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Contrastive rhetoric in business email writing across cultures : A case of Singaporean and Japanese business students

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Introduction

Because English has become a global “lingua franca,” a false belief has prevailed in the countries of non-native English speakers that people need only to become fluent in English if they are to be effective as global managers. However, fluency is a complex concept that requires analysis and reconceptualization.

Language fluency is affected by a country’s culture. The unique qualities of culture, which are different from country to country, affect the organization of information in business messages. When we compare how businesspeople having different cultural backgrounds try to persuade the readers of their messages to give desired replies, we often find interesting differences in their persuasive messages.

The theme of this paper is that cultural and communication habits are at least as important as “pure” linguistic skills. It is not only a question of ‘knowing the words’ and logic—it is also a question of the rhetorical style in which the transmitter wishes to communicate and the receiver perceives.

This paper examines such unique differences in persuasive communication found in business emails written by Singaporean and Japanese students. It is based on a research I conducted with my colleagues in Singapore and myself in Japan in 2006.

The paper will first touch upon the strength of emerging economies in Asia as well as in the Islamic world and how a business communication style based on Western rhetoric affects business dealings with people in these worlds. It will then introduce the research method. After considering differences found in the emails written by two nations’ business students, the paper will examine the differences and propose some better ways for teaching business English and/or international business communication.

Business communication with people in emerging economies

1. Emerging economies and their economic strength

No one could deny the fact that many countries of the so called emerging economies have had tremendous economic growth in the past few years. Table 1 shows that if ASEAN GDP and Trade (Export and Import total amount) data are compared with those of China, Korea, and Japan, then South-east Asia has already become one of the major markets in the world. Its present economic position, as shown in the Table 2, compares to other competing economic unions or free trade areas.

Table 1 Economic Data of ASEAN+3

	ASEAN	China	Korea	Japan
Land area (Km²)	4,480,000	9,600,000	99,270	377,923
Population	558,080,000	1,314,480,000	48,840,000	127,053,000
GDP (US\$)	1,059,600,000	2,700,000,000	887,400,000	4,340,100,000
GDP p/h (US\$)	1,899	2,000	18,392	38,410
Trade (US\$)	1,478,500,000	1,760,700,000	635,300,000	1,496,000,000

Sources : <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/asean/>, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/china/data.html>, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/korea/data.html>, <http://www.teikokushoin.co.jp/statistics/japan/index01.html>, and <http://www.teikokushoin.co.jp/statistics/japan/index02.html>, all retrieved on May 30, 2008.

Table 2 Comparison Chart of Economic Unions and Free Trade Areas

	Members	Population	GDP (US\$)	Trade (US\$)
ASEAN+3	13	2,048,453,000	8,987,100,000	5,370,500,000
EU	27	490,330,000	14,267,300,000	9,082,600,000
NAFTA	3	435,770,000	15,292,400,000	4,057,800,000
MERCOSUR	4	237,140,000	1,310,500,000	334,380,000

Source : http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/asean/pdfs/sees_eye.pdf, World Bank, World Development Indicators database, and IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics QUARTERLY June 2007, all retrieved on May 30, 2008.

Table 3 suggests two other examples of vital economic development in and around the region. Geographically, Singapore is really the pivot of a fan expanding its right hand side to China, Japan and Russia, and left hand side to India. If we would add the figures of India to those in the Table 1, we can envision a huge market still developing in this Asian territory.

We also should note the strength of the Islamic arc expanding from Indonesia and Malaysia to the northwest and west coast of Africa, which holds 1.3 billion people within its territory. The Or-

Table 3 Economic Data of India and Singapore

	India	Singapore
Land area (Km²)	3,287,263	669
Population	1,027,020,000	4,480,000
GDP (US\$)	906,300,000	132,200,000
GDP p/h (US\$)	736	29,474
Trade (US\$)	306,000,000	509,700,000

Sources : <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/india/data.html> &
<http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/singapore/data.html>, retrieved on May 30, 2008.

ganization of The Islamic Conference (OIC), consisting of 57 nations/territories, has member nations with large populations, such as Indonesia (220 million), Pakistan (160 million), and Bangladesh (140 million). India is not a member nation of the OIC, but has 140 million Muslims, 13% of its total population. Population increases undoubtedly will grow the economy within the OIC and Indian territory.

