Revisiting the Emic Approach to Japanese Interpersonal Communication Competence: Methodological Reflections and Future Directions

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This paper discusses some of the methodological issues in the emic approach to Japanese interpersonal communication competence, whose popularity has diminished in recent years but has remained latent in applied areas such as psychiatry and counseling psychology. The paper argues that many empirical studies, despite their venturous intent to indigenise interpersonal communication scholarship, lack sensitivity to nationalist and culturalist ideologies, and have therefore caused conceptual confusions and shortcomings. To resolve such problems, future research should prioritize the heuristic value of the emic perspective rather than pursuing its surface representativeness. It should also place more emphasis on analyzing actual interpersonal interactions, while taking co-cultural diversities within the Japanese population into consideration.

This paper revisits the emic approach to Japanese interpersonal communication competence, whose popularity has diminished in the recent theoretical literature but has remained latent in applied areas such as psychiatry and counseling psychology. The main focus of this paper is on the assumptions and methodological problems of the previous studies and their implications for the generation of a heuristic and practical communication theory, which should be relevant and rewarding to the people concerned.

Before entering this discussion, I will briefly overview the development of the emic approach to Japanese interpersonal communication competence to open the approach to the context.

Japanese Interpersonal Communication Competence

In the past three decades, many researchers have discussed theoretical issues in the study of interpersonal communication competence (hereafter, communication competence), especially communication competence in intercultural contexts. Although no conclusive agreement about its definition has yet been established (Hammer, Nishida & Wiseman, 1996), most communication scholars explain that communication competence includes three major components: motivation, knowledge, and skills (Lustig & Koester, 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Wiseman, 2003); or the affective, the behavioral, and the cognitive (Ting-Toomey, 1993). They also put forward two major criteria of competence: appropriateness (i.e., the ability to attune verbal and nonverbal messages to contextual constraints) and effectiveness (i.e., the ability to achieve interactional goals). Based upon these premises, many theorists have mapped the structures and components of communication competence in

intracultural (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), intercultural (e.g., Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Ishii, 2001; Spitzberg, 1994) and global (e.g., Chen, 2005) contexts.

In Japan, research on communication competence has been conducted mainly in the fields of foreign/second language teaching and intercultural communication, especially in the contexts of business and education. Researchers' interest in communication competence has derived from their pragmatic concern that many Japanese are apparently not well equipped to undertake effective and appropriate communication in international and intercultural contexts. Thus, much attention has been paid to the instrumental value, to the extent that the uncritical import of the Western construct has hampered the theoretical development of communication competence scholarship in Japan. Ishii (2001), for example, points out the widespread acceptance and popularity of sociolinguistic models of communication competence formulated by Hymes (1972) and Canale and Swain (1980), and discusses the urgent need for alternative perspectives on communication competence, which are truly applicable and meaningful in the Japanese sociocultural milieu.

In line with Ishii's argument, an increasing number of researchers have argued for the development of interpersonal communication theories on the basis of non-Western sociocultural contexts. They contend that the Western approach to communication is deeply rooted in the West's individualistic, ego-centred, teleological, sender-centred, control-minded and materialistic orientations, and may therefore have limited cross-cultural applicability (e.g., Gordon, 2007; Ikeda & Kramer, 2000; Ishii, 2001, 2006; Kim, 2002, 2007; Miike, 2007; Miyahara, 1996, 1999, 2000; and Takai, 1994). Similarly, some social and cross-cultural psychologists have discussed the Western biases in human sciences and have called for the indigenisation of their respective fields (e.g., Ho, 1998; Hwang, 2005). Many of them support Berry's (1989) suggestions of the "derived" rather than "imposed" etic for valid cross-cultural comparison and of the emic for understanding unique characteristics of people in a single culture. An important implication of these arguments is that the emic approach is particularly useful in generating culture-specific concepts and theories, which may provide a platform for further theoretical maturation (e.g., building culture-general concepts and theories), in conjunction with the etic, cross-cultural comparative studies.

