

The Japanese and English: Adding to the 'Cultural Telepathy'

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Introduction

In the last few years there has been a marked increase in the number of words which have been written about the Japanese, culture and English. People from a wide range of nationalities and backgrounds have made contributions. A number of new and interesting theories have been put forward, discredited and then put forward again in a slightly different form. Almost all the writers agree that the Japanese have some special difficulties with English, but it seems very unlikely that any of them have actually done anything to help them overcome these difficulties. In fact, it may well be that they have only contributed to the problem by adding to the "cultural telepathy" which they have been seeking to explain.

Cultural Telepathy

The following is an example of the sort of conversation which might take place between two young Englishmen.

MAN 1: Been out ?

MAN 2: Just for a bit. Down the pub.

MAN 1: See Bill ?

MAN 2: No, but Steve was there, knocking them back. He had a couple of outsiders come in yesterday.

MAN 1: What ? Kempton ?

MAN 2: Yes. One there and one at Windsor.

MAN 1: Lucky bleeder. You going down to the match on Saturday ? It's the big one. Gazza's fit, so they say.

MAN 2: I'll be there, mate. See you in the 'Dog' usual time.

This sort of conversation would be very difficult to understand for a non-Englishman. Of course, unfamiliarity with the names involved is one major obstacle. And in written form, as presented here, the lack of what has been called, 'non-verbal be-

haviour' such as gestures and facial expressions etc. also adds to the difficulty. But, even if the non-Englishman were familiar with the names and could actually see the conversation taking place, he would still have to contend with the local dialect and vocabulary.

Another important factor to consider is that the two Englishmen share a set of common cultural values. Hence people from countries who shared similar sporting and social interests to the English would probably be able to guess at what the two men were talking about, especially if they came from another English-speaking country like Australia or America. But for people from widely different cultures, such as Far or Middle Easterners, it might require a full course of lectures before they could understand this one 'simple' conversation.

It seems, then, that there are at least three basic components to this conversation: language, non-verbal behaviour, and common cultural values. And yet the whole is somehow more than the sum of its parts: there is still something missing. People who have lived in foreign countries for many years often still find great difficulty in taking part in, and even understanding, such conversations; even though they have made themselves familiar enough with all three of the basic elements, they are still somehow 'excluded'.

The explanation may well lie in the fact that the term 'cultural values' actually means something quite different from 'cultural knowledge'. It is not enough simply to be familiar with another culture to avoid 'exclusion'; the individual must fully understand the values of that culture and somehow make them his own. This helps to explain how certain people can be born and bred in a particular culture and still feel somehow excluded from conversations. On the other hand, other people who are not particularly familiar with any of the basic elements are often able to comprehend what is going on and even make meaningful contributions to certain conversations.

In the two Englishmen's conversation the shared values which bind the two together have assumed such an importance that the words and even the non-verbal communication have been reduced to the level of being little more than sign-posts. In fact so much is left un-said that the result is something that might be considered as a kind of 'cultural telepathy'.

The Oxford English Dictionary quotes from Frederick W. H. Myers' 'Human Personality' when it explains the word 'telepathy' as being, "The communication of impressions of any kind from one mind to another, independently of the recognised chan-

nels of sense. " The impressions and feelings that each of us have in any given situation are heavily influenced, if not dominated, by our cultural backgrounds. Hence certain Japanese have alluded to their ability to communicate their feelings to other Japanese by using very few, if any, words.

However, it would be unwise to think that the outsider cannot have any kind of meaningful conversation with a person who has access to a different kind of 'cultural telepathy'. Indeed, in terms of foreign language acquisition, it might very well be important to play down its existence. This could be especially so if one considers it possible that human beings all have access to a higher form of 'telepathy' which, although similar in the way that it operates, is entirely independent of any artificial cultural or national frontiers.

The potential telepathic ability of human beings is nothing new; in fact references to it can be found in most of the ancient religions and it has often been put forward as one convincing explanation of how certain highly civilised ancient societies functioned without words. Recently an increasing number of scientists from various fields have become so convinced of its potential that language teachers would be well advised to consider the possible implications for their profession. Telepathy could well be, as H. Drummond wrote as far back as 1894, "theoretically the next stage in the Evolution of Language".

Recent works on language and culture popular in Japan.

The approach taken by most of the modern writers concerned with the relationship between culture and language has been to attempt to explain how customs and attitudes differ between different cultures. This can often make for very interesting and stimulating reading. The underlying assumption is that the readers need to have a sound knowledge of other cultures to avoid embarrassing themselves and their hosts if they visit a foreign country.