The territory's GDP is supposed to be 5,800 billion US dollars with an annual growth rate of more or less than 6% that exceeds those of NAFTA and EU. The OIC enjoys a US\$400 billion trade surplus, about three times of that of China and exceeding those of Japan, Korea, and EU. The Islamic arc has created a market for Islamic finance above one trillion dollars. Sovereign wealth funds, investment vehicles in these countries, are playing a major role in recapitalizing large financial institutions hit hard by the US subprime loan crisis. Table 4 shows that there are seven Sovereign Wealth Funds

Table 4 Major Sovereign Wealth Funds in the World

	Name	Country	Fund Amts (Million US\$)
1	Abu Dhabi Investment Bank	UAE Abu Dhabi	625,000
2	The Government Pension Fund	Norway	322,000
3	Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency	Saudi Arabia	300,000 (about)
4	Government Investment Company	Singapore	215,000
5	Kuwait Investment Authority	Kuwait	213,000
6	China Investment Corporation	China	200,000 (capital)
7	Temasek Holdings	Singapore	108,000
8	Qatar Investment Authority	Qatar	60,000
9	Libyan Investment Authority	Libya	40,000 (or more)
10	National Welfare Funds	Russia	32,000

Source : *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, March 2, 2008.

Compiled by Nihon Keizai Shimbunsha based on the Standard Charter Bank's Report (October 15, 2007).

located in the Islamic arc out of the top ten government funds in the world, and two are in Singapore.¹

These developments in Asia are fostering increased contacts among business people of the West and East. Dealings between people having totally different cultural and linguistic backgrounds have increased to a level never experienced before. Business executives in all these countries now must develop new, special skills necessary for creating and managing global business relationships and transactions.

2. Business communication with and within these emerging economies in Asia

If executives and global managers in the western world wish to make successful global deals, they must understand one important thing. It is that there are people outside their spheres who employ rhetorics different from the traditional Aristotelian logic which they have cherished for more than twenty-five centuries. As Wong et al. write, “. . . rhetoric is more easily identified in the Western cultural tradition. This is because, historically speaking, the art of rhetoric in the West can be easily traced to specific origins in Classical Greece and Rome, and thus can be seen to form a relatively coherent corpus. . . .”²

Rhetorical thinking is widely dispersed over diverse traditions. In China, the three ethical and religious complexes of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism yield different rhetorical traditions. In India, Hinduism and Buddhism also yield divergent rhetorical traditions. It is the same in the Islamic world, which has a different rhetorical style based on Arabic prose. Japan, too, has its own unique style. Though different from each other, each rhetoric tradition should be respected.

An American businessperson once boasted about the supremacy of Aristotelian rhetoric saying, “This 56 year old mind has been trained so extensively in the linear logic stemming from the Greek tradition of logic that I have difficulty following other patterns of thinking.” It is all right for him to say this as long as he continues his business in either New York or Chicago. But, if he wishes to do business out of the United States or with people from other cultures, he may have to change such an attitude.³

Another American businessman who wanted to strike up business dealings with people of another culture and language wrote a letter to a delegation of Chinese who had visited the United States. The Chinese delegation had expressed some interests in the products of Mr. Jones’s company, so he wrote them a letter (reproduced in Box 1), presumably hoping to sell some. However, his letter drew no response.⁴

Box 1. Ineffective Cross-cultural Letter

Dear Sir :

Your name and address were referred to me by the Illinois Department of Agriculture-Far East Office. They stated that you had expressed an interest in our products and requested further information.

I am therefore enclosing a brochure which itemizes our products and services. Please let me know your exact requirements. I will be happy to provide you with further details. Thank you for your participation at the Illinois Slide and Catalog Show. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Peter Jones
Director of Sales Agri-Equipment Division

It is worthwhile to trace why this letter didn't work well for the Chinese by examining some characteristics of the rhetorical styles of the West that may conflict with Asian cultures.

The origin of Business English (in old days it was called "Commercial English," particularly in the U. K.) dates back to the latter part of the sixteenth century when England started to make rapid progress in international trade. Pirates who were granted a privateering commission by Elizabeth I helped to expand the country's international trade through their privateering acts and overseas trade. When they came back with plunder from overseas, the pirate traders, bare of education and low in social standing, had to arm themselves with the language of their customers in order to sell their goods. Whenever they needed to write a business letter to a customer, who represented the intellectuals at that time, the trader would copy a specific letter sample or samples. This "elegant and lofty" Commercial English, though something like a rental costume, started to coagulate as the trader's terminology.⁵

