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Communication Problems**
How Differing Cultural Values Get In The Way of Our Ability to
Understand Each Other Better

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総合理解の障害の背景となる文化的価値観についての検証

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北海道情報大学

平成27年3月

北海道情報大学紀要 第26巻 第2号別刷

〈論 文〉

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Abstract

Although we are supposed to be living in an age of globalization, Japanese and non-Japanese people often find themselves at odds due to differences in cultural values and social behavior. The Internet has brought us volumes of information about each other without helping us to understand our varying ways of thinking and feeling about the world around us. The purpose of this article is to point out key differences in social behavior, examine the background of those differences and propose ways in which we can lessen the psychological distant between us.

要旨

我々は国際化時代に生きているのにもかかわらず、日本人と外国人には文化的価値観や社会的行動の相違がある。そのためコミュニケーションの行き詰まりが起きている。インターネットによって互いの情報は提供されているが、依然として考え方と感覚の違いはあまり理解されていない。本研究では、社会行動の重要な相違点を指摘し、その背景を分析しながら相互理解への秘訣を提言する。

Key Words: intercultural communication, values, understanding, background, behavior

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1 Even In This Age of Globalization, Are Many Japanese “Allergic” to Foreign People?

A well-known Japanese scholar of sociolinguistics has pointed out that most people in this country are not accustomed to dealing with foreigners on a daily basis (Suzuki, 1987). There certainly are times when I am inclined to think he is exactly right. This is only natural when we consider that the majority of Japanese people go to work at companies where all the employees are Japanese, attend schools where all the students are Japanese and live in neighborhoods where the residents are all Japanese. When one's daily life is filled entirely with other Japanese, what is one to do if a foreign person suddenly happens to appear? In that case, it's understandable if a Japanese is in a quandary about how to interact with the foreigner. He or she might be interested in knowing the person, but not be able to speak English. What is worse, if some problem or misunderstanding arises, a Japanese might subconsciously be inclined to take the safe way out by avoiding interaction altogether. As a fellow earthling, I am certainly able to understand the tendency to avoid any source of potential trouble. On the other hand, I believe that this same tendency can also lead to the unfortunate result of preventing people from experiencing some enjoyable and highly rewarding human interaction as well. Let us look at some actual examples.

Those who know me are probably aware that I commute daily to my place of work by JR train. Recently I have noticed some interesting things while riding those trains. Since the departure

point of many trains is the station just before I get on, I usually get to sit down easily. As the train heads toward Sapporo, gradually the cars become more and more crowded. About four or five stops after I've gotten on, almost all the seats are full. As more and more people get on the train becomes lively with the sounds of various conversations around me. However, there is one thing I've noticed which is a cause for concern. Even after the cars are virtually full, the seats right beside me and those directly facing me remain untaken, at least while I am on the train. Could this be just a figure of my imagination?

At one point several months ago, I decided to deliberately observe the situation and find out if my impression matched the reality of things. I took notes on the seating situation around me. Upon doing this ten times, one clear pattern emerged. In seven of the ten times I rode the same train line, seats directly beside me or directly facing me remained untaken while I was riding. In fact, however, a more detailed explanation is necessary here, I believe. Analyzing the situation as carefully as possible, it essentially boils down to this: Although the seats right beside me or directly facing me usually remained unclaimed, as long as there were open seats not beside me or facing me, Japanese passengers consistently opted to take the seats not adjacent to mine. As soon as the train got crowded enough to where the only open seats were those beside me or facing me, a few people did sit in them. When they did so,

though, I felt a bit of tension in the air, as though they would have been more comfortable sitting elsewhere. Also, their body language seemed to indicate that they had taken the seats reluctantly. Is it possible that this writer is exaggerating? Is my imagination trying to invent a phenomenon that doesn't really exist? I explained the situation to one Japanese friend, a professor at another university. After listening with obvious interest, he opined, "Charles, the most likely reason is that sitting near you means there is a possibility they might get spoken to by you in English. In that case, they would be troubled, fearing they couldn't handle the situation. You shouldn't take this personally. I think their avoidance behavior operates on a subconscious level, mind you. There is both an avoidance of English and an *avoidance of foreigners*." The italics, of course, are mine. What an illuminating response he gave.

If my friend's opinion is on target, which I believe it is for the most part, then we must conclude that Japanese people's overall awareness has not changed greatly since Takao Suzuki wrote his book in 1987. I have also touched on this problem in a previous article for the Communication Association of Japan (McLarty, 1999). In addition, Mike Guest, a well-known educator and columnist for The Japan Daily News has recently written that many businesses with "No foreigner" rules in Japan are actually engaging in the same avoidance-of-foreigners behavior (Guest, 2014). Let us return, however, to our previous discussion of Japanese sociolinguistic behavior on trains.