Thus, Takai and Ota (1994), on the basis of eminent works on Japanese interpersonal behaviour (e.g., Barnlund, 1975, 1989; Hamaguchi, 1988; Midooka, 1990; Nakane, 1970; and Sugiyama-Lebra, 1976), have developed the Japanese Interpersonal Competence Scale (JICS) that has incorporated many supposedly Japanese core cultural values, such as "harmony maintenance, perceptivity and sensitivity, humility and modesty, reservation and hesitation, hierarchy consciousness, relationship consciousness, dependency, group consciousness and conformity (collectivism), and context consciousness" (p. 227). Subsequent studies have affirmed its internal validity (e.g., Koyama & Kawashima, 2001), its consistency with other measurement instruments of social skills (e.g., Mao & Daibo, 2008), and its utility in clinical and preventive interventions of depression (e.g., Matsudaira, Fukuhara & Kitamura, 2008). In a similar vein, social psychologists have attempted to identify the structure and components of culture-specific social skills for the Japanese who wish to improve the quality of

interpersonal relationships (e.g., Kukuchi, 1988) and for international students who wish to form interpersonal relationships with the Japanese (e.g., Nakashima & Tanaka, 2008). In this way, the emic approach, which prioritises an insider's rather than an outsider's perspective on communication and competence, has become one of the cornerstones of the indigenisation of Japanese interpersonal communication research.

Methodological Problems in the Emic Approach

In this section, I will examine some problems in the emic approach to Japanese communication competence, using Lustig and Spitzberg's (1993) methodological discussion of intercultural communication competence research. Lusting and Spitzberg (1993) take up six methodological issues (i.e., *what, who, when, where, why* and *with what effect*), with the teleological assumption that communication competence is equivalent to behavioural skills that are necessary for the achievement of an interactant's personal and/or relational goals. Thus, their discussion may have limitations in theorising interpersonal communication that is voluntary and does not stress instrumental or utilitarian values such as friendship (Kudo, 2003) and what Giddens (1991) terms "pure relationship," a type of relationship that is engaged in primarily for gratifications it offers through intimacy and mutual trust. Moreover, their argument does not address the issues on how to conduct rigorous research, and it leaves readers to consider other minor technical issues. In addition, their discussion is concerned with intercultural rather than intracultural communication competence, while the following discussion focuses on intracultural dimensions. Despite these limitations, I find their framework broad enough to encompass the major issues in evaluating the emic approach to Japanese communication competence.

Arguably, the most difficult issue in conducting communication competence research is its conceptualisation, given the lack of consensus on its concrete definition (Hammer et al., 1996). With regard to the *what* of communication competence, Lustig and Spitzberg (1993) take up five themes: level of abstraction (i.e., whether microscopic, mezzoscopic, macroscopic, or all behaviours should be examined), assessment equivalence (i.e., whether researchers should focus on the emic or etic aspects of competence), level of analysis (i.e., whether competence should be examined at the individual, relational, group, or cultural level), type of comparison (i.e., whether competence should be assessed in terms of typicality, variability, association, or pattern), and content level (i.e., whether researchers should examine motivation, knowledge, skills, or all the three).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address all of these themes. Thus, I shall focus on assessment equivalence, which appears to be particularly relevant to the Japanese emic approach to communication competence. That is, whatever the concept of communication competence may denote, the emic perspective emphasises the culturally distinctive aspects of Japanese competence using anthropological/folkloric constructs, such as *amae* (indulgent dependence: Doi, 1971), *kanjinshugi* (contextualism/interpersonalism: Hamaguchi, 1988), vertical relationships (Nakane, 1970), *ishin-denshin* or communication without language,

passivity and indirect communication, and high sensitivity towards *kuki* or the constraint of mood and face (Tsujimura, 1987). Indeed, Takai and Ota's (1994) JICS contains these constructs, and Koyama and Kawashima (2001) affirm the internal validity of the scale by showing that such Japanese aspects are highly applicable to Japanese university students, irrespective of competence evaluators.