While Business English has a history only of four hundred years or so, Chinese people have three thousand years of writing history as Li claimed in his "*Good Writing in Cross-cultural Context*": "Basically we think a piece of writing should have four components: introduction, development, transition, and closure [*qi 3 cheng 2 zhuan 3 he 2*]. I think this basic format is still valid because they are in accord with the way we think. . . . We have three thousand years of writing history . . . Teachers have the responsibility to teach a student the successful writing experiences of our forefathers".⁶

The above Chinese *qi-cheng-zhuan(jun)-he* pattern is equivalent to Japanese compositions char-

acterized by the *ki-shou-ten-ketsu* or four unit pattern. Let us see how these typical Japanese rhetorical components are defined. Here is a definition by Hinds, an American scholar of comparative linguistics specializing in Japanese vs. English: “Ki (First, begin an argument), Shou (Next, develop the argument), Ten (At the point where the development is finished, turn the idea to a sub-theme where there is a connection but not directly connected association to the overall theme), and Ketsu (Last, bring all of this together to reach a conclusion)⁷”.

A typical pattern of Japanese compositions characterized by the *ki-shou-ten-ketsu* or four unit pattern is as follows (a dialog of a student to his professor):

1. (*Ki*) ‘Excuse me, but I have to have a talk with you. I had a problem in my eyes last year.’
2. (*Shou*) ‘My mother told me that I should go to see the same eye doctor again. We checked his availability at the hospital in Osaka and learned he would be available only on Wednesday.’
3. (*Ten*) ‘By the way, the doctor is a very famous oculist and renowned for his excellent skills, that makes him very busy.’
4. (*Ketsu*) ‘Therefore, I am sorry, but I cannot attend your seminar class next week.’

This ‘therefore’ style of answer (conclusion comes last pattern) is often heard among Japanese. It is quite different from the ‘because’ style of dialog that may be common in the Western world:

‘I am sorry, but I cannot attend your seminar class next week, because I will have to go and see my eye doctor on Wednesday.’

Research Method

1. Scenarios for the students’ assignment

In order to find out if there are such differences in rhetoric across cultures, what they are, and why they are different, and to seek better ways to teach Japanese students effective business English, my colleagues at Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University, in Singapore and I started this study in the summer of 2006. We designed, collaborating with each other, three scenarios explaining certain business situations for writing informative, negative, and persuasive emails respectively, labeled Scenarios 1, 2, and 3. We then asked Singaporean and Japanese students, about 60 Singaporean students and about 110 Japanese students, to write emails to the prospective readers in the scenarios. We changed the names of the persons involved, locations of companies, the names of the territories, the currencies, etc. respectively in the scenarios to match the two countries’ situations. The following three scenarios are those used for the Japanese students.

Scenario 1 : Informative email

.....
 You are . . . (use your own name), Sales Manager of Keepwell Products Co., Ltd. The company, located in Kyoto and founded in 1996, is now a leading supplier of health and fitness products to homes, schools, gyms and institutions in Japan.

Keepwell's mission is to bring a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle to the convenience of the masses, with its quality range of health and fitness products. It continues to focus on growth by developing, designing, producing, and selling many kinds of indoor health and fitness equipment.

Two years ago, Keepwell ventured into China, and set up links with Shanghai Healthware, to sell its health and fitness products in Shanghai, as well as to other parts of China.

Shanghai Healthware started in 1992 as a used exercise equipment company, but has now become a mid-sized corporation, with a large network of dealers throughout China's major cities, selling health and fitness products mainly through online sales. It began importing and distributing Keepwell's products in 2004, and has since maintained very strong ties with your company.

Keepwell has now just produced a new foldable state-of-the-art rowing machine, which is very suitable for home use. It specially targets the growing number of health-conscious adults who want to exercise but for various reasons don't want to visit a gym to use its equipment.

You now want to make a courtesy call on Ms. Wang Meifen, Purchasing Manager of Shanghai Healthware, to cement good relations with a very valuable customer, as well as to introduce the new rowing machine to her. You believe that there will be a very good market in Shanghai for the machine, and you want to personally show it to Ms. Wang, and tell her about its strong selling points.

Some of the new features of Keepwell's magnetic foldable rower KP-800 are :

- 5 levels of magnetic resistance tension control
- LCD console which reads time, counts of rows, distance, calories, tempo and auto scan
- Foldable for easy storage : 640 mm(L)×420 mm(W)×1330 mm(H)
- Extended size : 1790 mm(L)×420 mm(W)×450 mm(H)
- Generous rowing track with super-sized pedals for a comfortable workout
- 200 mm diameter magnetic flywheel driving magnetic tension by rope

You want to make this visit as soon as possible, because your Board of Directors will be meeting in three weeks' time, and you want to be able to report a successful sale of the KP-800 to Shanghai Healthware.

