite as strictly as other societies?

## Communication patterns

A number of researchers have discussed cultural relativity in regard to communication patterns and how various language communities interact according to different norms. Cultures or communities which are obliged to interact with groups outside of their own, are often said to be more explicit in the ways that they communicate due to the increased risk of misunderstanding inherent in cross-cultural relations. Edward Hall (1959) uses the term "context" to distinguish between societies that appear to use more precise or explicit language and those that require a minimum of verbal clarification to convey meaning. Groups of this latter type are characterized by an increased use of non-verbal signals and shared cultural background.

In contrast to many English speaking cultures, Japanese society, with its emphasis on social harmony appears to fit Hall's definition of a "high context" society. An observation frequently made in Japan concerns a speaker's ability to infer meaning from what are seen as minimal utterances. Sometimes referred to as "haragei" -variously translated as "stomach talk" or heart-to-heart communication- (Matsumoto 1984) this intuitive capacity to understand others without the necessity of verbal explicitness is a quality that many Japanese view as unique to their culture. Although any society can be seen to allow some degree of vagueness in expression, it may be that among Japanese speakers, contention is avoided to a large extent through a greatly reduced insistence on verbal explicitness and a more ready acceptance of language which might be considered 'imprecise'. This can often be seen in the way some speakers use terms of agreement such as "so desu ne" (Right) or "naruhodo" (I see) without necessarily agreeing to what is being said. Since an insistence by the listener for the speaker to clarify himself might be regarded as a form of disagreement, listeners are expected not to openly question a speaker's statements. Polite forms of agreement seem to be viewed by many Japanese not simply as ways of accepting others' opinions so much as a means by which relationships

are maintained (Mizutani, 1981). In this and a variety of similar ways, Japanese speaker/listeners might be said to exhibit patterns of communication that not only employ a lesser degree of clarification language but use this language in ways that differ qualitatively from English speakers.

### **Comparing Japanese and English speakers**

Having discussed some general distinctions between Japanese and English speakers, we can now look at one specific area of usage. How do native speakers of Japanese and English perceive the need for clarification when faced with a situation involving some miscommunication? In light of the above view regarding high context societies it might be expected that Japanese speakers would feel less need for clarification than others and therefore use either fewer such forms or clarification language that is somehow 'softer' in its implications. If we accept that there is, in fact, a reduced need for clarification among Japanese speakers, is it possible to predict that L2 learners will not use language in instances where native English speakers would? Or failing this, will the language that is used have force equal to that used by natives? And finally, we might ask whether Japanese speakers will use such language at similar points within a conversation.

To investigate these questions, a questionnaire (Figure 1.) was used to obtain speakers' perceived necessity and usage of clarification or repair language in reacting to a situation involving miscommunication. Results were tabulated and compared to those given by a number of native speakers. In formulating the questionnaire the following points were considered: An effort was made to vary the types of miscommunication involved to include instances of noise interference, failure to see intended meaning, unfamiliar lexicon, and lack of clarity in explanation. As much as possible, an attempt was made to avoid forcing a response at any point in the hope of obtaining a truer picture of when and at what points respondents felt it necessary to request clarification.

Despite the measures taken, there is the implicit understanding that the responses given reflect only the perceptions of the participants and cannot serve as a substitute for actual recorded responses. Nevertheless,

we can hope to discover some differences in perceived needs alone which might help to direct subsequent research. In addition, problems with language ability among the Japanese subjects (intermediate L2 learners) may have influenced the range of responses.

### Study design

Subjects were asked to imagine themselves as having a job interview with the president of a manufacturing company. A transcript of the interview was provided (Figure 1.) in which they, the interviewees had spoken only one time. Subjects were asked if they would like to add anything to the dialogue and, if so, what and at which points they would insert their comments into the transcription. Although the type of language that might be used was not discussed, it was suggested that there were points in the dialogue which the interviewee might find difficult to understand and that they were free to ask the interviewer to explain himself if they wished. Subjects were told that they could insert any comments they felt were natural for them in the context of the interview and were asked to indicate the point of insertion with editors marks below which any comments or questions could be written out between the lines.

