Japanese Conversation

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Many Americans and Japanese feel that people from the two countries have different styles of speaking, and they are probably right, but not so right that they are really "inscrutable" to each other. Americans often say that Japanese conversation is indirect, that people talk around the point without directly stating it, and that Japanese people are reluctant to say "no" directly. It often seems to Americans that they have to work hard to realize what Japanese are really talking about. Japanese people say that their talk is subtle and requires them to be conscious of cues that are not spoken, of body language and facial expression, and of signals of the emotional state of the other person. They feel that communication is difficult and that listeners in particular have to be very careful about interpreting what speakers say.

Communication is difficult, and both speakers and listeners have to work at it in both cultures, but both Japanese and English give people a number of tools to use in accomplishing communication, sometimes same and sometimes different. Also, people using the two languages must pay conscious attention to different features of each language.

There are some grammatical differences between the two languages that make Japanese seem more vague and English more specific to people who learn the other language. For instance, most English sentences require that a speaker use both a subject and a predicate in forming the sentence. But actually, one can think of lots of exceptions, especially in casual speech. And most commands and requests don't use a subject because the subject is "understood."

When English speakers choose a noun, they have to decide if it needs to be used with "a" or "the" or no marking at all.

A cake is needed for a wedding or birthday party.

Cake is good for breakfast, too.

The cake didn't turn out too well.

English speakers also need to decide how to mark singular and plural on nouns and predicates. If they are talking about people (and some other things or animals), they need to show whether they are talking about males or females if using pronouns. These distinctions are not required in Japanese. Nouns are the same whether they are

singular or plural, pronouns are seldom used except for people, and even those are often left out ("understood"). If it's really important, and not obvious from the context, Japanese does have ways of making clear whether singular or plural number is meant, but plural marking isn't used if explicit reference is clear or unimportant.

It turns out to be easy to learn how NOT to do these things when English speakers are learning Japanese, and most learners are amazed at how little difference in comprehension it makes if those things that are required in English are just left out. But for Japanese speakers who are learning English, it is much harder to remember to put all that information into every sentence, so it makes English seem much more detailed and specific to them. But understand that, while English is detailed in some areas, Japanese is detailed in other areas, so it is hard to say which language is more explicit.

Verbs in English, too, have to agree with the subject in number, though that makes no difference to the verb form in Japanese. English has different systems of verb tenses (things like past "ate" and present/future "eat, will eat") and aspects (things like "is about to fall," "is falling," "keep falling," "have just fallen,"). Japanese learners of English have to learn to think about these, and English speakers learning Japanese have to learn how to use Japanese system of tense and aspect.

Many sentences in Japanese are formed with a verb alone, especially in spoken Japanese. Since the verb form doesn't change depending on the number of the subject or the gender of the subject, it does not need to be marked, as this information is perfectly clear from the context.

Another grammatical difference between the languages that often leads to confusion when people from the two language cultures are speaking with each other, but not within each language community, is the use of yes and no. Within the languages of the world, it turns out that there are two major systems for using these words--Japanese belongs in one group and English in the other. It takes training to make the switch between them. Questions in Japanese are formed either by using a rising intonation at the end of a sentence or by adding a particle ka, to the end of the sentence.

Densha ga kimasu. The train is coming.

Densha ga kimasu?(rising intonation) The train is coming?

Densha ga kimasu ka? Is the train coming?

As these examples remind us, English can make sentences by changing the intonation at the end too, in speech, or by changing the word order of the subject and part of the predicate. For all these questions, the answers have the same meaning in Japanese

and English. In Japanese, hai if the train is coming, and iie if it's not; for English, "yes" if the train is coming and "no" if it's not.

But if the question is asked using a negative, as in the following examples, then the answers in the two languages are not the same.

Densha ga kimasen. The train is not coming. (masen instead of masu makes it negative)

Densha ga kimasen? The train is not coming?

Densha ga kimasen ka? Isn't the train coming?

In the questions above, if the train is coming, the answer is iie, and if the train is not coming, the answer is hai. The Japanese answer is more like saying, "Yes, your assumption is correct; the train is not coming" or "No, your assumption is incorrect; the train is not not coming." So it is the assumption part that the listener is responding to by means of hai and iie. In English, however, the answer depends on the train itself, not on the assumption of the speaker: "Yes, the train is coming" or "No, the train is not coming." The actual wording of the question, that is, whether the question is asked negatively or affirmatively, is irrelevant.

Another difference between the two languages is observed in the way the two groups of people signal social factors through grammatical elements, especially verbs. Japanese people using Japanese in different social situations are taught to be careful about verb forms that are appropriate to the social goals of the interaction. For example, American English speakers decide, on social grounds how to compose a question: "Would you like a cup of coffee, Dad?," "D'you want some coffee?," "Don't you want some coffee?," "How about some coffee?," "Coffee?" or "Here, have some coffee," "There's coffee here for anyone who wants it," etc. Japanese speakers make similar choices.