Your task :

Write an email to Ms. Wang (wangmf@shanghai_health.com.cn) to arrange a date for your visit. Since time is so short, this being the peak holiday season and you need to book your

air ticket as soon as possible, you need her reply urgently.

Scenario 2 : Negative email

.....
Suppose you are a designer. Life as a young fashion designer has not been easy for you. But now you have put together a great new collection and shown it at a recent fashion show to considerable acclaim. While this success is encouraging it is not enough. You also need to secure orders from department stores and boutiques, because you have to improve your bank balance.

At the fashion show, you were introduced to Mr James Wee, purchasing manager for *Cool Places*, a large, publicly listed company. It has stores in a number of cities in the region, including Kyoto, Tokyo, Singapore, and Shanghai, and is currently looking for new labels to market. Mr Wee was impressed by your work and your conversation ended with him inviting you to join him and a few of his contacts for lunch next Wednesday. You are thrilled! This is going to be an excellent opportunity to network and perhaps even get a contract.

It is early morning and you have just arrived in your workshop. You check your emails and find the following message from Prof William Johns of Kyoto College of the Arts :

Dear Mayuko,

As you know, we are currently running the highly popular weekly “History of Asian Fashion” lecture series. We just heard that next week’s lecturer is in hospital and won’t be able to make it. Since we have a contract with StudioArts to film every lecture for our e-learning programme, we are unable to re-schedule the lecture without incurring all sorts of problems. Therefore, I am writing to ask you if you can deliver this lecture instead. Its topic fits in neatly with the 3 seminars you conducted last term and which were such a success. The lecture takes place next Wednesday at 12.30 pm, Main Lecture Theatre. We really need your help and I look forward to receiving good news from you! Please get back to me as soon as possible, so we can discuss all other details.

Yours sincerely,

BJ

You read this message and immediately notice the clash in dates. You know that you cannot pass up the opportunity to have lunch with Mr Wee, but you also do not want to disappoint Prof Johns. You have worked as a part-time lecturer at Kyoto College of the Arts for some years and this source of income has been very important to you. Also, you are grateful that Kyoto College has hosted a couple of exhibitions promoting your designs. You do not want to let them down, but realize that you have no alternative this time. You must decline their request.

Your task :

As Mayuko Kimura, write to Prof Johns, telling him that you cannot give the lecture next

Wednesday. You would, however, like to ensure that this refusal does not affect your good relationship with Prof Johns and Kyoto College of the Arts. Send you email to the following address : billyjohns@kyotoarts.ac.jp

Scenario 3 : Persuasive email

.....
 Your company is a very aggressive distributor specializing in high quality audio equipment such as stereo speakers and amplifiers. You have more than a dozen branches each having its own retail shops in big cities in Japan. In order to further expand your wholesale as well as the retail sales, your company has decided to approach Kosei, the world famous American speaker manufacturer, about the possibility of importing their products here. If your company could import the Kosei products, you can surely double or even triple your sales turnover in a year.

However, there is a problem. Kosei has its sole and exclusive distributor in Japan, which means no one else can directly buy the Kosei brand products from its headquarters. In order to import the Kosei products and boost the total sales, you will have to have Kosei change the distributors from their present sole and exclusive distributor to your company. Their present sole and exclusive distributor Nippon Audio Co., Ltd. is an old, reputable, and family-owned company. However, the company is not so active as before, because the company president, Mr Hayashi, is getting old, and one of their top salespeople has recently left the company with several men working under him, which must have been a big blow to the old man. However, you know that the personal relationship between this old man and a senior executive director of Kosei is very close. Bonds of friendship unite the two men.

Your company was established in 2000. Your major shareholders are one of the big ten trading houses, two leading local investment banks, and a dozen local big business companies. The sales turnovers in the past five years have been J¥1.0 B (billion), 1.8 B, 3.5 B, 5.0 B, and 9.0 B. Your company now represents a few very famous brands of high quality and expensive home stereo equipment in and for Japan. Those famous audio manufactures have appointed your company as their sole and exclusive distributor here because of these remarkable sales records and credibility of your company. Your company's website is [http : //www. xyzcorp.co.jp](http://www.xyzcorp.co.jp)

Your task :

With the above data write an email to Mr Alex Gupta, Executive Director, International Sales Division, Kosei Corporation at alexgupta@kosei.com, whom you met at a reception of their new product exhibition half a year ago at the Hilton Hotel in Osaka.

