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Speaking to foreigners: Reactions of Japanese students to a sample situation

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1 Introduction

In cross-cultural communication, maybe because of cultural differences between the parties, it often happens that some behaviors, though not malicious, confuse or cause discomfort to the other person.

Such cases can prevent the development of satisfying human relations, though both parties may be unaware of it.

In this study, I discuss a situation frequently encountered in communication situations between Japanese[1] and foreigners and I attempt to explain the grounds of the Japanese behavior in that situation. I used one frame from a *manga* in which such a situation clearly occurs and I asked Japanese university students to look at it and to write an interpretation of the situation described. On the basis of their responses, I propose an interpretation of how Japanese manage in such contexts.

[1] In this paper, I use "Japanese" as a shorthand for "The Japanese" or "Japanese people". Though ordinary grammar prefers the last two forms, "Japanese" with a plural verb is widely in use in modern English as well as in linguistic, sociological or medical literature. See *"Japanese are" -"the Japanese"* on Google and on Google Scholar (as one query, with the quotation marks, and the minus sign).

2 Sample situation

My research deals mainly with Japanese society and communication as seen through *manga* and *anime*. In one particular manga, I found the following scene (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Sample situation from "Dai Tokyo Toy Box (*Great Tokyo Toy Box*)".

Woman:
Gummōnin, Mistā Rodorigesu!
(Good morning, Mr. Rodriguez!)
Man:
Well… I speak Japanese, you know…

Dai-Tokyo Toy Box
Volume 1
By Ume
(2006, Gentōsha)
(My translation)

This scene is from "*Dai Tokyo Toy Box (Great Tokyo Toy Box)*" volume 1, by Ume (2007 – 2013). It's a sequel of "Tokyo Toy Box" (2006)[2]. The setting of the story is the game industry. It is basically a human drama about game creators. The manga has been a big hit in Japan, and TV drama adaptations were created out of both series.

In this scene, Momo Momoda, a new employee in the game company, greets her senior employee, Gō Rodriguez. Rodriguez is a third generation Japanese American, bilingual in Japanese and English. He is a game programmer, and also in charge of the games' translation.

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[2] Ume (2007 – 2013) "*Dai Tokyo Toy Box (Great Tokyo Toy Box)* volume 1." 10 volumes, Gentōsha. Ume (2006) "Tokyo Toy Box." 2 volumes, Kōdansha)

We first notice that Momo's line is written in katakana English from top to bottom, meaning that her pronunciation is Japanese. Nevertheless, in this article, I will just call her English "English."

Rodriguez's line is also written vertically, but this time in kanji, hiragana, and katakana, as an ordinary manga line. It means that he is speaking Japanese with the pronunciation of a native speaker. In *manga*, foreigners' Japanese is often written in katakana, depicting a foreign accent. It is not the case here: Rodriguez's Japanese is impeccable.

When analyzing postures and facial expressions, we can see that Momo is smiling and she seems cheerful. In other words, she appears to be candid and sincere. However, Rodriguez seems puzzled; a drop of sweat appears on his face. In *manga*, such a sweat drop means confusion.

Being a Japanese who has been married to a foreigner for 20 years, as well as teaching Japanese language and society to international students for almost 15 years, I often heard that foreigners have to deal with such situations with Japanese. I have witnessed such situations myself as well. I also believe the manga's author, Ume, intended to describe an ordinary situation in the company. Such situations are frequently seen; they are caricatures of some aspects of Japanese communication with foreigners.

In such case, Japanese supposedly mean no harm. But more than often, foreigners are embarrassed or confused. There are even occasions when foreigners may react strongly, showing their discontent. I think it would be interesting to find out what the Japanese party means and why the foreign party sometimes feel offended.

3 Methodology

There isn't much difficulty explaining such situations by using the literature about Japanese society and culture. However, it is not easy to demonstrate why these situations occur. In order to do that, I decided to analyse the interpretation of this scene by 40 Japanese female college students. They aren't experts in communication, but as

young females, they can identify to Momo and attempt some interpretation of her attitude.

The panel consists of 40 Japanese female students who attended my intercultural communication class at a women's university in Fukuoka prefecture. Most of them were freshmen, but some students of other grades were included.

During the class, I distributed a copy of the *manga* scene (see figure 1 above) and the question below.

Question: Why do you think the woman spoke in "English"?

4 Analysis by keywords: Interpretations given by the Japanese female students

Most of the responses consisted in one to three lines. Some respondents wrote multiple interpretations. I picked up keywords from the responses and categorized them into four groups. Results are shown in Table 1. In many cases, one response includes multiple keywords. The total number of keywords is 108, for 40 respondents.