Some readers might disagree with this writer's opinions and conclusions about Japanese

people avoiding sitting near me. If so, let me relate another "happening" on a train which, I think, lends further credence to my conclusions. On the way home from HIU, I took a train on the Ebetsu-Otaru line, heading toward Sapporo Station. Several stops after I got on, one of my former students boarded the train. He immediately recognized me and came over to sit with me. We had a wonderful chat about various school-related matters and, before we knew it, the train had reached Sapporo. Many people got off at Sapporo, but even more new passengers got on. In fact, the cars quickly became full. Strangely, though, the seat directly facing me remained empty, despite there being plenty of passengers standing in the aisles. Just as I began to wonder if people were avoiding the seat opposite me, an elderly-looking gentleman came and took the seat. As he sat down, however, I could feel some tension in the air. As I couldn't help feeling that he had taken the seat reluctantly, I brought up the subject with my former pupil. At one point I said in Japanese, *yahari, minasan wa eigo de hanashikakeraretara komaru kara kono zaseki dake wa muishiki ni sakete iru kana.* (I wonder if the reason everybody is avoiding this seat is because they are worried I might speak to them in English?) The instant I said that, the look on the gentleman's face changed. When our eyes met, he looked embarrassed. I decided to try speaking to him. I asked (in Japanese, of course) what he thought of my comments. With a rueful smile he said, "Yes, you are certainly right." I then assured him that there was no need for embarrassment and that I could easily understand his feelings. The three of us then had an enjoyable chat until we got off the train. If it really is true that most Japanese feel troubled when they are spoken to by strangers

in English, it is worth asking why they need to be troubled by this. Professor Yoshio Sugimoto, a Japanese linguistics expert who has resided in Australia, has some interesting comments on this topic. “If I spoke to a person on the streets of Melbourne and asked him or her directions in Japanese, that person would really be surprised. However, if an American speaks to a Japanese person on the streets of Tokyo and asks for directions in English, nobody would think it strange at all. In fact, if the American asked for directions in Japanese, that would be far more surprising to a Japanese person.” (Sugimoto, 1988).

In fact, I have had exactly that type of experience. When I was living in a rural area of Honshu, I had a number of Japanese people escape from my presence when I attempted to ask them street directions, despite the fact I always asked them in Japanese! When I have asked strangers street directions in Hokkaido, the results have been mixed. The times I asked in English, people seemed to be nervous, although in most cases they tried to answer. When I asked in Japanese, however, none of the Dosanko (Hokkaido) people escaped. In all cases they either replied politely in Japanese or physically escorted me part or all the way to my destination. If I ask a Japanese person street directions in English in a place outside Japan, it’s understandable if they might get nervous. However, when a Japanese is spoken to in English in Japan, I wonder if they really need to feel troubled. Why can’t the Japanese person treat such a situation more matter of factly? He or she has the right to consider that, as this is Japan, the foreigner should have managed to learn at least a modicum of Nihongo. If the foreign person has not made the effort to learn

a little “survival Japanese” then communication problems cannot really be helped, can they? My opinion on this is that Japanese people need not feel even the least bit guilty for not speaking English in such situations. A complicating factor here is that, as readers are probably aware, virtually all Japanese study English for three years in junior high school and three more years in high school, not to mention further classes if they attend college or a university. Thus, many Japanese vaguely feel guilty if they cannot respond in English. However, having studied English many years ago in school (probably by rote memorization or grammar-based methods) and being able to use it effectively when suddenly spoken to in a public place are two completely different things. I had several years of Chinese language classes at my university, yet I hardly remember anything except a few phrases. Almost all of my old high school classmates had three years of either French, German or Spanish, but none of them has continued to study those languages. I would wager that virtually none of them can manage a real conversation in any foreign tongue.

It is my fervent wish that Japanese people not feel defensive about not speaking English in cases such as the above. It is okay for them to say *Eigo ga dekimasen* (I don’t speak English). If some foreign person says, “Why can’t you speak English after having studied it for at least six years in school?” then I hope Japanese people can answer, “Since you have come to Japan, why haven’t you learned to speak at least some Japanese?”

