CONSEQUENCES OF JAPANESE AND AMERICAN BUSINESS CONVERSATIONS

Laura Miller

Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science
and
National Foreign Language Center

With Japanese and American interactions so frequent and important in modern society, an effort to facilitate and improve understanding has produced research in many disciplines. The approach taken here is an anthropological one, greatly influenced by the contributions to the study of interethnic communication made by Gumperz (1982a, 1982b) and Scollon and Scollon (1981).[1]

There are many reported instances of mutual stereotypes arising from interethnic contact. Basso (1970) and the Scollons (1981) describe the interlocking images of the silent, taciturn Native American and the loquacious and chattering Anglo. Americans and Japanese also have many sets of complementary images—direct or indirect, formal or casual, verbal or nonverbal, and so on. Through close examination of actual talk we can see Japanese and Americans speaking in ways which the others, based on their respective expectations and assumptions, will interpret in just these ways. Consequently, these recurring misinterpretations may be at the root of some mutual stereotypes.

This type of misunderstanding is usually not apparent to participants themselves. Gumperz and Tannen (1979: 307) describe "good" communication as having smooth rhythm, orderly turn-taking, recognition of formulaic routines, and cooperation in topic development. On the other hand, "poor" communication will be characterized as having choppy turn-taking, lack of rhythm, failure to use appropriate formulaic expressions, and inability to effect adequate topic development. The consequences of

"poor" communication are that participants draw incorrect inferences and interpretations. This type of misunderstanding is

more far-ranging and insidious than those cases in which participants simply have difficulty conveying surface information. Rather, participants experience feelings of interactional disharmony or discomfort and other negative impressions which have deeper implications for the interethnic encounter itself. In Japanese and American business conversations, these incorrect inferences and interpretations usually have negative consequences.

Discussion in this paper is based on the analysis of a collection of audiotaped, videotaped and transcribed data. Naturally occurring conversations between Japanese and American co-workers were taped in Tokyo, Japan. Firms which have both American and Japanese employees working together in one office were selected for taping. The transcribed data were examined in order to locate evidence of the cultural and linguistic assumptions that influence participants' interpretation and meaning. (These transcriptions can be seen in Miller 1988a).

In conversations between Japanese and American co-workers, communicative differences on several levels, such as cultural assumptions, discourse structure, content organization and distribution of talk, all affected understanding. I will briefly review only a few examples of some of these communicative differences.

Talk is interpreted according to the meaning of the words used, and their placement in conversation. In addition, talk is also interpreted according to what sort of "actions" participants think underlie the use of words. We depend on cultural and social assumptions about the assumed goal of the interaction, and on the proper "presentation of self" in order to interpret and understand how people talk. Goffman's concept of the "presentation of self" (1959, 1974), refers to the way we present ourselves to other people through our language and behavior. Whenever we talk to others, we communicate not only information but an "image" of ourselves as well. These culturally constructed and expected images occasionally may result in misunderstanding and stereotyped images in interethnic interactions. Some differences between Japanese and Americans in assumptions about how to present the self bear upon encounters between co-workers. The concepts of ***enryo***, or "restraint," and modesty relate to speech acts or behavior such as complimenting, use of formulaic expressions, showing empathy, and others. I would like to discuss just one of these activities, complimenting.

The structure of compliment responses for American English has been described by Pomerantz (1978), and it is my observation that this structure is much the same as for Japanese speakers. According to Pomerantz, those who receive compliments want to support the speaker, but also desire to avoid self-praise. Yet compliments do differ cross-culturally in their function, type, frequency, and the situations in which their use is appropriate. Wolfson (1983) describes the social and cultural meanings implicit in complimenting in American society. She found that the most common topics for compliments were appearance, ability, skill,

talent, attractiveness of children and personal qualities. In American culture, compliments occur in many speech events and are quite frequent. They also perform important interactive functions. According to Manes (1983), and Wolfson (1983) these functions include reinforcing desired behavior, expressing gratitude, apologizing, softening criticism and beginning a conversation (see also Wolfson and Manes 1980).

Americans often use a strategy of down-grading a compliment when they receive them. This means that a compliment such as "That's a nice paper you wrote" will receive a reply such as "Thanks, but it's a bit short," or "I could have expressed my ideas better, though." While Americans down-grade compliments, Japanese prefer to firmly deny them. The consequence of this slight difference is that Americans who usually respond to Japanese compliments with the strategy of down-grading them rather than explicitly denying them may be seen as lacking modesty and restraint.

