

Miscommunication Across Cultures: Degrees of Shock Impact and Tolerance

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Introduction¹

The writer of this paper fondly remembers going to Hawaii from Japan for the first time in the mid-1960s and being shocked by many items, for example a mere sprinkler in a park, a variety of ice-cream flavors other than vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate, and different cuts of beef such as New York, porterhouse, round, sirloin, Spencer, and T-bone. In retrospect, the mid-60s was said to be the threshold of the period when in a figurative sense the world was getting smaller. During the past 25 years, more and more Japanese have traveled to the U.S.A., and Americans have traveled to Japan. Many, if not most of the travelers, find at least one difference which causes them a "culture shock."

Regardless of whether we like it or not, we are no longer "permitted" to live in isolation in the world; cross-cultural interdependence is unavoidable. For example, Time magazine, instead of following its usual practice of designating some notable person as "Man/Woman of the Year,"² designated the earth as the focus of 1989. Our earth is now regarded as an endangered species. In 1989, representatives from 123 countries gathered in London to discuss the ongoing problems of the ozone layer, and earlier this year another major meeting of the nations of the world discussed a long list on environmental issues. To survive on the earth, we have no other choice but to cooperate with one another regardless of any differences in race, religion or national doctrine. Thus, our needs and demands for intercultural communication have become greater and more pressing than we have ever imagined.

From a brighter aspect, the number of tourists visiting foreign countries for sightseeing purposes has been increasing each year. One statistic shows that 8,426,867 Japanese tourists went abroad in 1988, which is about 66 times the 127,749 figure in 1964.³ The writer remembers being allowed in 1964 to take only \$200 from Japan to the

United States and therefore having to borrow money from a bank in Honolulu just to rent a house for his family.

The rising affluence of many countries and the availability of modern air travel have eased travel difficulties. People from disparate cultures all over the world now contact one another, directly or indirectly, giving rise to unexpected difficulties in intercultural communication as influenced by respective socio-cultural elements in verbal/nonverbal or intentional/unintentional behavior. An overall comparative study of the socio-cultural differences among disparate cultures is still in its infancy because of the vast range of differences: after all, no two individuals even within a given culture are alike. The cultural differences may well be placed on a continuum grid from a relationship between two greatly disparate cultures to that between any two individuals, with due attention to the common notion of subcultural and individual differences within one particular culture. For the purpose of discussion in this paper, cultural differences are roughly grouped into several categories.

The main objectives of this paper is to examine degrees of "impact" that one is likely to sense in cross-cultural encounters mainly in Japan, both interculturally and intraculturally. The concrete data the writer has used for this paper are from the responses of 21 foreigners, so-called "gaijins" living in Japan,⁴ and of 188 female college first year students.⁵

Types of Culture Shock

Even when a person expects some differences between the separate cultures such as those of the U.S.A. and Japan, the encounter might cause a shock at first actual contact. A person may feel an awkwardness or strangeness about the experience. Even so, the foreigner can at least be tolerated as one outside the culture. This phenomenon of culture shock is clearly manifested in the survey that the writer has conducted with the Japanese college students. A total of 128 students, or 68.08%, responded to the effect that they would tolerate a foreigner who violated the Japanese norm while 28 students (or 14.89%) stated that they would tolerate a foreign "violation" but would enlighten the foreigner as to the Japanese cultural pattern of "rules" violated. There were 22 students (or 11.7%) who stated that they would acknowledge no differences at all between foreign and Japanese violators: "a violator is a violator" was their comment on the question.

It is also interesting to report that the favorable and the unfavorable characteristics of Americans pointed out by the students are often contradictory: for example, according to them, Americans are favorably "expressive," "cheerful," and "friendly"; on the other hand, they are unfavorable "not hesitant," "too loud," and "presumptuous."

In the survey conducted by the author, 63 items relating to cultural differences were listed. The foreigners who were surveyed have experienced cultural shock or observed cultural behavior which they found offensive, irritating, or annoying in Japan. All of the respondents live in the Kansai or western area of Japan in such places as Himeji, Kobe, Kyoto, Nishinomiya, and Osaka. For the most part, the greater number of tourists and business people are found in the Kanto or eastern area which includes Tokyo. These respondents from the western area could have experienced some things somewhat different from those in Kanto area.