The following is the same Scenario No. 3 designed for Singaporean students. We have changed the shaded words and phrases more suitable for the local students to understand the contents. We added the same kind of modifications to the Scenarios Nos. 1 and 2.

Scenario 3 : Persuasive email for Singaporean students :

.....

Your company is a very aggressive distributor specializing in high quality audio equipment such as stereo speakers and amplifiers. You have a dozen retail shops of your own in major shopping areas in Singapore. In order to further expand your wholesale as well as the retail sales, your company has decided to approach Kosei, the world famous American speaker manufacturer, about the possibility of importing their products here. If your company could import the Kosei products, you can surely double or even triple your sales turnover in a year. However, there is a problem. Kosei has its sole and exclusive distributor in Singapore, which means no one else can directly buy the Kosei brand products from its headquarters. In order to import the Kosei products and boost the total sales, you will have to have Kosei change the distributors from their present sole and exclusive distributor to your company. Their present sole and exclusive distributor Eastern Audio Pte., Ltd. is an old, reputable, and family-owned company. However, the company is not so active as before, because the company president Mr Lim is getting old and their top salesman has recently left the company with three men working under him, which must have been a big blow to the old man. However, you know that the personal relationship between this old man and a senior executive director of Kosei is very close. Bonds of friendship unite the two men.

Your company was established in 2000. Your major shareholders are a state-owned company, two leading local investment banks, and a dozen local big business companies. The sales turnovers in the past five years have been S\$10 M, 13 M, 18 M, 25 M, and 35 M. Your company now represents a few very famous brands of high quality and expensive home stereo equipment in and for Singapore. Those famous audio manufactures have appointed your company as their sole and exclusive distributor here because of these remarkable sales records and credibility of your company. Your company's website is <http://www.xyzcorp.co.sg>.

Your task :

With the above data write an email to Mr. Alex Gupta, Executive Director, International Sales Division, Kosei Corporation at alexgupta@kosei.com, whom you met at a reception of their new product exhibition half a year ago at the Hilton Hotel on Orchard Street.

2. Changes in the introductory remarks in emails

This paper mainly discusses only my focus in the project, the case of persuasive email writing, which I was in charge of designing and analyzing. Before introducing the results of our study, I would like to refer to one important aspect of a people's behavioral standards. It is well known that some parts of the basic thought and the behavioral standards of the people belonging to a given culture can be changed through the effect of learning and also the passage of time. The way of thinking and the resultant way of expressing one's idea may change. Keeping this in mind, in 2001 I gave to the Japanese students of my Business Communication class the following assignment (Box 2.) :

Box 2. Assignment to write emails in 2001

Write an email message based on the following situation. One cold morning when you start your day's work by browsing through a trade magazine, you saw an advertisement of a very unique and compact computer in the January issue of *JOURNAL OF COMPUTERS*. It was introduced as a new product produced by J. Smith & Co., Inc., New York. You want to import this product for marketing in Japan if the price is good. You also wish to receive its catalog to study the product thoroughly. You have decided to send an email to the manufacturer introducing your company and asking for the catalogs and prices for their latest models of compact computers. Your company was established in 1950 and has been importing and exporting various kinds of electronics products. It may be a good idea to introduce your web site (home page) in the English version that has been quite recently completed.

The typical introductory remarks in the answers, more than two thirds in the class of about 200 students, to the above assignment were :

- Hello, I'm sorry to give you an unexpected email. Our company is very interested in . . .
- Excuse me for sending this email suddenly.
- It continues very cold days, and how are you doing?
- It's chilly now in Japan. How are you and how is the climate in New York?

It is apparent that these students were much influenced by the traditional Japanese way of writing letters. They started their emails with an apology for the sudden contact and seasonal greetings. However, in the most recent sample out of our assignment in 2006, we haven't had any emails by the Japanese students which started with such seasonal greetings or apologies as above. Out of about 110 students, moreover, only three started their emails with the following introductory remarks :

- Please allow me to send you this mail suddenly.
- I hope that my contacting you is not an imposition in anyway.
- I am sorry to send this e-mail suddenly.

These are direct translations of the Japanese traditional greetings that often appear in Japanese letters, private as well as official. The above fact, that many of or almost all of the Japanese students this time did not start their emails with seasonal greetings or an apology for sudden contact, tells us that this kind of practice and customs have now changed. Possible reasons for this change may be as follows :

- Many Japanese students, perhaps more than 90%, seem to be no longer familiar with the typical or classical Japanese style of letter writing. In a sense, the above three students should be respected because they know the Japanese customs.