It is important, however, to point out that such emic behaviors are not necessarily unique to the Japanese. Some empirical evidence suggests that constructs that emic studies such as Takai and Ota (1994), Mao and Daibo (2008) and Matsudaira et al. (2008) believed are of the Japanese are less true of Japanese samples than of other national samples (Sugimoto, 1997). For example, a study conducted by Hamaguchi (1998), a developer of the *kanjinshugi* model, reveals that the Japanese are not distinctively inclined to *kanjinshugi* when compared to other nationals, such as Britons and U.S. Americans. Lewis and Ozaki (2002) also challenge the view that the Japanese in particular, value *amae* in interpersonal relationships, and claim that the concept of *amae* can be translated into "mardy" in English. Nakane's (1970) contention that Japan is typically a vertical society is not strongly supported by cross-cultural data (e.g., Hofstede, 1980). These results suggest that the Japanese "core cultural values" that the emic approach to communication competence has used are not as unique to the Japanese as the *Nihonjinron* (theories on the Japanese) literature has argued, and this may provide less support for the rationale of carrying out the emic approach if its purpose is simply to identify cultural constructs particularly unique to the Japanese. (Other values of the emic approach will be discussed in the next section.)

With regard to the *who* of competence research, Lustig and Spitzberg (1993) propose two themes: whose competence should be assessed, and who should assess competence. In terms of whose competence, they discuss the problems created by researchers' heavy reliance on the convenient sampling of university students, because students have limited contact with the society, and therefore are not good representatives of cultural groups. Another issue they consider is the role of evaluators in the assessment of competence, because this implies that some conceptual tensions may arise when the results of competence assessment differ among actors, co-actors, or observers. In response to these arguments, the emic approach stresses the importance of collecting data from various demographic sources and considering multiplex perspectives (e.g., Takai & Ota, 1994). However, underneath this argument, there exists a tacit belief that Japan consists of a socioculturally homogenous population, and an infatuation with this assumption leaves out the experiences of minority people such as Korean residents, Ainu, Japanese immigrants abroad, naturalised foreigners and biculturals/biracials (Befu, 1997; Sugimoto, 1997). This is exemplified by the fact that most empirical studies on Japanese interpersonal communication competence (e.g., Koyama & Kawashima, 2001; Mao & Daibo, 2008; Matsudaira et al., 2008; Takai, 1994; Takai & Ota, 1994) have taken the meanings of Japan and Japanese for granted and have hardly engaged in definitional discussions, while in recent years an increasing number of studies have explored the multiplicity, hybridity, and historicity of Japanese(ness) and have argued for a multicultural analysis of the Japanese (e.g., Sugimoto, 1997; Tai, 2005).

Lustig and Spitzberg (1993) also point out the contextual components of competence research under the issues of *when* and *where*. With regard to the *when* of competence research, there are three themes: whether competence is episodic or dispositional (i.e., state or trait), whether researchers should engage in cross-sectional or longitudinal analysis, and whether research should investigate short- or long-term competence. With regard to the *where* of competence research, they argue about the level of analysis and situational constraints in competence. Their sensitivity to the contextual aspects of communication competence should be appreciated, given the influence of macro-social systems (e.g., ideology, history) on an individual or a dyad (Goodwin, 1999; Keshishian, 2005; Lannamann, 1991). On the other hand, the emic approach to Japanese communication competence has not discussed this issue, despite a widely held claim that the Japanese are highly sensitive to contextual constraints in communication (e.g., Hall, 1976; Hamaguchi, 1988).

In addition, the emic perspective takes little or no consideration of socio-political and technological factors: what is salient, instead, is the emphasis on classical representations of Japanese culture that have served as an independent variable of Japanese face-to-face communicative behaviours (e.g., Matsudaira et al. 2008; Takai, 1994). Yoshino (1997) refers to this type of simple reductionist attribution as culturalism, and criticises its pervasive dominance in the intercultural communication manuals. Given the increasing importance of poststructural, postmodern, and postcolonial thinking in intercultural research (Dissanayake, 2006), Yoshino's understanding of intercultural communication research is outdated. However, his criticism of culturalism and essentialism seems applicable to many intercultural communication studies in Japan (Maruyama, 2002), and to the emic approach to Japanese communication competence research.