In one way it is a little surprising that these cultural differences need to be spelt out; one only has to look at one's own country to realize how different language, customs and even clothing can be even in neighbouring districts. However, in Japan it is widely assumed that by spelling out these differences students of English will be able to improve their ability to communicate by becoming familiar with the likely conversation topics and values attached to various words in other cultures. Hence several col-

leges and universities have instituted courses with titles such as 'IBUNKA' (cultural differences) and 'EIBEIBUNKA' (English and American culture).

I first became aware of the potential reverse-effect of studying 'cultural differences' when I was teaching a composition class at a certain university in central Japan. Some of my students starting writing things like, 'I didn't know that Japanese and foreigners thought in a completely different way until I read X book.'; and, 'I must be more careful not to make cultural mistakes when I speak English.'. In this particular case I was able to trace the specific source of these statements to a course book they were using entitled, 'Polite Fictions', written by an American, Nancy Sakamoto and a Japanese, Reiko Naotsuka.

The main proposition of this book is that the Japanese and the Americans each have their own 'polite fictions', which are a set of socially acceptable values which they adhere to in their everyday lives. The writers simplify the American 'polite fictions' into a series of assumptions such as 'You and I are equals', 'You and I are relaxed' and 'You and I are independent.' By means of a series of well-chosen personal anecdotes they try to show how the Japanese have a very different and often glaringly contradictory set of assumptions.

It is unlikely that Japanese university students would be surprised to learn that there are certain cultural differences between their own country and America. Most of them have grandparents and even parents who were exposed to the anti-American propoganda of the pre-Second World War years. However, they may not have realised the differences were so marked or had such serious implications before studying this book. There is a distinct likelihood that they could be left feeling that they had, if anything, underestimated how difficult it is to get on with foreigners. Certainly the evidence of what I found in my students' compositions would seem to support this possibility.

By way of giving a concrete example of how this book might help to make the language teacher's life more difficult let us consider how the writers conclude their section on American teachers in Japan:

"The problem here.....isn't primarily one of language ability. It's the fact that American and Japanese polite fictions are so different The teacher and his students may be occupying the same classroom; but they are living in entirely different mental worlds."

As a foreign teacher who has spent a lot of time and energy trying to convey to my

students that there is no need to be shy or embarrassed in front of a 'GAIJIN', I found this passage somewhat dis—heartening.

Another interesting effect of this kind of approach to cultural differences might well be that Japanese students are made to begin to think about their own cultural values. Very few Japanese university students are likely to have done any serious thinking about this kind of thing before reading this kind of book. But now here are the Japanese cultural values spelt out for them in plain language, and by an American with a Japanese husband. Now they know more about how they should think as Japanese, and the writers have succeeded in adding something to both American and Japanese 'cultural telepathy'.

In recent years in Japan one of the most highly respected and influential writers on the subject of culture and language has been an American, Mr. John F. Condon. Mr. Condon has spent a considerable amount of time in Japan, as well as other countries with different cultures.

One of his lesser—known books in Japan is entitled 'Cultural Barriers' with the sub—title, 'Considerations for the International—minded'. He begins the book by referring to the Chinese character ('KANJI') for 'man'. He points out that almost all non—Japanese people imagine that the character is somehow moving to the right, whereas most Japanese, and presumably Chinese, imagine that it is moving to the left. Perhaps he need not have been so specific; personally, I have been fascinated from childhood by the fact that Chinese, and Japanese, is traditionally written down the page and from right to left, whereas Indo—European languages are written from left to right across the page.

He goes on to point out that not only differences in language but also differences in non—verbal communication and value systems make a big difference in how we get on with people from different cultures.

The tone of the book is not particularly negative, despite the title; in fact he makes the point at the end of chapter five that, although cultural differences do exist, cultural barriers are beginning to fall:

"Today all over the world there are young people who in their clothing, music and dance can share feelings of closeness that no words in a common language can quite match.....amidst culture's barriers we can find some means of sharing."

However, in this and several other works he does go a long way to re—enforcing

the Japanese belief that they are somehow different from the rest of the world. He also helps to re-inforce a similar suspicion of the East which many Westerners still have, and which Rudyard Kipling succinctly summarised when he wrote:

"East is East and West is West; and never the twain shall meet."

In another work entitled, 'Words, words, words', Condon considers the different values which are attached to the same words in different cultures. The student of a foreign language should beware of translating literally. The Japanese student is unlikely to be too surprised at what he has to say since he is the product of an education system and a society which is constantly urging people to take words seriously——'KOTOBA O DAIJI NI SITE'.

In one chapter of this book he deals with the distinction between the 'content' and 'relationship' of words.

"We can say that everything one person says to another can be interpreted in two ways: (1) the 'content' or literal meaning of those words as would be explained in a dictionary; and, (2) the implications for the relationship between the persons who are talking."

Again this might well seem to be a statement of the obvious to most Japanese, whose use of respect language 'KEIGO' continues to baffle most foreigners.