- The Japanese people these days use cell phones a great deal for exchanging e-mails and get used to writing short messages without lengthy introductory remarks when they send messages not only to their friends but also to their bosses and business customers.

Yet some other parts cannot be easily changed because of the persistent nature of the culture and its people. Let us see such a case next.

3. Positions and Contents of Main Messages

I conducted research in 1997 in Singapore to identify features in the Japanese business persons' way of writing business letters and emails. The result showed that the Explanation first style, that is, reasons or explanation (cause) comes first and result (effect) comes last, was prevailing among Japanese business people at that time. This practice, and several others, seem to be well entrenched among Japanese people in general. I believe that the practice of positions of cause and effect rather than effect and cause is culture bound. The results of our recent study confirm one traditional rhetorical device: that Japanese are still apt to place the main message (the effect, result, or action desired) last.

A second issue dealt with the use of explicit or implicit desired actions. The assignment in Scenario 3 suggested that there is a clear-cut purpose even though this aim was not purposely indicated in the assignment. The main goal of the task was to persuade the reader into changing the sole and exclusive distributor and granting the exclusivity right to the writer. The explication pattern is like this statement: "The main purpose for writing this email is to request a chance for my company to be Kosei's sole and exclusive distributor in Singapore," while the implication pattern is like "If we'll be business partners, we can surely get high turnover than now."

Here are samples of Main Message Explicit by the students of both countries:

Examples of Main Message Explicit by Singaporean Students:

- Appointing us as your sole and exclusive distributor in Singapore would be achieving a win-win situation for both companies. With our strong financial backing, excellent sales records and credibility, we believe that working with us will be beneficial for Kosei.
- Your company is well known for its premium quality products and we will be glad if we could be awarded the sole and exclusive distributorship in Singapore.

Examples of Main Message Explicit by Japanese Students:

- I would be very pleased if you could kindly change the distributors from your present sole and exclusive distributor to us.
- We would like to import your products to Japan directly as your sole and exclusive distributor in Japan.
- Would you change the distributors from your present sole and exclusive distributor to our company?

Here are some samples of Main Message Implicit by the two countries' students :

Examples of Main Message Implicit by Singaporean Students :

- We would like to distribute Kosei's world-renowned audio products in Singapore.
- As part of my company's plan to expand our wholesale as well as retail sales, we would like to collaborate with Kosei, to bring in your company's world famous speakers into Singapore.
- We have interest in collaborating with Kosei by importing your products to Singapore.

Examples of Main Message Implicit by Japanese Students :

- In order to further expand our wholesale as well as the retail sales, we want to import your products.
- If we'll be business partners, we can surely get higher turnover than now.
- If you are interested in negotiating a possible tie-up with us, please contact me to schedule an initial meeting.

• Case of the Japanese Students (n=37) :

1. Positions of MM (Main Message)

Positions	Number of students	Percentage
Beginning	8	21%
Middle	7	19%
Last	22	60%
Total	37	100%

2. Contents of Main Message

Main Message Explicit	15	40%
Main Message Implicit	22	60%
Total	37	100%

• Case of the Singaporean Students (n=20) :

1. Positions of MM (Main Message)

Positions	Number of students	Percentage
Beginning	16	80%
Middle	3	15%
Last	1	5%
Total	20	100%

2. Contents of MM

Main Message Explicit	13	65%
Main Message Implicit	7	35%
Total	20	100%

The analysis of the positions as well as the contents (explicit vs. implicit) of the main message (the desired action) by the two countries' students shows an interesting result. As shown in the tables, the Japanese people's explanation first style is still prevailing among the Japanese people. Nearly 60% of the Japanese students place the main message in the last part of their mails, while 80% of the Singaporean students place the main message in the beginning, which includes the right-after-greetings/introduction position.

Also, the Japanese students are apt to write more implicit messages (60%) while the Singaporean students write more explicit messages (65%).

4. Reasons for the differences in the positions and contents of Main Message

What is the reason for these differences? We may find the answer to this question in the following passage, “. . . in some languages, such as English, the person primarily responsible for effective communication is the speaker, while in other languages, such as Japanese, the person primarily responsible for effective communication is the listener”⁸.