The more frequent use of compliments in conversation in a broader range of speech events by Americans can also lead Japanese to draw negative evaluations. Some compliments are by their nature judgements of another person. In Japanese society it is not always a good thing to directly compliment others, especially one's superiors, because this implies an evaluation or judgement of them (Mizutani and Mizutani 1977: 135). For example, when complimenting a professor, rather than saying "That was an interesting lecture," one would say "I learned a great deal from it" (*Taihen benkyoo ni narimashita*). The social relationship between participants will therefore influence the type of appropriate compliment.

Wolfson found that American complimenting is more formulaic in structure than most people, linguists included, would initially suppose. She suggests that the reason complimenting is so formulaic is because it has an important social function:

> However sincere compliments may be, they nevertheless represent a social strategy in that the speaker attempts to create or maintain rapport with the addressee by expressing admiration or approval."
>
> (Wolfson 1983: 86)

Americans often use complimenting as one method to promote rapport and empathy by focusing on shared tastes and interests. In my data, Americans workers and management often complimented their Japanese co-workers for a variety of reasons: to create rapport, to function as apology, to initiate conversations, or to soften criticism. However, in many instances these compliments were interpreted negatively by the Japanese. Recipients often became highly embarrassed. When they did respond, it was usually with strong denial. This strategy, intended to show modesty, is usually interpreted by Americans as somehow hypocritical or insincere. Japanese workers rarely interpreted the numerous compliments of their

American co-workers in positive ways, but rather as behavior that was too direct and judgmental. In this way, American and Japanese co-workers interpret their respective behaviors not as the result of differences in the presentation of self, but rather as a deficiency in the character of the other.

Another type of communicative difference has to do with the patterns of listening in conversation. Prior to a discussion of listening in Japanese and American co-worker interactions, I will briefly describe the verbal listening patterns for each group. (A more detailed discussion is found in Miller 1988b).

For Standard American English, there is a conversational pattern in which listener's responses occur most often during pauses in a speaker's talk. Most researchers have noted that listener's responses are most likely to occur at turn-taking transition points, pauses or phrase boundaries (Schegloff 1968, 1981; Dittmann and Lleweeyn 1968; Maynard 1986).

Another pattern for English speakers is their choice of listener token. In this pattern, a listener tries not to use the same response time after time, but rather varies his selection of token, since repetition can be interpreted as boredom or impatience (Schegloff referred to this as "incipient disinterest" 1981: 85).[2]

For Japanese speakers, the patterning for verbal listening response, or *aizuchi*, takes a slightly different form. Listener tokens occur more frequently and often simultaneously with a speaker's talk. And Japanese speakers, unlike American English speakers, often prefer to use the same listener token sequentially rather than to use a variety of them. For example, a speaker will use *hai* or ***e*** or *un* repeatedly.

Many Japanese linguists have noted that certain grammatical units called sentence particles are used by speakers to elicit agreement and *aizuchi*. (Japanese sentence particles are monosyllabic utterances that usually follow a pause group or clause.) Among the many sentence particles, *ne* appears to be the one used most often to draw forth listener response (Miller 1983).

In many of the conversations I taped, periods of silence or the inhibition or retardation of a speaker's volubility are the result of an American listener's failure to provide proper Japanese-style listening behavior. In taped conversations, Japanese speakers can be seen using the sentences particle ne to elicit *aizuchi* from the American listener, but often without the desired effect. In some cases, *ne* is even attached to English sentences. Although there is rarely clear-cut, conscious misunderstanding, Japanese workers report their impressions that their American co-workers have not shown rapport and have not been "cooperative."

In other instances, Japanese workers use the word *hai* ("yes") as a listening token, even when the conversation is in English. *Hai* is often cited in the literature as a

frequent listener response (Kokugo Gakkai 1980). It has even been suggested by writers that *hai* is used more often as *aizuchi* than in its literal meaning of "yes"

(Mizutani and Mizutani 1977). In some cases, the American recipient of *hai* as a listening token assumes that his Japanese co-worker is agreeing with him, rather than merely listening to him. Foreigner's interpretation of *hai* as agreement rather than as *aizuchi* has been noted before (Seward 1969).