Perhaps because it is considered vulgar and offensive by the foreigners, the fact that Japanese men urinate in public areas was listed as a frequent cause of culture shock. A total of 7 foreigners (one-third responding) list this behavior in their survey. The same number of people feel uncomfortable about being stared at by Japanese people. Another offending item to 5 foreigners (23.8%) is that many Japanese have a stereotypical concept that foreigners are so "different" that they are incapable of speaking Japanese, using chopsticks, sleeping on a *futon*, eating *sushi*, etc. Samovar *et al.* (1981: 85) discuss these types of attitudes. The list three aspects of perception as factors contributing to our misunderstanding of other cultures: projected cognitive similarity, stereotyping, and ethnocentrism.

From a brighter aspect, 4 of them (19.04%) were shocked to learn that the Japanese in general are polite, friendly and honest. Others were shocked or surprised to find Japanese so homogeneous, to find them calling foreigners *gaijin* ("outsider") and looking at them as if looking at animals or at someone recently arrived from Mars. Those 4 also listed the high-price index and the noise level found all over Japan in trains, department stores, supermarkets (especially on food floors), and in various types of announcements such as for political campaigning, and even in schools including elementary, intermediate, high schools and often colleges. However, culture-shock memories fade gradually, depending upon each person's degree of contact and exposure, and one's tolerance for the initially "offensive" tends to expand to the point of indifference. Sometimes, if a person has been exposed to other foreign cultures for a long time before being exposed to that of Japan, for example, most of the cultural shocks in Japan tend to be considered mild or even positive.

Between Two Subcultures

If the two cultures involved are similar but not exactly the same and if the two cultures have some knowledge of each other, such as those of Japan and Korea, the degree of "tolerance" is apt to be much less than in the case of two greatly different cultures. A person who does not behave in exactly the same way as a person in the other culture is thought to be intentionally violating the norm.

The above is also applicable to any two subcultures within the same culture. Consider the case of an American of Japanese Ancestry (AJA) living in Hawaii and an AJA living on the U.S. Mainland, such as in the state of Washington or California. Although their ancestral origins in Japan are the same, very often from the same *ken* (or prefecture), their respective cultures in Hawaii and on the mainland represent two separate subcultures.

Many Japanese-Americans in Hawaii feel in general that their cousins on the Mainland are a bit too "*haolefied*" not only in their speech but also in their nonverbal behavior. People in Hawaii call a Caucasian a "*haole*," which originally meant in Hawaii an "outsider." On the other hand, many Japanese-American mainlanders often think that their Hawaiian brothers are nothing but hardheaded pineapple-growers. Therefore, it is often difficult for the two groups to get along with each other at least for the first few months or so. They call each other such names as "pineapple" or "Buddhahead" for Hawaiian Japanese, and "kotonk" or "banana" for Mainlanders. "Kotonk," in the way the writer understands, is the sound a person makes when he falls down and hits the floor. During World War II, *nisei* or the second-generation soldiers from Hawaii and the Mainland states were placed in the same Army barracks. Unable to get along with each other, two factions often got into fistfights. The soldiers from Hawaii in general were physically stronger, and the mainland *nisei* soldiers were often knocked down on the floor -- "kotonk."⁶

Japanese-Americans from Hawaii and the Mainland states often have difficulty mingling or associating with each other even today on college campuses on the Mainland. Many Hawaiian Japanese-Americans tend to group together when they study at Mainland colleges. Though some of these students may be successful in associating with their Mainland cousins, others remain aloof.

Between Japanese-Americans and Japanese in Japan

The Japanese-Americans we have just discussed, whether they are from Hawaii or California, or any other area in the United States for that matter, often face a worse degree of difficulty with regard to the culture of Japan, which is totally foreign to them. However, many Japanese people in Japan are often unaware of the fact that their cousins from the United States are linguistically or culturally totally Americans. The Japanese-Japanese unconsciously tend to treat the Japanese-Americans as if they were fellow country persons. This is a far different treatment from what they would give to blue-eyed blond Americans who share the same culture as Japanese-Americans.