2 Japanese People Who Have Foreign Names Get Mistaken For Foreigners

Several years ago my wife had a very strange experience. Although she is a Japanese national, she uses my last name, McLarty (マックラーテイ in katakana), for official purposes. Unfortunately, she has discovered that when a Japanese person uses a foreign name in Japan, various problems seem to crop up. For example, when she catches cold and needs to see a doctor, the hospital's staff nurses can't seem to pronounce her name correctly when they call patients into the examination room. On a recent visit to a local hospital, she dutifully filled out the medical information card at the front desk. Naturally, she wrote her name *makkurahtei*, in Japanese katakana letters. However, no matter how long she waited, her name was not called by the nurse. Just as she was starting to wonder what was going on, she suddenly realized that the nurse had actually been calling her name, but she had not been aware of it. Why? Instead of calling her *Makkurahtei-san* (Ms. McLarty), as she had been expecting, the nurse had been calling her *Matsukura, Tei-san* (Ms. Tei Matsukura).

The Japanese wife of a former colleague had a rather similar experience. Her husband was an American teacher whom I'll call *Oldcastle* (in katakana オルドウカッスル). Unfortunately, whenever she has to give her husband's name to other Japanese people over the phone, she has had all kinds of problems being understood. What follows, for example, is a conversation she reported having with a taxi company dispatch operator:

A: *Moshimoshi, RG Takushi desu.*

(Hello, RG Taxi Company.)

B: *Ichi dai onegai shimasu.*

(Could you send us a taxi, please?)

A: *Dochira sama desho ka.*

(Could I have your name, please?)

B: *Oldcastle desu.*

(It's Oldcastle.)

A: *Eh?*

(What?)

B: *Oldcastle desu.*

(It's Oldcastle.)

A: *Ehhh?*

(How's that?)

B: *Gaikokume nan desu. Oh-ru-do-u-kassu-ru to iimasu.*

(It's a foreign name. It's pronounced Oh-ru-do-u-kassu-ru.)

A: *Aaah, hai, hai, hai. Dochira no sunakku desho ka.*

Ohhh, I get it. It's a drinking shop, right? So where is the Oldcastle Bar located?)

B: *。。。*

(She gives up in frustration.)

For Japanese people who use foreign names, getting other Japanese to learn their names correctly is clearly a problem. However, there is another, perhaps more peculiar, problem. That is, when a Japanese person uses a foreign name, other Japanese have a tendency to mistake them for a foreign national. Once again, readers will excuse me (hopefully) for using my wife as the example. I do so because she has had experiences such as the following so many times that we have lost count. Whenever she has to fill out forms at hospitals, city hall or ward offices, etc., the staff or officials there say, *Makkurahtei-san wa Nihongo wa johzu desu ne.*

(Mrs. McLarty, you speak Japanese really well.) Other times they say, *Makkurahtei-san, Okuni wa dochira desu ka.* (Mrs. McLarty, which country are you from?). Keep in mind, she was born and raised in Japan and has never lived anywhere else. Not only that, but she speaks standard Japanese and her appearance (black hair, dark eyes, etc.) is not noticeably different from other Japanese around her. Despite this, she still gets mistaken for a foreign national. Why do you suppose this is? One factor we can point to is the fact of Japanese people being unaccustomed to dealing with non-Japanese names in their daily lives. Why is this the case? As I have alluded to elsewhere, the fact of attending all-Japanese schools, working at companies with entirely Japanese staff and being members of clubs/groups/organizations where there is not a single foreign person around is a big reason. Most Japanese people simply have few chances to come across people with non-Japanese names. In that case, why are there so few non-Japanese names in their lives? Perhaps the key factor has been pinpointed by one scholar of things Japanese. There aren't any foreign names in most Japanese people's lives because, under Japanese law, all Japanese have to have kanji (Chinese characters) names. Whereas in the U.S. one is likely find a Polish Malinowski, a Mexican Hernandez, an Irish O'Neal or a Swedish Knudsen all living in the same neighborhood, Japanese are unlikely to encounter any names that don't sound Japanese. In addition, foreign nationals who wish to take Japanese citizenship must register their names in kanji and, naturally, use kanji names on all legal documents (Horvath, 1986).

3 Are Foreigners Unable to Read Japanese Newspapers or Magazines? Do Non-Japanese People Only Read Periodicals in English?