From native speaker descriptions of conversational behavior it is apparent that *aizuchi* is thought of as a way of displaying empathy. It is possible that because American verbal listening behavior is not expressed as consciously, or frequently, as it is for Japanese, Americans are therefore perceived by some Japanese as showing less empathy and rapport in conversation.

However, since empathy is an important social behavior in all cultures, it is not that Americans express empathy less than Japanese do. They are simply expressing it differently. Some methods used other than verbal listening tokens are facial expression, eye gaze, intonation, conversational collaborations and complimenting.

Listening, therefore, is a type of communicative behavior that may have unseen consequences in Japanese and American conversations. Communicative differences in how rapport is displayed may be the basis for some common stereotypes. One stereotype is that Japanese have greater concern for showing empathy; another is that Americans are cold and businesslike.

Other types of communicative differences and interpretations will also result in the formation of negative evaluations in Japanese and Americans conversation. Individuals define interactions in terms of a "frame" or "schema" (Goffman 1974). These frames do not make certain interpretations obligatory, but they do influence and direct the interpretations and inferences that are made.

In one rather long conversation a very fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of the meeting led to a variety of misinterpretations. An American was asked to translate the script of a Japanese commercial into English. I filmed the conversation in which the American meets with his Japanese co-workers to discuss this completed translation.

Through an analysis of the conversation and discussion with the participants, some basic misunderstandings were revealed. The American thought the meeting was a consultation and an opportunity for his Japanese co-workers to solicit advice from him. The Japanese thought the meeting was for the purpose of giving instructions for a revision of the translation. There was also misunderstanding of what "translation" means. The American tried to express the "feeling" and subtle nuance of the commercial in the English version he had written. His idea of "translation" was to produce something that represented what was intended rather than what was literally written. The Japanese co-workers understood translation as the one-to-one, exact, literal correspondence of meaning between words.

Assumptions about the nature of a communicative task will result in expectations about the appropriateness of the other participant's behavior. In this conversation, the American tried to be tactful and polite, but nevertheless gave an impression of directness and insensitivity because he misunderstood the nature and purpose of the meeting. He thought he was offering advice, and that his offering a different opinion was appropriate behavior. However, because his Japanese co-workers thought the meeting was an occasion to give instructions to the American, the expression of opinion was interpreted as argumentive and insensitive. Again, we see individuals acting on differing assumptions which in turn results in misinterpretation and negative judgements.

In order to balance the implication that all the Japanese and American conversations I taped were exercises in misunderstanding, I would like to point out one interesting phenomena in the data that has a mitigating influence on the potential for misunderstanding.

Cross-culturally empathy is sometimes displayed in different ways, yet the symbolization of group membership and cohesion is important for all social groups. What strategy, then, can speakers use to show empathy and group solidarity when speaking in a mixed group of co-workers? Americans and Japanese are found in the same close working units, yet they do not always share the same background assumptions for how to show empathy and group togetherness. One strategy speakers may use to mark group membership and to show empathy is to "code-switch," to frequently switch from use of both the Japanese and English languages.

Code-switching is defined as the ability to alternate from one code to another. Gumperz' (1982a: 63) definition of conversational code-switching is switching that occurs in a single sentence, in a single turn by one speaker, and in a conversation between two (or more) speakers. The presence of code-switching is one of the most salient features of my data to emerge, and one that can not be ignored. Code-switching by Japanese and Americans occur among most participants, regardless of their relative second-language competence. In much of the code-switching I found, in addition to the locally negotiated interactive reasons for it, I feel it is also functioning to symbolize group cohesion and solidarity in these interethnic interactions.

In most past research, the focus has been on intra-group code-switching, especially where the use of separate codes is associated with different ethnic groups. For example, Chicanos in California associate Spanish with Chicano ethnic identity and as a "we" code, and English with Anglo society as a "they" code. Gumperz (1982a: 137) suggests that meanings derive from the juxtaposition of the "we" and "they" codes. Very rarely has the use of code-switching between members of different ethnic or linguistic groups been investigated. I feel that in the

case of code-switching which occurs between those of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, who are nevertheless bound together into a single social unit, the code-switching itself becomes the "we" code.