He goes on to give a specific example of this distinction which is immediately relevant to the English conversation teacher in Japan. He asks the reader to imagine a situation where a foreigner meets a Japanese high school student on the platform of a station in Tokyo.

"The two approach each other. One says, "Do you speak English?" If I ask you what is the meaning of the sentence DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH? in that situation, you probably cannot answer without knowing who said the sentence to whom. If the...man approached the student, that sentence might mean: 'Excuse me, I'm a stranger here. I don't speak Japanese, I can't read these signs, I wonder if you could help me since you seem to be a Japanese and maybe speak some English.'.....In short the sentence means 'Help me.' But if the Japanese student said, 'Do you speak English?' to the ...man, it might mean: 'Excuse me you seem not to be a Japanese, so maybe you speak English. I am studying English in school, and I wonder if I could practice my English with you,' or something of the sort, which in any case is quite different from the meaning of the words if spoken by the other person."

The example makes Mr. Condon's point about 'content' and 'relationship'. However, to the Japanese student it probably only serves as another illustration of the fact that it is not easy to talk to strangers in English without being very careful what you say.

In the first chapter of one of Mr. Condon's best known books, 'An introduction to intercultural communication' co-written with an Egyptian, Fathi S. Yousef, the writers consider twelve apparently ordinary situations which cannot be fully understood without some awareness of, what they call, 'cultural assumptions'. They point out how it is possible for a foreigner to appear extremely rude and rather stupid in these everyday situations if he is ignorant of local customs.

Instead of this being a particularly shocking set of revelations for most Japanese they would more likely to be shocked by Mr. Condon's statement of obvious. Most Japanese would not visit a foreign country without a thoroughly reliable, and preferably Japanese guide. And they would certainly not attempt to interact with the natives without proper introductions and a reliable go between. Instead of having the positive effect of making his readers more 'international-minded' he has probably added to the Japanese fear of travelling abroad and re-enforced their idea of how difficult it is to speak a foreign language successfully.

Supra-cultural telepathy

Mr. Condon's writings are very useful in that they give the reader a number of interesting concrete examples of differences in customs and behaviour, and help us to understand that there are value systems other than our own. But, as far as the English teacher in Japan is concerned, it is very possible that his approach is more likely to discourage students than to enlighten them.

However, the idea that the three basic elements of any intracultural conversation are (i) verbal and (ii) non-verbal communication and (iii) the sub-conscious espousal of a set of cultural values is entirely consistent with his views. On the evidence of what he has written so far, he might also agree that those conversations in which the shared cultural values assume such an importance that the other two elements are rendered almost unnecessary constitute some form of 'cultural telepathy'.

Let us now apply this framework of three basic elements to cross-cultural communication. Despite all the obvious differences in language it is clear that the worlds' languages are not so dissimilar after all, at least in terms of structure and what they

actually sound like. Mr. Condon remarks in 'Intercultural Communication':

"...if we expect to find great diversity in languages, it is only a matter of time until—as the transformational grammarians seemed to find—we discover how remarkably similar languages are at heart."

Just as all dogs bark and all birds sing so humans all make the same basic sounds using the same basic vocal chords. These days almost all languages have an increasing amount of shared vocabulary. It is also clear that there are certain forms of non-verbal behaviour which are common to all human-beings: happiness, sorrow and pain are all expressed in very similar ways in every culture. So, if it could be shown that all humans do—at least potentially—share a similar set of values above and beyond cultural values then some sort of 'supra-cultural telepathy' might be possible in cross-cultural communication.

If we look at the world's religions, the codes of conduct by which people live, we can find a surprising amount of common ground. The principles of love and respect for other human beings seem to be almost universally held. Unfortunately, when human-beings meet they tend to forget these common values. Indeed the history of the last two thousand years is a tale of mutual hostility and suspicion between people of different cultures. It is only in recent years that people have started to look beyond the most obvious 'cultural differences' such as skin and hair colour. Maybe in the future, through the active espousal of these universal values, we will at last be able to gain access to our latent powers of 'supra-cultural telepathy'—a way of successfully communicating our wants and needs that goes beyond cultural barriers and possibly even existed before them. This is not to say that this 'supra-cultural telepathy' could ever take the place of words. But it could, as in the case of the Englishmen, render both words and non-verbal behaviour of secondary importance.

In practical terms it seems probable that a student who approaches a conversation with a foreigner with universal, as opposed to cultural, values in mind is much more likely to have a meaningful and enjoyable conversation than the student whose mind is cluttered up with incomplete sets of generalisations about his own and the foreigner's culture. Certainly he is much more likely to get on well with the foreigners he meets than the person who has learnt a foreign language simply because it is fashionable, or to impress the neighbours.

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