Consequently, many Japanese-Americans have undesirable experiences in Japan and leave the country with ill-feelings. The writer can blame neither group, the Japanese

people in Japan or the Japanese-Americans from the United States, because both parties are often unaware of the basic cultural differences between them.

In this respect, the writer's older son is a good example. After an absence of seven years from Japan, he came to Japan for a couple of weeks during his summer vacation when he was a sophomore in an American college. After the trip, he revealed to the writer his unfavorable feelings toward the Japanese people in general: he thought that the Japanese people were rather rude and inconsiderate to him. When he tried to go someplace by train and was trying to buy a ticket at the train station, but was unable to read Japanese *kanji*, he asked someone nearby how much it would cost him to get to his destination. The Japanese man looked at him and said bluntly, "It's written up there." In fact, he knows about Japanese customs and thoughts somewhat more than his average American contemporary, having lived in Japan until the age of six and also between the age of ten and eleven. His knowledge about Japan may be manifested by the fact that he mistook *tai* (a kind of fish widely called "red snapper" which is sometimes used for a betrothal gift) for a necktie when his wife-to-be, a third generation Japanese born in Hawaii, mentioned it to him. He replied by asking her, "What color tie do you think your father would like?"

Another example is the writer's son-in-law, who was born in Hawaii and who spent a year in Japan practicing *judo*. Some Japanese suggested that he become a *sumo* wrestler because he is big for a Japanese. Perhaps that person wanted him to be like *Takamiyama* or *Konishiki* , the two sumo wrestlers who are from Hawaii. But my son-in-law said, "No, I'm practicing judo so that I can try out for the U.S. Olympic team." However, that man kept suggesting a sumo career, and my son-in-law became really irritated.

The Japanese students whom the writer surveyed stated that they would feel either strange or disharmonious (36.17%), or surprised (18.08%) when spoken to by a Japanese-American in English while about one-fifth of them (20.74%) stated that they would not be surprised. Furthermore, 16.48% of the students (31 of them) felt envious of those Japanese-Americans who are able to speak English as well as other Americans while, although a distinct minority, 3.19% (6 students) would feel dubious and assume that the Japanese-American could in reality speak Japanese but was testing them to see if they could understand English. Yet, four students (2.12%) stated that they would feel annoyed or angry if spoken to in English by a Japanese-American, and two students thought the Japanese-American should learn to speak Japanese. Further, to the question as to whether or not the Japanese-Americans should be educated in the area of Japanese culture, 55.85% responded that such study abroad should not be mandatory, while only 6.38% felt that the Japanese-Americans should study Japanese culture. However, as many as 61 students (32.44%) stated that it would be advantageous, beneficial or desirable to be Japanese-Americans because of their blood relationship to the Japanese nationals.

Reverse Culture Shock

The writer has experienced a phenomenon which has been labeled either "reverse culture shock" or "re-entry culture shock." After being away from Japan, the land of his birth, for over two decades, he returned to assume a teaching post at a Japanese university. The sight of 150 black-haired Japanese female college students in a classroom, in homogeneous array, almost stunned him. Another shock was the cacophony of loudspeaker announcements at the university was almost overwhelming.

Life in the United States had prepared him to cope with a heterogeneous cultural milieu; thus, the contrast with the homogeneity of the Japanese model resulted in the above-mentioned reverse culture shock. Japanese society is accustomed to a high level of "broadcast announcement": at train stations, in supermarkets, from street vendors, and even from roving political campaigners.

Another example of reverse culture shock has to do with holding a door open for someone following immediately behind. Before coming back to Japan, the writer was in the habit of holding a door open out of politeness. In Japan, he was often rebuffed when so doing. That is, the person following would waltz through and neglect to hold the door for the writer. However, much to the writer's surprise, on a return visit to Hawaii, a similar "door incident" occurred in a condominium. A young native-born Caucasian man violated the writer's cultural expectations by not holding the door, either. This was perceived as a more serious affront.

Some Psychological Difficulties

It is interesting to note that one Japanese student stated in the questionnaire her experience of being offended by Americans at a ball park in the United States when they stopped talking with her after being told by a host-family member that the student's English was not good yet. Once they learned that she was incapable of speaking English well, they stopped asking her questions or conversing with her. Her pride was hurt.