Though Americans recognize some of their options as "more polite" than others, and sometimes are concerned about how polite they should be in a particular interaction, for the most part we make these choices without thinking overtly about them. Similarly, Japanese people learn about politeness levels but learn the system more consciously than Americans.

Japanese speech assumes that a speaker and listener can have three different status relationships: higher to lower, equal to equal, lower to higher. Speaker and listener can also be members of the same group or of different groups. The decision as to what relationship is at work in any encounter depends on a number of factors. Usually, older people have some claim to higher status over younger people, and usually males have

some claim to higher status over females. Occupational status or family background are also important. What one wishes to accomplish in the interaction also matters. Americans don't usually like to think about status relationships and sometimes declare that everyone should be equal, but many Japanese seem to be quite comfortable with hierarchical relationships. Some relationships can change over time, like those in work groups where competition leads some people to higher positions than others. But other relationships don't change: your mother is always your mother, younger brothers and sisters are always younger, and a teacher is always a teacher, even after you leave the school. The relationships just mentioned are all ones that are usually thought of as 'in-group' relationships: members of the same stable group of people who can be distinguished from individuals outside of the group.

Some situations are thought of as formal, others as casual. Even in interactions within an in-group, some situations are more formal than others and call for different modes of speaking. Interactions with people outside of one's in-group may often be more formal. Even in 'informal' situations, people with lower status may speak more formally and 'politely' than those of higher status (think, for instance, of the ways in which employees may be careful of their speech to a boss, even one they've worked with for a long time, and even in informal situations.)

The verb choices one makes for any given utterance depend on the status relationship one has with the listener, whether they are both members of an 'in-group' or not, the kind of situation they are in, and what each wants to accomplish (ask a favor, or offer help, for instance.) In English this might turn out to be something like "Mom, I need the car tonight," or "Dad, c'n I use the car t'night?" There are a host of variations that would color this request in keeping with the factors given above. The same factors and variations are used in Japanese, too. And as in the U.S., even the same pair of people, doing roughly the same thing, have a lot of options for how they speak to each other.

In Japanese, among the verbs that have different forms for different in-group/out-group encounters and different hierarchical statuses are the verbs for giving and receiving (Again, English can do this too, with words like "offer," "bestow," "grant," "confer," and "present." But we usually, especially in speech, make do with "give" and "get" for most transactions.) In Japanese, verbs for giving and taking are very important in summarizing the relative statuses of the conversants.

The following chart from Maynard's An Introduction to Japanese Grammar and Communication Strategies summarizes the variations:

Verbs of Giving and Receiving

1. Kureru: Speaker receives
   Kudasaru: Giver is higher than receiver/speaker
   Kureru: Giver is equal or lower than receiver/speaker

2. Ageru: Speaker gives
   Sashiageru: Giver/speaker is lower than receiver
   Ageru: Giver/speaker is equal to receiver
   Yaru: Giver/speaker is higher than receiver

3. Morau: Speaker or third person receives
   Itadaku: Speaker/receiver receives from someone higher
   Morau: Speaker/receiver receives from someone equal or lower

If any of the giving and receiving that people are talking about is across in-group/out-group lines, then the speaker must take the point of view of his/her own in-group, and the tendency is usually to put one's own in-group in an equal or lower position vis-a-vis the other person. So if someone from outside gives something to someone in your family, it is as if they had given it to you, and you would use a verb from the first group, kudasaru or kureru. These verbs are also used for giving within the in-group. So, all talk about giving and receiving, and conversation includes a lot of this, must include decisions based on the group membership of the giver and receiver and decisions about whether the thing given is moving up or down the social hierarchy. Generally speaking, Americans don't like doing these types of calculations. But Japanese requires that these social calculations be made. As a result, many Japanese speakers feel that something of the meaning of what they want to convey is lost in English, because the distinctions that are important to them are not so readily translated.

There is a class of sentences known in Japanese as aisatsu which is usually translated as "greetings." These are formulas of polite and appropriate things to say at specific times. "How do you do?" at an introduction would be a counterpart in English. There are possibly more formulas like this, and more occasions for their use, in Japanese. And they are meant to be used as formulas i.e., no one is expected to come up with their own unique or especially meaningful ways to restate the sentiment. Many Americans feel uncomfortable about using such statement phrases in at least some contexts, for they can seem insincere, and trite. At the same time, though, many Americans recognize that it is difficult to come up with appropriate expressions in certain difficult situations. Japanese people learn to use many of these standard phrases appropriately in everyday life, and they are explicitly taught how to use them in school, by their parents, by their employers, and in etiquette books.