Two groups were used for the study, one a group of 10 young Japanese businessmen aged 24-30 in an intermediate English class, and the second group of 10 native English speakers drawn from a diverse background largely comprised of language teachers.

Figure 1.

**President** : Good morning. My name is Fender Houseman and I'll be doing the interview with you today. I've been through your files and see that you are looking for work in our sales department. **That's good because...uh.\***

Let's see...You're a student now, I see. You're interested in foreign countries. **Well, there are many vexillologists\*** in the office. They are always talking about this subject. You may become interested yourself...But we can talk about that later...

I should tell you that I am the company president. The man who began

the company was the cousin of my mother's second sister's husband's brother.\* So, when he died I took his place. Anyway, I hope my speech isn't causing all your **oscitancy**.\*

We have three main (*there is a loud noise from a train passing outside*)\* and there are five hundred people working for us now. To get to the factory you have to go down the third street past the street in front of this office's west gate and then take the second...no...third left after the traffic light.\*

David and John both began working in the factory last year.\* Most of the workers are there and only about 50 people work in the offices. The factory is where we make it. It's very good and it's cheap at this time of the year, too.\*

You: (looking at an expensive coffee cup on the desk) This looks very old.

President: No, the secretary made it fifteen minutes ago!\* The secretaries are busy with typing and filing, so they don't usually have the time to do this..So..I see that you are wearing a blue suit.\* .....Let me tell you about the salary now.

As earlier mentioned, a number of possible sources of miscommunication were purposely included in the interview transcription. Although there are many points throughout the dialogue where it is possible to insert any number of parenthetical comments, it was felt that these designated points would be the areas most likely to elicit requests for clarification from native speakers of English and it was expected that native speakers would insert comments at or around these points. (The sources have been highlighted with an asterisk in Figure 1. unlike in the version provided for the subjects in which there was no such indication.) At least ten possible sources, as they appear in the transcription, are as follows:

1. "That's good because..." — Failure to complete speaker's line of thought.
2. "...vexillologists..." — Abstruse term for a person who studies world flags.
3. "...cousin of my mother's second sister's husband's brother." — Unusually convoluted explanation.

4. "...oscitancy." -Abstruse term meaning 'yawning'.
5. Loud noise of a train passing. -Prevents the listener from hearing.
6. "...the third street past the street in front of this office.s west gate" -Unusually complicated explanation.
7. "David and John both began.." -No indication of who these people are.
8. "The factory is where we make it." -No clear referent for the term 'it'.
9. "No, the secretary made it fifteen minutes ago." -Mistaken referent.
10. "So, I see you are wearing a blue suit." -Intention unclear.

## Results

As was expected, the Japanese group was seen to request clarification in fewer instances overall. Native speakers indicated that they would make these requests on the average of 6.1 times within the interview as opposed to the Japanese group average of only 4 times. A separate form which asked the subjects to list any reasons for requesting clarification showed that a large number of the Japanese subjects (60%) felt that since the speaker was a person in a high position, interrupting too much would be impolite. Other comments indicated the opinion that the speaker new what he wanted to say and that it was not the position of the interviewee to ask questions during an interview. Several respondents wrote that they would wait until the speaker had finished everything he wanted to say before asking any questions at all. Table 1. shows the breakdown of responses.