This discussion can best be facilitated by analyzing an incident which occurred at my neighborhood hospital several years ago. Feeling rather sick one day, I headed to the hospital. Since I was aware that hospital waiting time can be lengthy (anywhere from 3 minutes to 3 hours is possible) I took along a newspaper from our house. If I was going to be kept waiting for awhile, I figured I might as well enjoy a bit of reading to pass the time. Contrary to what some readers might expect, the newspaper I took with me was not an English one but rather a Japanese one. To be specific, I took The Hokkaido Newspaper, (Hokkaido Shimbun, 北海道新聞) better known as *Doshin*. As a long-time fan of the Hokkaido Nippon Ham Fighters pro baseball team and Consadole Sapporo, this area's pro soccer team, I wanted to catch up on some of their recent match results, etc. This is not to say that I don't regularly read newspapers in English. Most mornings I do browse The Japan News, The Oregonian (published in my hometown, Portland, Oregon) or, sometimes others such as the San Francisco Chronicle. On that particular day, however, I somehow felt like reading the newspaper in Japanese.

Although I was able to enjoy at least 15-20 minutes of reading, suddenly I remembered some work-related items, so I put down the *Doshin* on the bench beside me and took out my daily schedule memo book. A few minutes

later a middle-aged Japanese woman came and took a seat nearby on the bench. Suddenly she reached over, picked up my Doshin and began reading it. Ordinarily, if a Japanese person wants to read another's newspaper, they would say something like *Sumimasen, yonde ii desu ka.* (Excuse me, may I read this?). However, this woman said nothing at all to me. She just continued reading my newspaper. A few minutes later, she was called to the examination room (before me) by the nurse on duty. As she stood up, I assumed that she would put the Doshin back where she got it, on the bench. She did no such thing. She headed to the exam room with my newspaper in hand! As she disappeared around the corner, this writer sat there dumbfounded. After recovering from the momentary shock, I consoled myself with the thought that she would probably bring back the Doshin after her session with the doctor was over. Then I was called by the nurse and went to the exam room, without giving further thought to the newspaper. Later, however, I went back to the lobby area, hoping to grab my newspaper and head home. By now, readers can probably imagine what happened. I searched the entire lobby area to no avail. The woman had simply taken my Doshin home with her, or wherever she went after that. To this day, my ill-fated Doshin remains unaccounted for.

Several weeks later, I recounted this incident to a Japanese friend and former colleague. His reply was quite interesting. He said *Tabun, sono shimbun wa byoin no mono da to kanchigae shita desho ne. Masaka, sore ga anata no shimbun da to iu koto wa atama ni nakatta desho.* (She probably assumed, mistakenly, that the newspaper belonged to the hospital. The possibility that the Doshin

belonged to you probably never entered her mind.) In other words, her assumption could be put in a nutshell. Foreign people cannot read Japanese newspapers. The idea that that Doshin might belong to me never occurred to her. To this writer, that seems like a peculiar assumption to make. Some readers might suggest that this was simply an isolated incident and that I was just unlucky to have this encounter with one, self-centered Japanese woman. For any readers tempted to make that argument, however, I have another real incident (actually a series of incidents) to share with you. What follows should provide food for thought.

For various reasons such as business trips and academic conferences, I usually have occasion to travel by plane 2-4 times a year. Whenever I take a domestic flight in Japan, a most interesting thing happens. Since the other passengers on those flights are almost entirely Japanese, my presence tends to attract attention. The stewardesses (particularly on JAL and ANA) give me big smiles and seem to make a point of speaking English when they serve me. They give me special service by saying, "Would you like an English newspaper, sir?" While I appreciate the special treatment, there is one doubt about this type of kindness that has entered my mind. The stewardesses have never once offered me a Japanese newspaper to read. Is this because they don't imagine that a foreign person might have the ability to read Japanese? From my observations to date, the possibility that a non-Japanese person might read Japanese fluently still appears to be an unfamiliar concept to large numbers of Japanese people.

This assumption may seem reasonable on first sight. On the other hand, I have very solid

first-hand evidence which contradicts this idea. At the university where I am employed, there are at least five foreign faculty members who are both well-versed in written as well as spoken Japanese. Of course, I am not suggesting that reading Japanese is easy for foreign people. It requires a number of years of study. While it is difficult, it is far from being impossible. A number of my Japanese friends can read English newspapers and I don't find this strange at all. In the future I hope to see a world where everyone feels it's natural for foreigners to read Japanese and for Japanese to read English or other foreign languages fluently.

4 Are Foreigners Unable to Understand Street Signs in Japanese? Are They Unable to Find The Right Place to Board Trains?

A few years ago I had a very strange experience at JR Sapporo Station. It happened when I was standing on one of the platforms waiting for the next train. As I am quite accustomed to taking the train from Sapporo Station, I know not only what time and on which track my train is coming, I also know exactly which boarding place to line up at in order to get on the train. One day I went to my favorite position on the platform of Line Two and got in line. As it happened that day I was the first person there so I stood at the front of the line. Shortly after I lined up a Japanese woman came to line up for the same train. So far so good, except for one thing. Instead of getting in line behind me as I expected, she came and stood beside me (next to me) as though she was making a new, separate line.