According to Hinds, Suzuki, a Japanese linguist, claims that Japanese authors do not like to give clarifications or full explanations of their views. They like to give dark hints and to leave behind nuances.⁹ Hinds wrote that in Japan, perhaps in Korea, and certainly in Ancient China, there is a different way of looking at the communication process. In Japan, it is the responsibility of the listener (or reader) to understand what it is that the speaker or author had intended to say.¹⁰

Jack Seward, a prominent Japanologist, once remarked, “The thought process of the Japanese, and therefore the structures of their language, are radically different from those of the West, where pride is taken in clarity, directness, eloquence, and what is called ‘honesty,’ whereas the Japanese value vagueness and avoid statements that are too direct, clear, and unequivocal”¹¹.

Rochelle Kopp, a well known cultural counselor in America, replied to a question as follows during *The Nikkei Weekly's* interview and commented on the differences in communication style between the U.S. and Japan: “In some cases, Americans start to wonder if their Japanese colleagues are being secretive. . . . Due to their struggles using the English language, Japanese often get exhausted trying to express themselves, and give up before they have communicated all the necessary information. Another key factor creating the impression of secrecy is the ‘*hear one, understand ten*’ (tacit) communication style that Japanese have. To non-Japanese who are used to having everything on a silver platter, this communication style can easily be misinterpreted as withholding information”¹².

Regarding the tacit communication style which Kopp explained above, here is a comment on Japanese communication style given by a local Japanese manager stationed in the U.S. “The Japanese probably never will become gabby. We’re a homogeneous people and don’t have to speak as much as

you do here. When we say one word, we understand 10, but here you have to say 10 to understand ¹³ one”.

Nisbett also wrote in his *The Geography of Thought* that “Westerners teach their children to communicate their ideas clearly and to adopt a ‘transmitter’ orientation, that is, the speaker is responsible for uttering sentences that can be clearly understood by the hearer—and understood, in fact, more or less independently of the context. It’s the speaker’s fault if there is a miscommunication. Asians, in contrast, teach their children a ‘receiver’ orientation, meaning that it is the hearer’s responsibility to understand what is being said”¹⁴.

The Japanese people’s taciturnity and their preference for suggestion to statement or implication to explication are well established. This tendency, peculiar to the Japanese people, was demonstrated in our research, too. I will explore this finding further in the following section.

5. Number of words used in the students’ emails

Here are the results of the number of words the two countries’ students used in their emails. In the case of the Persuasive email, the Japanese students used an average 177 words per mail, while the Singaporean students used 350 words, nearly double. This interesting fact is worth probing further.

Table 5 The number of words used in the emails by Japanese students

	Less 100	100–139	140–179	180–219	220–259	Over 260	Total
Informative	0	11	14	11	1	0	37
Negative	6	8	16	2	1	0	33
Persuasive	0	11	9	10	6	1	37
Total	6	30	39	23	8	1	107

Table 6 The number of words used in the emails by Singaporean students

	Less 100	100–139	140–179	180–219	220–259	260–299	Over 300	Total
Informative	0	0	0	2	2	7	8	19
Negative	1	2	7	5	3	2	0	20
Persuasive	0	0	1	0	3	4	12	20
Total	1	2	8	7	8	13	20	59

Table 7 The number of words used in an email

Japanese emails :

	Maximum words	Minimum words	Average words
Informative (37)	237	103	162.0
Negative (33)	228	75	138.5
Persuasive (37)	302	115	177.2

Singaporean emails :

	Maximum words	Minimum words	Average words
Informative (19)	481	208	301.3
Negative (20)	292	97	187.6
Persuasive (20)	621	161	350.3

6. Reference to Rival Company

Here is another interesting result of this study. The question is whether or not the students refer to their imaginary rival company. While 65% of the students from Singapore refer to their imaginary rival company Eastern Photo, only 27% of the Japanese students directly refer to their rival Nippon Audio. The possible reason for this difference may have something to do with the following communication styles and language habits peculiar to Japanese people :

- a deeply held respect and consideration for others ;
- a focus on understatement and humility ; and
- a lack of trust in verbal communication.

• Reference to Rival Company in the Japanese students' emails

Reference	Number of students	Percentage
Yes	10	27%
Slight reference	4	11%
No	23	62%
Total	37	100%

• Reference to Rival Company in the Singaporean students' emails

Reference	Number of students	Percentage
Yes	13	65%
Slight reference	3	15%
No	4	20%
Total	20	100%

Modest and quiet persons and modest expressions are respected in Japan. The Japanese people have an old saying : “The richer rice ripens, the lower its head hangs”, which is equivalent to “The boughs that bear most hang lowest”. The implication is that a person should not ostentatiously ‘show off’. Japanese people usually don’t speak of their own abilities. Those who have achieved success usually talk of their success with much humility. In Japan we hardly see a TV commercial in which a company compares its products with its rival company and openly criticizes the company and its products as inferior. Japanese culture is rich in proverbs that reflect the low status of verbal communication. Examples include : ‘Talk is the root of trouble’ ; ‘Keep your mouth closed and eyes open’ ; and ‘In your speech honey ; in your heart, a sword’.¹⁶