It is also important to consider the dimension of the *why* of the emic approach, since this lies at the heart of all of the aforementioned problems. As mentioned previously, the Japanese perspective of communication competence developed from researchers' concerns over the dominance of the Western research paradigm in communication studies, as well as from their practical needs. This implies that, from the outset of its development, the Japanese approach wanted or needed to stress the differences in the components of communication competence between Japanese and Euro-Americans. Here the dichotomous distinction between Japanese and Westerners is made salient, and this mentality neglects the comparison of communication competence between the Japanese and other non-Western people (e.g., Chinese, Nigerians, and Brazilians).

Moreover, when communication competence is measured, the result of the assessment usually involves value judgements (i.e., positive or negative connotations): competence research can be used as a tool to prove or to devalue the quality of certain cultural groups. This point is implicated in the literature in the 1980s and the 1990s when scholars on Japanese interpersonal communication resorted to cultural relativism and attempted to depict the Japanese as being able to communicate as competently as North Americans (e.g., Ishii, 1992; and Takai & Ota, 1994). Thus, the Japanese perspective on communication competence can be supported by those Japanese who wish to appear as communicatively competent as

Westerners, and this incentive requires a discovery of culturally unique aspects of the competence as opposed to the Western counterparts. Accordingly, the Japanese perspective has clung to the culturalist (and to some extent Western-oriented) assumptions and interpretation of the data, in which culture has been treated as a mere independent variable of a culturally unique and homogeneous communication behaviour, and the West has been seen as *the* frame of reference. In my opinion, such a reductionist, Western-oriented vision should not guide the emic approach to communication competence, as it promotes an "imposed emic," a seemingly insider's, yet profoundly biased perspective that only serves to maintain the dominance of the Western notions of communication competence.

Finally, the *with what effect*, or the social implications of Japanese communication competence research, deserve serious consideration. Lustig and Spitzberg (1993) point out ethical considerations and impacts of research on the subjects and the phenomena under study. Other than these general precautions, one important aspect of the emic approach is, as discussed previously, the possibility that research may exclude or distort the experiences of those who do not share affective, behavioural, and cognitive patterns of communication with the mainstream population. Thus far, the emic approach has investigated solely the interpersonal communication experiences of the mainstream Japanese, especially by means of social scientific, quantitative methodology. There is a lack of interpretive and critical scholarship of more qualitative orientations that touches upon multiple constructions of competence and ideological aspects of interpersonal communication (Lannamann, 1991), and given the emic approach's supposition of homogeneity of a cultural group (Befu, 1989), the dominance of social scientific research may function as an impetus for distinguishing the mainstream Japanese from ethnic minority groups and for sustaining the hegemonic dominance of the former over the latter.

Future Directions

To reiterate, the emic approach to Japanese communication competence has stood on the premise of Japanese folkloric uniqueness and homogeneity, and has paid scant attention to the contextual factors and ideological consequences of the research. What does this imply for future research? At least five issues should be discussed.

First, the emic approach should not become a tool for culturalism and nationalism, and should be left open for wider cross-cultural comparisons that involve people in non-Western as well as Western societies. With growing influences of postcolonial, poststructual, and postmodern thinking in intercultural research (Dissanayake, 2006), naïve claims for cultural uniqueness, especially in the dichotomy of "us" against "them" (e.g., Japan against the West) are subject to criticism, if their implications for actual intercultural encounters are ignored. As Starosta and Chen (2009, p. 90) put it, "the lack of openness is the biggest enemy for self improvement….An outsider may not see what an insider can see, but an outsider may see what an insider cannot see. For a cultural system to survive, it must be open to the inputs from outside." To avoid the narrow-minded use of the emic approach, researchers should be more

conscious of the paradigmatic contributions that the emic approach can make, and more etic studies, which use a wider range of cross-cultural samples, are needed to ensure the strengths and limitations of the respective emic concepts or theories.