Table 1: Interpretation of figure 1 by Japanese female college students: keywords

Categories and keywords	Number of items	Comments
Identity	**40**	
Foreigner: Because he is a foreigner / a non-Japanese	30	Among which: *Gaijin* (foreigner) (1), American (1), not a Japanese (3).
Image: appearance, outward, face, looks	10	Every response here is connected with the keyword "foreigner."
Communication, relationships	**33**	
Become friends: friendly, friendship, amicable, closer, friends, want to understand	15	Among which: try to communicate (4)

Be nice: consideration, kindness, for *aite* (the other party), make *aite* easier to talk to, make *aite* happy	12	Among which: accommodate *aite* (not make *aite* accommodate you) (5)
"Kyara" communication: *Nori* (beat of conversation), *karami* (teasing), joke, humor, cheerfulness*	6	* Using English is a way to appear cheerful.
Language	**23**	
Japanese language ability: Thinks he can't speak Japanese. Doesn't know how much Japanese he can speak. Doesn't know him well.	8	
Practice: Wants to speak English. Occasion to speak English with a foreigner. Wants to show she can speak some English.	6	
English is better: English is a better way of communication in this case. She thinks / feels that she should talk in English.	5	Among which: Should talk in English (2).
English is the world language, all foreigners are English speakers	4	
Judgement	**12**	
Stereotype: fixed / preconceived idea, one-sided judgement / definition / assumption	8	Among which: Positive stereotype about foreigners (1)
Imposition of kindness: A way of imposing something (though out of kindness)	1	
Downplaying: No profound meaning. Just a greeting.	2	
Banalization: "Japanese have a tendency to do such things."	1	

First, I categorized the keywords into four groups: "Identity," "Communication / relationship," "Language," and "Judgement" in decreasing order of numbers of items (see Table 1 above).

4.1 The "Identity" response category: "If he looks like a foreigner, speak English."

In the "Identity" category (40 items), the prevailing keyword is "(Because he is a) foreigner" (27 items, including "*Gaijin"* and "American"). The next one is "Appearance (outward, face, looks)" (10), in connection with "foreigner." Three

respondents wrote "Because he is not Japanese." In other words, 30 out of 40 interpret Momo's attitude as "She speaks English because he is not Japanese." Besides, 10 respondents among them wrote that the reasoning "He is not Japanese" is made according to appearance.

Many respondents just wrote "She speaks English because he looks like a foreigner." The implication is that some Japanese share a pattern of thinking according to which "If someone looks like a foreigner, you normally speak English." (However, we'll see that some respondents considered such a way of thinking as a "stereotype.")

4.2 The "Communication" response category: "Accommodate the other party."

Keywords in the "Communication, relationship" category (33 items) show that many respondents interpret Momo's intention positively. Two types of interpretations come out. One of them is: "Because she wants to be friendly with him." The other one is "Because she wants to show consideration." In both cases, the logic relies on something like: "To do something for the other party is to do the same thing as them."

Six other respondents wrote that "She uses English as a joke (or a tease.)" Of course, the function of a joke may also be to show consideration and friendship. But how can the use of "English" be considered a joke? I will discuss this in 5-3 below.

4.3 The "Language" response category: "I want to speak English," "I must speak English."

The third category of responses is "Language" (23 items). Two types of interpretations can be distinguished. The first one is "Momo wants to speak English," while the other is "It is better to speak English / She feels that she should speak English."

Six respondents interpreted "She wants to speak English" as "She wants to show that she can speak English / she wants to take advantage of this occasion to speak English with a foreigner."

For six other respondents, the reason why she wants to speak English is that "She thinks that Rodriguez can't speak Japanese." Another two explained that "She wants to speak English" because "She doesn't know Rodriguez's Japanese level." Yet, from

Rodriguez's line "Well…, I speak Japanese, you know…," we may guess that Momo and he had the same kind of conversation before. It shows that not only Momo, but also other Japanese have difficulty to switch their mindset and acknowledge that some foreigners speak Japanese, or that one may speak Japanese to foreigners.

Interpretations in the "Language" category are strongly connected to the ones in the "Communication" and "Identity" categories. Therefore it is possible to regroup them (also including some other minor opinions). We can then say that many Japanese share the following scheme: "He/she looks like a foreigner → Therefore he/she doesn't speak Japanese → Therefore it is better to speak English." Another common scheme is: "I don't know his/her Japanese level → Therefore I'll speak English." In the background of this logic pertain ideas like "Foreigner → English"; "English = common language of the world"; "Foreigner → must speak English," etc. A respondent wrote: "If I met a foreigner and he/she obviously seemed to be a foreigner, I would certainly feel that I should speak English."