For those readers not familiar with local

Sapporo area train riding, let me explain in more detail. There are several different types of colored lines drawn on the ground to show passengers which line to stand in, depending on which type of train they are waiting for. There are also metal signs hanging on a rope above the platform to indicate which line is where. The line I was in is labeled *Midoa josha guchi* (Boarding entrance place). This line is used by most regular trains. The line that lady got in is designated *Densha josha guchi* (Train boarding entrance) and is used by several trains that I don't usually ride. I thought her positioning was odd so I leaned over to check the electronic information board which shows which trains stop at which boarding places. Sure enough, I was standing in the correct position. She continued standing in the *densha josha* line, the wrong place for our train. If the train had arrived with just the two of us waiting, there would have been no problem. In the next few minutes, however, a really bizarre thing began happening. About a dozen more Japanese passengers came to ride the same train and every one of them lined up in the wrong line behind her! Not a single one of them lined up behind me. What on earth was going on here? There we all stood for the next 5 minutes or so with one foreigner standing alone in the correct *midoa josha guchi* and a whole group of Japanese passengers waiting patiently for their train---*in the wrong line*. A knowledgeable observer watching this could easily have mistaken it for a scene from a comedy movie.

Just then, however, our train pulled into the station. From the back of the line I could hear the murmur of voices. The Japanese passengers had realized they were lined up in the wrong place and began scurrying to get into the

correct position behind me. Moments later everyone was able to board the train without incident and we all rode away on JR as though nothing had happened. Nevertheless, this incident perturbed me so much that it was still on my mind several weeks later. Finally, I asked a Japanese man (and former pupil) what he thought about this. He said *Yappari, gaikokujin no anata yori Nihonjin no kanojo no ho ga tadashii ichi ni narande iru daro to iu ishiki ga atta ja nai ka.* (They probably assumed that the Japanese woman knew the correct place to stand better than a foreigner such as you.) There it was. The assumption that foreigners don't know the correct place to stand when waiting for trains. Perhaps this is not a surprising assumption if one assumes that foreign people cannot read signs in Japanese. Clearly, this comes from the same source as the assumption that non-Japanese people cannot read Japanese newspapers or magazines. If people cannot read Japanese periodicals, why would they be able to make out street signs written in kanji? The bottom line here, in this writer's opinion, is that this assumption harks back to the words of Takao Suzuki, a gentleman we have met earlier in this paper. He stated *Gaikokujin ga nihongo wo wakaru hazu ga nai* (Suzuki, 1978). In other words, foreign people are not expected to know the Japanese language. If we make that assumption, then the behavior of those passengers at the train station makes perfect sense. So does the "special service" offered to me by JAL and ANA stewardesses. I believe the day will eventually come when enough foreign people are fluent in Japanese to cause a significant change in the linguistic awareness of most Japanese regarding this matter. At this point in history, however, it is safe to say that that day has not

yet arrived.

Conclusions

As I alluded to in the first section of this article, there still is a tendency on the part of many Japanese to avoid the physical presence of foreign people. As my friend, the professor, opined, this operates largely at the subconscious level. As several other scholars have pointed out, this is mainly due to historical factors and, thus, is not something that can be easily changed. It is my hope that with greater exposure to foreign people, this subliminal avoidance tendency will gradually begin to disappear. Ideally, most Japanese would eventually come to feel that there is nothing to fear in having direct personal interaction with foreign people. Our discussion in part two is also not a problem likely to be easily solved anytime soon. However, as more and more non-Japanese play an important part in this society, Japanese people will have more opportunities to get familiar with foreign names. Foreign language teachers such as us can do something to help with this by introducing plenty of non-Japanese characters in our teaching materials.

The issues we looked at in sections three and four are closely related. The widespread assumption by many Japanese that foreigners cannot speak or read the Japanese language is quite deeply rooted in this country. That will only begin to change when greater numbers of foreign people make the effort to learn Japanese. Both Japanese and non-Japanese people have a great challenge in learning each other's languages. Finally, I believe our common humanity is far more important than any cultural differences we may have.

Francisco: Kodansha International Ltd.

Postscript

The writer would like to thank Ms. Satomi Tanaka for her native speaker expertise in correcting my Japanese summary and title

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