Another tendency is that people tend to speak "artificially" or "uniquely" when talking with a non-native speaker, as with a native-speaking infant. Hinds (1986) lists four basic characteristics when addressed to foreigners and babies: (1) their expressions are shorter and simpler with fewer subordinate clauses and other types of modification; (2) they use more questions and commands; (3) more repetitions; and (4) they do not use many pronouns. Hinds also notes that "the speech to foreigners becomes so simplified it is actually ungrammatical. This does not happen when adults speak to babies."⁷ The writer has also noticed that our speech to foreigners in general tends to be "louder" in voice than our speech among native speakers.

Some people who are in the process of studying any target language often feel insulted, expecting to be exposed to the language at a normal speed and grammatical. However, there are other language learners who prefer to be addressed at a slower rate of speed. There was one student in the survey who complained that one American person would not decrease the rate of his speed of speaking English even though she asked him to do so. She felt that that American was impolite, if not rude. However, the writer suspects that perhaps as a language teacher, this American probably thought that he should maintain a normal speed. These two examples are contradictory in a sense, but include case-by-case justifications. These kinds of psychological feelings that other people have are very difficult to perceive. In this respect, Hoffer (1986, p. 51) mentions: "misunderstandings which are not seen as such by both sides are the most destructive of cross-cultural communication, other than behaviors which are seen as 'immoral' or 'repulsive.'"

Another common pitfall is that the so-called psychological level of a language learner is often misjudged. An English text at the elementary level in Japan often starts with such statements as "This is a pen," or "I am a boy." The writer also remembers that one Japanese text, now considered "archaic," includes the sentence "*Sankana ni wa te mo ashi mo nai,*" which translates into "A fish has neither hands nor feet." Although these sentences represent structural patterns useful to non-native speakers, the learners need not be taught these as the sentences are almost useless in real-world conversation.

Another concrete example with which the writer is familiar is that there are some English teachers who ask their college students whether or not they know the capital of Japan, or the highest mountain in Japan. Although a Japanese college student's knowledge of English may not be up to par yet, his/her intellectual level is that of a college student. Therefore, if a college student is asked to answer such questions as the above mentioned, the student's feelings will be hurt. Thus, the English teaching conducted in such a fashion will not be successful.

Psychological perceptions stemming from within each culture will be different, and a systematic study of this realm is vital to cross-cultural communication.

Conclusion

Who could have predicted that the Soviet Union would dissolve into its component parts in such a relatively brief period of time. The continuing changes in the situation have caused many experts in the field of U.S.-Soviet diplomacy to be somewhat outdated, while new types of experts are in demand. Following the precedent of the former Soviet Union, many other countries such as North Korea and China are initiating and expanding contact with Western nations.

During the course of the survey conducted, the writer saw the necessity for an overall systematic study of intercultural communication employing inter-disciplinary findings from such fields as psychology, sociology, religion, and linguistics. In particular, psychological aspects illustrate how each individual in his/her specific culture perceives or encodes messages, through verbal/nonverbal, or intentional/unintentional behavior, which are foreign to one culture but common to other cultures.

Notes

1. Thanks to the financial support provided by Seiwa College in Nishinomiya, Japan, the writer was able to present this paper at the International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication, San Antonio, Texas, March 23-29, 1989.
2. *Time*, International Edition, January 2, 1989.
3. The information has been provided by Ms. Takabe of the Japan Travel Bureau office in Himeji, Hyogo-ken, Japan.
4. The 21 foreigners consist of 18 Americans, 1 West German, 1 New Zealander, and 1 British whose stay in Japan ranges from 2 months to 20 years.
5. The 188 female college students are those who are majoring in English at Seiwa College in Nishinomiya, Hyogo-ken, Japan.
6. See more in detail about some conflicts between AJAs in Hawaii and U.S. Mainland in Kurokawa's *Amerika no Nikkeijin / Americans of Japanese Ancestry*, Kyoikusha, Tokyo, pp. 85-90.
7. John Hinds (1986) cites also Barbara F. Freed's work, "Talking to foreigners versus talking to children: similarities and differences" (1980) to the effect that a major difference between talking to foreigners and talking to babies is that there is more concern with "information exchange" in talking with foreigners (pp. 54-61).

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