4.4 "Foreigner → English" as a prejudice.

Nine respondents gave not only an interpretation of Momo's attitude, but also a judgement about it. For them: "Foreigner → English" is a fixed/preconceived idea, a stereotype, a one-sided judgement/definition/assumption. One of them also describes it as "*oshitsuke*," or a way to impose one's kindness on someone who doesn't need or doesn't want it. Another one wrote that "Japanese have a tendency to do such a thing."

These responses show that some Japanese have a critical view of the scheme "Foreigner → English." Nevertheless, they do admit that this scheme is shared by many people.

On the other hand, two respondents wrote that "There is no profound meaning in what Momo says" and that "It is just a greeting." It may show that this kind of communication is natural and normal for them, though some foreigners are embarrassed by such greetings. The least we can say at this stage is that some Japanese and some foreigners share different notions of language or communication.

As mentioned above, I analyzed the responses of 40 Japanese female students to

a sample situation appearing in "*Great Tokyo Toy Box*." These responses share two schemes: first, "Foreigner → English"; second, "If he/she looks like a foreigner, speak English." These two schemes are associated with a third one: "You must accommodate the other party, and in order to do that, do as they do." Consequently, some Japanese want to speak English, or feel that they should. On the other hand, some others have a critical view of such schemes. They see them as "prejudice," "stereotype," or "imposition of kindness." Some also interpreted "Foreigner → English" as teasing, intended to characterize Rodriguez in his role as a foreigner.

Now I will look at these points again, this time from the point of view of Japanese communication.

5 Discussion: Characteristics of Japanese communication

5.1 Why does "foreigner" imply "English"?

Inoue (1990, 57-60) writes that Japanese characterize foreigners with extreme generalization. He relates this to the myth of the "homogeneous nation." In other words, the cause of the generalization may be a lack of knowledge about foreigners, this lack of knowledge being a consequence of the small number of immigrants and foreigners in the country. This explanation is still often put forth. However, we may wonder about it. Admittedly, Japanese have little history of contact with foreigners, but it certainly should not lead them to conclude that all foreigners are English speakers and that they don't speak Japanese.

Another possible background explanation would be, in my opinion, the Japanese attachment to "shape" (*kata*)[3]. It can be said that many Japanese first judge foreigners according to the scheme "Japanese or not" rather than according to "Where they are from" or "Which language they speak." In other words, they probably judge people according to "shape," not to personality or individuality. At least superficially, modern

[3] Japanese 型 *kata* originally means: *model, type, pattern, mould, template, form, procedure*. The notion is described in Azra (2011, 24-27, in French).

Japanese people are certainly influenced by individualism, but a majority still determine the kind of relations they have with each other according to gender, role, or title, all kinds of "*kata*" which seem to determine behavior. The social system makes also use of the same notion. Thus, it can be said that the Japanese tendency to do "extreme generalization" does not apply only to foreigners. It also applies to the male/female, young/elderly, single/married distinctions, as well as many others.

Of course, the acquisition of a "shape" type of communication is emphasized from childhood. For the Japanese, contrary to the notion of stereotype usually seen as negative, the "*kata*" point of view relates to the nature and behavior of things themselves. It has therefore some sort of virtue which is to be protected. To that end, the foreigners themselves, as well as communication with them, are regarded through the "*kata*" prism. The reason why Japanese do not have any doubt about "Speaking English to foreigners" is probably because it is a natural "*kata*" to be respected.

Moreover, appearance is important in determining a "shape." Among the students' answers, 10 emphasize looks or physical features.

For many Japanese, evaluating the other party according to "*kata*" or communicate in terms of "*kata*" is an unconscious process, which may sometimes be confusing for foreigners who come from societies that emphasizes individuality and diversity. In response to that, eight of the respondents evoked "stereotypes."

5.2 Why the "Speak English to foreigners" behavior?

Even admitting that for the Japanese "Foreigner implies English," one may wonder why one must speak English to a foreigner. Among the respondents, 15 answered this question by saying that "The Japanese want to become friends," 12 explained it is "Out of concern for the other party," among which five wrote that it is "In order to reach out to the other party, who is English-speaking." One of them explained even further: "Momo didn't want to force Rodriguez to accommodate her. Thus she adapted to Rodriguez." In other words, for the Japanese, "Out of concern for the other party" can be translated as "Accommodating the other party."