Table 1

No. of requests	Japanese group	Native group
1	0	0
2	1	0
3	1	0
4	3	0
5	3	3
6	1	4
7	0	2
8	1	1
9	0	0
10	0	0

Concerning the distribution of the requests, the Japanese group clearly concentrated on the more overt types of difficulties in understanding the speaker referred to earlier as "abstruse terminologies" (vexillologists, oscitancy). We can assume that this group felt these to be areas in which requests for clarification could reasonably be expected. The lexicon used was sufficiently arcane that native and non-native listeners alike could be expected not to be familiar with these terms. Interestingly enough, however, the native-speaker group avoided questions here for the most part. We might ask whether this reluctance arises from the desire to avoid admitting their lack of knowledge in a situation involving job employment. The native-speaker participants were better able to judge the overall importance of these abstruse terms as they affected the intelligibility of the interview as a whole. Obviously, the native-speakers felt that clarification of these terms was not vital to the main subject at hand.

The common understanding that noise interference cannot reasonably be avoided, seemingly influenced most of the respondents. Native and non-native alike (70%) generally asked for repetition at this point. Both groups also seemed to concur on the problem involving a mistaken referent(60%) in which the president in the dialogue believes the speaker to be referring to the coffee rather than the cup.

Where the two groups diverged in their requests is of more concern to us here since this might point to the areas of perceived appropriateness that we are looking for. The first instance referred to as "failure to complete speaker's line of thought" showed the most marked difference in responses with 60% of the native speaker group requesting some type of clarification as opposed to only 20% in the Japanese group. What might be some possible reasons for this difference?

One answer mentioned earlier might involve the desire among Japanese listeners to avoid contention in personal interaction. Questions at this point might be perceived as forcing the speaker to continue with a line

of thought he would prefer to end at this point. Japanese speakers might feel less motivation to "dig out" vagueness in a person's speech and therefore allow more of this type of speech to pass without inquiry.

The question involving the use of 'it' without any clear referent ("The factory is where we make it") also showed a large difference in native/non-native responses. The percentages in this case were only slightly different from the above instance with 70% of the native and 30% of the Japanese group requesting clarification. There is the possibility that the meaning value of this small word may have been overlooked by the non-native listeners. Whereas the native listeners would clearly require some referent, the Japanese group may have discounted its importance and taken the meaning of the sentence in a more passive sense equating "The factory is where we make it" roughly to mean "Manufacturing is done in the factory". Nevertheless, we can see that even in the passive construction, the type of product remains unclear. Again we might attribute the lesser degree of clarification to a desire to let the speaker get on with what he is saying with a minimum of interference from the speaker. We might ask whether or not the Japanese listener trusts the speaker to somehow clarify himself at a later point. It may also be the case that the Japanese listener fails to question the speaker out of a general sense of respect. In commenting on the various uses of silence in Japanese discourse, Condon (1984) interprets the pauses and empty spaces in conversations as a "shared medium" between participants which is not necessarily a cause of discomfort as with many English speakers.

### **Evaluating the current study**

One clear disadvantage of the current study is that due to the format, a true picture of the interaction between participants cannot be seen. In actual discourse, each exchange necessarily affects subsequent turns so that any feedback given will have an effect on the way a speaker continually adapts his speech to the listener. In lieu of actual transcriptions of recorded data, we cannot accurately judge the effects of

clarification language on the speaker and how that will in turn change what follows.

Noticeable in the edited transcriptions was the lack of any so-called "back-channel cues"-the "um's and uh-huh's" of naturalistic discourse. Once again, the possible effects these signals might have on the speaker cannot be ascertained here but are not without importance. Hatch notes that during lectures, Japanese students often produce these signals at every pause in the lecturer's speech seemingly indicating comprehension when, in fact, they are not necessarily following (Hatch, 1983). It may be the case that Japanese listeners substitute these nods or verbal punctuation marks more frequently and at places which differ from native English speakers. The effect on the speaker, then, would be for them to continue without making any adaptations to their speech.

Despite these disadvantages, the format of the present study does eliminate such performance pressures as time or nervousness concerning the speaker's own abilities in a foreign language thereby allowing the respondent to concentrate more fully on his beliefs concerning the perceived importance of feedback. This factor may have helped to counteract differences between native and non-native abilities in actual language performance thus giving us a better idea of the respondents' own beliefs about appropriate communication style.