Culture, language, and education

Having observed the differences in the styles and patterns of email writing by the Japanese and Singaporean students, we wonder why the Singaporean students place the main message in the beginning, why they write more in the Main Message Explicit style, and why they refer to the rival company more than the Japanese students. Possible answers to these questions may be found in the following three reasons :

- Influence of the Singapore’s bilingual education and a college education in the English language ;
- Influence of the Chinese culture and language ; and
- Westernization of the Singaporean society.

Singapore is a bilingual country with four official languages such as Malay, Mandarin, English, and Tamil. Of the total population of 4.59 million (3.58 million inhabitants), 71% can speak English and 57% can speak more than two languages.¹⁷

The Singaporean students who wrote the Persuasive emails were almost all of Chinese ethnicity (19 Chinese and 1 Eurasian). We can see almost the same composition in the other two kinds of email writings, too. This ethnic distribution is nothing unusual at Nanyang Technological University’s Business School which our sample students attend. One can usually find single-ethnic classes, despite the general population distribution of 74.8% Chinese, 13.5% Malay, 9% Indian, and 2.7% others such as Eurasians.¹⁸ We can conclude that the positions of MM (Main Message) or the number of words used on the Singaporean side has something to do with the Chinese logics, rhetoric, philosophy, etc.

The Singaporean students appear to be much influenced by the Chinese way of thinking. All stu-

dents of Chinese ethnicity have to study Mandarin in school, even if their home language is English ; therefore, they must be familiar with at least the basics of Confucian philosophy. But of course, they are also exposed to Western culture (free access to books and other forms of Western entertainment, such as TV programs, movies, music, etc.). I believe that the way the Singaporean students write English is influenced by their Chinese way of thinking though they are unconscious of this point.

If they were influenced by their mother tongue, Chinese, which has had much influence on the Japanese language, it is natural to see some similarities between their writing emails. But our findings show the opposite ; they are quite different from each other. How could we explain this contradiction? Here is what Hinds wrote. According to his explanation, “Classical Chinese appears to be more like Japanese in that it is a reader-responsible language, while Modern Chinese is more like English in that it is a writer-responsible language¹⁹”.

Moreover, we may also note that the Singaporean students have established their own identities as Singaporeans and formed their own ideas based on their study through English language textbooks published locally and overseas as well. They are exposed to all-in-English textbooks in secondary school through universities. From reading such English language textbooks they have learned the Western logic and rhetoric from an early age.

Chiew, a local social scientist, conducted research back in 1970 and published the results in his “Bilingualism and National Identity : A Singapore Case Study²⁰”. According to the research, 90% of those asked if they call themselves Singaporeans answered ‘Yes’, and 74% of those asked if they would like to be called Singaporean rather than Chinese, Malay, Indian, European, and Eurasian answered ‘Yes’. The first question and answer are well reflected in some students’ comments. Young Singaporeans would probably prefer identifying themselves as Singaporeans first, not as belonging to a specific ethnic group.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the unique differences in persuasive communication found in business emails written by Singaporean and Japanese students. The examination and analysis were based on the research by myself and my colleagues in Singapore and Japan in 2006. The paper has described the strength of emerging economies in Asia as well as in the Islamic world and how business communication based on Western rhetoric would affect business dealings with people in these worlds.

The paper then introduced the research method with the introduction of the three kinds of scenarios used for the research. It considered differences found in the emails written by the two nations’ business students. The major differences are positions and contents of main messages, number of

words used in the emails, and reference to an imaginary rival company. The paper concluded with a discussion of the email writing styles by Singapore students, who may have been influenced by both Chinese and English language styles.

It is clear that contrastive rhetorical research on Japanese and English needs to receive a great deal of attention. Corner, the author of *Contrastive Rhetoric*, aptly writes as follows : “The impact of the globalization of business, Japan’s eminence in world trade, and the role of English as the emerging lingua franca of business have helped change the direction of contrastive rhetoric from examining essays written by ESL students to looking at writing for business and other purposes”²¹.

I believe that this kind of study dealing with international business writing, including English-Japanese contrasts, will have to be further promoted for the sake of Japan and the Japanese global companies as well. It will be worthwhile for researchers to pursue this study with other samples from mainland China and also the Islamic world.

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