Japanese communication is often defined as "partner-oriented." Inoue (1990, 37)

stated that the Japanese culture is "The culture of conforming to the other party." Most Japanese will unconsciously try to fit to the other party, but foreigners will sometimes feel a sense of incongruity. What can be kindness and consideration among Japanese can also be perceived as distance and alienation to the other party.

Nevertheless, in a Japanese conversation when one of the parties speaks a dialect, the other party will usually not attempt to speak this dialect, even if Japanese people are generally "partner-oriented." Such an attempt would certainly be understood by the other party as being made fun of. Yet, for many Japanese, it would much easier to speak in another dialect than in English. In other words, "Conforming to the other party" is unrelated to the implication "Foreigner → English" and to the attempt to speak English to a foreigner. There must be some other strong link between "foreigner" and "English."

According to Azra (2011, 138-140; 2016), many Japanese do not identify foreign languages, including English, as interpersonal communication tools. They rather see them as codes, translating a limited number of clear-cut notions. Therefore, it may be that rather than attempting to "communicate" in "a foreign language," Japanese speakers use bits of English as customary forms meant to show their concern for the other party.

5.3 Using English as a "joke"

For six respondents, Momo's English was intended as "a joke, a pun, a tease." We may wonder if she's trying to show some familiarity, or if she thinks she can befriend the other party by doing so.

Modern communication between Japanese young people often includes "characters (*kyara*)." I understand Momo's speech and attitude in the cartoon as a case of "character communication." I'll suppose that the six respondents who interpreted her English as a form of joke do interpret it as "character communication," too.

Psychiatrist Tamaki Saito (2013), known for his analysis of young people's way of life in Japanese society, describes "character communication" in "*Shônin wo meguru yamai* (*The disease of approval*)":

"First of all, 'character' does not point to someone's 'personality' or 'nature' but to a type of 'role' this person performs. […] It is irrelevant to that person's nature. 'Character' appears in relationships or within groups. It acts as the coordinates indicating the position of the individual within the relationship or the group." (Saito 2013, 15)[4]

"The advantage of 'character culture' is a smoother communication. Once one's own character and the other's character are understood, communication modes are determined naturally." (Saito, 2013, 20)

Saito further writes: "Communication among the younger generations, for instance 'tsukkomi' or 'ijiri,'[5] show a certain amount of preoccupation with cross-validation of characters, with little exchange of information. We refer to this kind of communication as 'grooming communication'. […]" (Saito 2013, 20)

"*Kyara*" is a modern communication pattern particularly used among young Japanese. It is also certainly much more widely spread among the general population in Japan than it is in foreign cultures. Using "*kyara*" (like "*tsukkomi*" or "*ijiri*") amounts to using stereotypes, capturing the other's "shape (*kata*)," or "role (*yaku*)."[6] This is particularly true at the beginning and end of a conversation, where greetings take place.

Though the other party may find it uncomfortable or confusing, "*kyara*" communication is basically an expression of familiarity meant to ensure that both parties are aware of each other and are strengthening their relationship.

This clearly appears in the students' responses (my emphasis)

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[4] Translations from Saito (2013) are mine.

[5] "Tsukkomi" or "ijiri" are two types of "kyara", or character communication roles. "Tsukkomi" refers to someone who reacts to other people's words in a funny way; "ijiri" is a teaser, who makes fun of others.

[6] As said above, 型 "*kata*" originally means: *model, type, pattern, procedure*, whereas 役 "*yaku*" or 役割 "*yakuwari*" means *role*. Both notions occur in the way people position themselves and position others in social relationships. While "*kata*" defines categories, "*yaku*" is the behavior to be adopted by someone: speech, actions, or in other words "part to play" in the grand scheme of society as a whole (Azra, 2008).

- "Momo tried to communicate in English as a joke, because he is a *gaijin*."
- "The woman is smiling, and I think she speaks English as a joke or maybe just for fun."
- "It's just that Rodriguez is a foreigner. I think she says that for the sake of the conversation ('*nori*')."
- "Yeah, it's '*nori*'. She's not tense. She smiles. I guess it's '*nori*.'"

"*Nori*," literally the act of "riding," is the mood of a conversation. One has to catch it and follow it for the sake of the exchange. "*Nori*" is an important element in character communication. It can be described as the rhythm, the beat, the feeling of the conversation. Someone who can't "ride" the atmosphere is considered as a bad conversationalist. In performing the "cross-validation of characters," ("Grooming communication" in Saito's words), "*nori*" is an essential element.