Even after instances of clear and even dubious cases of word borrowing between languages were extracted, there is nevertheless a great amount of code-switching in the data. My interpretation of the ubiquitous code-switching among co-workers is that it functions as a mechanism for fostering empathy and good-will. The switching has this effect because participants are outwardly demonstrating that they are members of the same group because they use a "we" code in which both languages alternate.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the paper, reference was made up to the existence of numerous stereotypes about Japanese and American cultural and communicative styles. One of my primary objectives has been to point out some of the underlying phenomena which are often the basis for some stereotypes. Although other social and cultural factors play a role, one mechanism by which some stereotyping develops is the difference in discourse structure, content organization, distribution of talk and cultural assumptions. When participants in interethnic encounters misinterpret these aspects of communication, they attribute them to the faults, attitudes, or peculiarities of the other's personality or culture. Participants do not explicitly explain why they think someone lacks empathy, is very polite, or is too direct; they simply assume that the person is in fact too direct; does indeed lack empathy or is very polite.

Ethnographic observation and sociolinguistic research reveals some of the cultural assumptions, discourse expectations, and culturally-based styles of speaking which participants carry with them when they talk to others. In Japanese and American encounters co-workers will use these same assumptions and expectations to (often incorrectly) interpret others' behavior. One of my principal findings is that not all misunderstandings are of a type which participants are actively aware of as being "misunderstanding" (such as grammatical error or lack of lexical knowledge). Rather, misunderstandings also occur in conversations when there are differences in participants' intentions, expectations and assumptions.

Notes

1. This paper is based on my dissertation in anthropology titled Interethnic Communication Between Japanese and American Co-Workers, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988a.

2. There is intra-cultural variation, however. See Tannen (1981) for a description of the more actively verbal listening style of New York Jewish speakers.

References

Basso, Keith
1970 "'To give up on words': Silence in Western Apace culture," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 26. 213-30.

Dittmann, Allen T., and Lynn Lleweeyn
1968 "Relationship between vocalizations and head nods as listener responses," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 9. 1: 79-84.

Goffman, Erving
1959 *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday.
1974 "On face-work: An analysis of ritual in social interaction," in *Language, Culture and Society*, Ben Blount (ed.), Cambridge: Winthrop Publications. pp. 224-49.

Gumperz, John, and Deborah Tannen
1979 "Individual and social differences in language use," in *Individual Differences in Language Ability and Language Behavior*, Charles Fillmore, Daniel Kempler and William S. Y. Wang, (eds.), New York: Academic Press. pp. 305-25.

Kokugo Gakkai
1980 *Kokugogaku Daijiten* (Comprehensive Dictionary of Language Study), Tokyo: Tokyodoo.

Manes, Joan
1983 "Compliments: A mirror of cultural values," in *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*, Nessa Wolfson and Elliot Judd (eds.), Rowley: Newbury House. pp. 96-128.

Maynard, Senko K.
1986 "On back-channel behavior in Japanese and English casual conversation," *Linguistics* 24. 6: 1079-108.

Miller, Laura
1983 "Aizuchi: Japanese Listening Behavior." M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.
1988a "Japanese and American Interethnic Communication: Interactions Between Japanese and American Co-Workers." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
1988b "Verbal listening behavior in conversations between Japanese and Americans," in *Intercultural and International Communication*, Jan

Blommaert and Jef Verschueren (eds.),.Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Mizutani, Nobuko and Osamu Mizutani
1977 *Nihongo Notes 1: Speaking and Living in Japan*, Tokyo: The Japan Times.

Pomerantz, Anita
1978 "Compliment responses: Notes on the cooperation of multiple constraints, "in *Language, Thought and Culture: Advances in the Study of Cognition*, Jim Schenkein (ed.), New York: Academic Press. pp. 79-112.

Schegloff, Emanuel
1968 "Sequencing in conversational openings," in *American Anthropologist* 70. 1075-95.
1981 "Discourse as an interactional achievement: Some uses of "uh huh" and other things that come between sentences," in *Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk*, Deborah Tannen (ed.), Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press. pp. 71-93.

Scollon, Ron, and Suzanne Scollon
1981 *Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication*, Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex.

Seward, Jack
1969 *Japanese in Action: An Unorthodox Approach to the Spoken Language and the People Who Speak It*, New York: Walker-Weatherhill.

Tannen, Deborah
1981 "New York Jewish conversational syle," in *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 30. 133-49.

Wolfson, Nessa
1983 "An empirically based analysis of complimenting in American English," in *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*, edited by Nessa Wolfson and Elliot Judd (eds.), Rowley: Newbury House. pp. 82-95.

Wolfson, Nessa, and Joan Manes
1980 "The compliment as a social strategy," in *Papers in Linguistics* 13. 391-410.