Saying "no" to requests, demands, and invitations is difficult in both languages, and both Japanese and American speakers have ways of avoiding direct refusals or contradictions. But there often results a conflict between being courteous and being clear. Many people feel that for Americans, clarity and frankness outweigh courtesy, and for Japanese, courtesy outranks clarity. In both languages expressions such as, "Yes, but...," "Well, ...," "I'll have to think about that," "Let me get back to you on that," "I agree in principle, but. ..," "I wonder about that," etc. are ways of signaling a negative answer or lack of agreement, without having to actually say "no." In Japanese conversations, this happens a lot, and its meaning is critical to native speakers. Even when pressed by American speakers who do not understand, many Japanese hesitate to use a direct, clear, uncourteous "no." As a result, to Americans the Japanese often seem to be wishy-washy or deceptive. Americans, on the other hand, can seem so negative and blunt that for Japanese, it is difficult to keep on talking or negotiating with them because their direct negatives do not leave any room for adjustment. One of the characteristics of long-lasting, well-established multi-purpose groups in Japan, such as families, is that within them, clear "no's" are often used. But outside of these intimate in-group contexts, such directness is seldom used.

Another area in which differences between Japanese and American speakers are noticeable, to both groups of speakers, is in the use of 'back-channel' signals and the use of body movements during speech, such as bowing. Back-channel signals are things like "um," "un-hunh," "okay," and "yeah" that listeners say without interrupting a speaker, to signal that they are continuing to understand and follow what the speaker is saying. American speakers do this, and also nod their heads, watch the speaker, and use body postures to help speakers in this way. Japanese do it even more, perhaps. And of course, the syllables they use are different: "sō", "sō desu", "un", "hai", and "sō nee" are very popular. From their first months, when Japanese mothers say "thank you" on behalf of their babies and push the baby's head down while they say it, or the baby riding on its mother's back feels the mother bowing as she says thank you or exchanges greetings with other people, Japanese speakers learn to use this form of non-linguistic signaling as part and parcel of talking, especially in formal settings, and with people not of the same in-group. Japanese people make fun of themselves, about bowing to the other party even in telephone conversations. It just seems to go along with talking. And it's a difference that's easy to notice, whether it means anything or not about the two cultures or societies.

Still other non-verbal behavior patterns that differ between the two countries, and that people don't think consciously about in either country, can lead to discomfort or puzzlement. Patterns of touching, for instance, seem to differ, not absolutely, but still noticeably. Americans are likely to notice that Japanese acquaintances seem to touch less than Americans, in some ways. Greetings, for instance, always included bowing,

with no body contact, and with eyes not meeting, instead of hand shakes with eye contact, or shoulder touching, or 'air kisses' or embraces and cheek kisses. Even Japanese parents greeting their young children, picking them up from day care, for instance, do not usually embrace and kiss them. Goodbyes and greetings associated with long or important journeys often seem unnaturally restrained and non-physical to Americans (conversely, of course, Americans can seem too physically intimate in public to Japanese.) If people do touch each other, say holding hands, it's more likely to involve same sex pairs than opposite sex ones.

On the other hand, Japanese seem to Americans to be much more tolerant of other people, even "strangers" in their space or close proximity in crowded, public situations. In a crowded subway, for instance, where Americans would be inclined to hold their bodies tightly and at least pretend they weren't touching any one else, Japanese strangers seem to relax into close body contact. The American tactic doesn't keep you from touching people in this very crowded situation, anyway. And Japanese people seem not to mind being touched or hit by other people's bags or briefcases as much as Americans either.

The general tolerance for close proximity of people who aren't interacting also extends to sidewalk and street behavior, where pedestrians and bicyclists come closer to each other, and often cars and pedestrians, than is comfortable to Americans. Streets in Japanese cities seem to be thought of as ways for any kind of vehicle to get from one place to another, and not divided into distinct zones for automobiles, bicycles, and pedestrians. (Usually, they're too small for any such division into exclusive areas.) But going along with the sharing is a 'rule' that the smallest vehicle has priority over larger ones--cars over trucks, bicycles over cars, and pedestrians over everything else. I don't advise putting this to the ultimate test, but still there is a general presumption that the rule will work, and people proceed accordingly.

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intellectual history and modernity, particularly the development of aesthetic categories and their political implications before World War II.

Suggested Reading

Horvat, Andrew. *Japanese Beyond Words: How to Walk and Talk Like a Native Speaker.* Berkeley, California; Stone Bridge Press, 2000.

Lebra, Takie Sugiyama. *Japanese Patterns of Behavior.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976.