Yonekawa (1996) defines "*nori*" originally as a function of the language of young people. However, "*nori*" is not just a characteristic of the youth anymore. It has affected the entire Japanese communication. "*Nori*" is "one of the tools that helps conversation progress, and makes it entertaining in every situation" (Yonekawa, 1996-v, my translation).

According to Yonekawa, "nori" appeared in the late 1970s, its trend progressing with the changes in the consumer society, and continuing up to now (1996, 90).

It is probable that qualifying Momo's "English" as an outcome of "*nori*" won't surprise many Japanese. As we have seen, the students' comments underlined the "*nori*," "joke," or "tease" aspects of Momo's comment. Moreover, when presenting the comments to the class, many students, even if they didn't write it themselves, expressed that "*nori*" was certainly a factor. It can be said that for many Japanese, cheerfully talk in "English" to foreigners is also part of the atmosphere, and it's done out of an intent to become friends.

5.4 Is she doing something wrong, or is it Rodriguez?

Cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall (Hall, 1976) classified cultural codes in

"high-context" cultures and "low context" cultures. In high context cultures, the context plays an important role in the process of message transmission. In other words, the importance of verbalization is relatively low. On the contrary, in low-context cultures, information is explicitly verbalized, and communication relies on the context as little as possible.

Germanic systems, including English-speaking cultures, are low-context. On the contrary, Japanese communication is definitively high-context (see "Japan" in Hall, 1976, index). The emphasis on "*nori*" over content which developed in Japan must have some sort of relation with that.

Westerners, who tend to see conversations as exchanges of ideas, knowledge, or information, may feel a sense of incongruity when the purpose of the conversation is just the conversation itself, and the possibility to "ride" it through "character communication." Moreover, for those who perceive stereotypes as negative things, a "joke" based on social attributes or physical characteristics can certainly be difficult to appreciate. In addition, they would find it difficult to imagine that intimate human relationships can be built on such premises.

On the other side, Rodriguez's reaction tended to be understood by the Japanese as "*Nori* is bad (or not interesting, or annoying)." For some respondents, Rodriguez should rather "Reply cheerfully in English, for instance using a Japanese accent". Rodriguez seems "not fun" because his reaction is "argumentative".[7] Though he may not be conscious of it, this might get in the way of Momo and him becoming friends.

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[7] Being "argumentative" (理屈っぽい "Rikutsuppoi") is very strongly frowned upon in Japan. In "外国人とのコミュニケーション (Communication with foreigners)" (Nishihara, 2003), the difference between "high-context" and "low-context" cultures is described the following way: "So now, we can imagine what happens when a German speaker and a Japanese speaker contact. The Japanese speaker is bored by the argumentativeness of the German speaker and the German speaker is puzzled because he or she doesn't understand at all what the Japanese speaker means." (p. 166) (my translation)

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I analyzed one simple situation frequently happening between Japanese and foreigners in Japan, as represented in one frame of the manga "Great Tokyo Toy Box" by Ume (2006). In the situation depicted, a young woman, Momo, addresses a foreign employee in "English" (more exactly greets him in English, with Japanese pronunciation). The foreign employee, Rodriguez, being bilingual in English and Japanese, seems to be confused by Momo's attitude.

I asked 40 female students in my intercultural communication class to comment this situation, and I categorized their responses according to keywords. The main results can be summarized as follow:

- Momo speaks English to Rodriguez because he is a foreigner / looks like a foreigner, without thinking about the fact that he speaks Japanese.
- She wants to accommodate the other party, or she wants to "tease" him.
- She wants to take the opportunity to speak some English, or she thinks Rodriguez doesn't speak Japanese.

These responses show that the respondents strongly identify "foreigner" with "English." Some respondents were critical of this view, and qualified it as "stereotype."

More interestingly, many of the responses tend to show that Momo's attitude, and possibly the attitude of many Japanese who attempt to speak English to foreigners, is intended as normal conversation or normal greeting. For one thing, it's a way to accommodate the other party. Moreover, it is, for some people at least, a way to "ride" the exchange ("*nori*"). This is a common tendency in modern Japanese, which can be connected to the notions of "*kata*," "*yaku*" and "*kyara* communication," which are well established in the communication literature.

These are novel conclusions which cast some light on the question of Japanese addressing foreigners in "English," even in situations when they know that the other party speaks perfect or good Japanese. Moreover, I hope that a better understanding of this sample exchange may help to build better cross-cultural communication. Other related aspects of the question should certainly be considered. I hope I'll have the

opportunity to treat them in further studies.

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