## Conclusion

The results of this study suggest several possible interpretations concerning pragmatic transfer or the effects of native speakers' communication patterns on L2 learning. One of these has to do with a learners abilities to judge the adequacy of verbal messages. Studies done with young L1 learners (Asher 1976 ; Cosgrove and Patterson 1977 : Ironsmith and Whitehurst 1978 ) point to several problems facing listeners. These include : 1) failure to realize the importance of message quality, 2) difficulty assessing message quality, and 3) failure to

provide feedback for speakers. Similarly, Geoffrey Leech, commenting on the manner in which listeners interpret utterances, describes what he calls "heuristic analysis" (Leech, 1983). Listeners, when first faced with a comprehension problem, form a hypothesis concerning possible meaning, check the hypothesis, and go on to interpret the meaning depending on the outcome of this process. Based on the data from our study, we might suggest that due to patterns of communication common among Japanese speakers, L2 learners provide feedback in fewer instances than do native speakers or, in Leech's scheme, that Japanese L2 learners fail to sufficiently check the hypotheses they make about the meaning of utterances they hear. It should be noted that speakers in general desire to avoid losing the trust of speakers by overquestioning and therefore accept a certain degree of ambiguity (Wardough 1985). Japanese speakers, appear to apply this rule to a greater extent and in circumstances which differ somewhat from native speakers of English. Situations involving status differences also seem to affect the use of clarification language among Japanese with listeners requesting clarification to a much lesser degree when dealing with speakers of higher status.

Three ways have been suggested to help with greater success in tasks involving abilities involving active listening (Glucksberg, Kraus, and Higgins, 1975). First, listeners must develop the confidence to recognize when a message is somehow inadequate. Following this, they must inform the speaker of the problem. And finally, they must specify what further information needs to be supplied.

But more than this simple recognition and repair of trouble areas is the implication by some researchers that communication breakdowns, far from causing comprehension problems, actually provide an ideal situation for learning. In studies done on the effects of "modified input" in which speakers simplify or reword, as opposed to "modified interaction" where both speaker and listener negotiate meaning, it was the second case, in which listeners were actively involved, that appeared to provide increased

input available as "intake" (Faerch and Kasper, 1986). The importance of these studies for the language teacher might therefore involve the teacher's ability to convince students of the increased learning potential of situations in which communication problems occur. This would seem especially relevant to Japanese students whose general tendency, as we have seen, is to avoid contention by a decreased use of clarification.

### References

- Asher, S. R. 1976. '*Childrens' ability to appraise their own and another communication performance*'. *Developmental Psychology* 12 : 24-32
- Condon, J.C.(1984). *With Respect to the Japanese*, Tokyo : Yohan (Pg.40)
- Cosgrove, J. M. and C. J. Patterson. 1977. '*Plans and the development of listener skills.*' *Developmental Psychology* 13 : 557-64
- Glucksberg, S., R. M. Kraus and E. Higgins. 1975. '*The development of referential skills*' in F. D. Horowitz (Ed.) : *Review of Child Development Research*, Volume 4. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). in P. Cole & J. Morgan (Ed.) *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, New York: Academic Press
- Hall, E. T. (1959). *The Silent Language*, New York: Doubleday
- Hatch, E. M. (1983). *Psycholinguistics*, Cambridge, Mass: Newbury House (pp.133-134)
- Ironsmith, M. and G. Whitehurst. 1978. '*How children learn to listen: the effects of modeling feedback styles on children's performance in referential communication*'. *Developmental Psychology* 14: 546-54
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*, New York: Longman (pp.40-43)
- Mizutani, O. 1981. *Japanese: The Spoken Language in Language in Japanese Life*. *The Japan Times* (pp.86-95)
- Matsumoto, M. (1984). *Haragei*, Tokyo: Kodansha
- Wardaugh, R. (1985 ). *How Conversation Works*, Oxford: Language Library (pp. 8- 9 ; 20)