Second, it is important to consider Japan as a socioculturally heterogeneous society. As mentioned previously, the literature has assumed cultural homogeneity of Japan and has attempted to find those aspects of competence that are peculiar to the Japanese. However, in the present age of globalisation, Japan is on her way to multiculturalism with an increase of the foreign-born population, and a rise of "multicultural co-living" (*tabunka kyosei*) discourses (Tai, 2005). In addition, Matsumoto (2002) provides psychological data to indicate that, in contemporary Japan, people above and below 40 years of age have very different value orientations (e.g., the young are much more individualistic than the old), and concludes that Japan is in a cultural duality. A longitudinal survey conducted by NHK Housou Bunka Kenkyujo (2000) also reveals an increasing divergence in Japanese values and behaviours over the last 25 years. These studies imply the importance of examining the realities of various kinds of Japanese people as characterized by age, occupations, and geographical locality, rather than pursuing the typicality of Japanese communication competence on the basis of the monolithic myth.

Third, closely linked to this suggestion is Shapiro's (2002) contention that surface representativeness should not be a primary concern of empirical research. In other words, not all research conducted in the emic approach should pursue the discovery of "normative" competence components typical of the majority Japanese. Researchers' experience in the past several decades has taught us that emphasizing differences alone does not bring about understanding; rather, it has promulgated stereotyped images of the Japanese (Yoshino, 1997). Pursuing the discovery of the characteristics of Japanese competence may also prohibit understanding the cultural diversity within the national culture (Mabuchi, 2002). Thus, I suggest here the importance of appreciating the heuristic value of the emic approach rather than relying on its surface representativeness and generalisability. The popularity and acknowledged importance of *amae* in international academia, for example, tell us that Japanese emic concepts, even if not applicable to most, if not all, members of Japanese society, can be a basis for insightful theory building or paradigmatic contribution.

Fourth, future research on Japanese communication competence should pay more attention to actual interpersonal interactions. This is in response to the discussion on contextual (i.e., the *when* and *where*) aspects of competence research. Most empirical studies on Japanese interpersonal communication competence, though steadily increasing, still rely on quantitative analysis by means of a self-report questionnaire, in which culture is treated merely as an independent variable of communication competence (e.g., Koyama & Kawashima, 2001; Mao & Daibo, 2008; Matsudaira et al., 2008; Nishida, 2000; Takai & Ota, 1994). However, culture is irrefutably changing, just as communication is a dynamic process: culture is intertwined with socio-economic and political conditions (Matsumoto, 2002). Thus, further research, particularly of interpretive and critical paradigms is urgently needed to capture the interactions between situational, socio-economic, political, and historical contexts

and the engagement and assessment of communication competence. The technological impact on communication competence may also prove to be an important research area, because, in comparison to the traditional aspects of Japanese culture and face-to-face interactions, there has hardly been any research conducted on the issues relating to industrialisation and technology development, and they may have room for significant theoretical contributions.

Fifth, taking these suggestions together, it is also important to consider the future of intercultural communication competence research in Japan. Thus far, the emic approach has paid more attention to communication competence in "intracultural" rather than intercultural contexts. To open the emic approach to intercultural contexts, further refinement of the research on intracultural communication competence is required. It is, however, at least possible at this stage to engage in case studies that attend sensitively to the multiple contextual constraints on communication competence (e.g., Witteborn, 2003). The influx of borrowed foreign words into the Japanese language, the development of information and communication technologies, the diffusion of Japanese pop culture on a global scale, and the increased global mobility of sojourners and immigrants—all these issues can assist in bringing forth discoveries meaningful to interpersonal communication scholarship. The future of the Japanese emic approach to intracultural and intercultural communication competence is still unforeseeable. However, it depends to a large extent upon researchers taking more open attitudes towards various (e.g., historical, economic, political, ideological, and educational) types of concurrently existing contexts, and on a self-reflexivity that keeps them searching for a better research practice.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the background, research development, problems and challenges of the emic approach to Japanese communication competence. I hope this literature review will benefit readers and lead them to reconsider the methodological issues involved in conducting research on intracultural and intercultural communication competence. This should help to improve the quality of the professional and private lives of people who rely heavily on the quality of interpersonal communication.

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