

Japanese Corporate Communication in English

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Introduction

Poor presentations and the lack of accountability at press conferences have been major issues in the recent recall cases by Japanese auto and tire manufacturers. Judging from the nature of these communication problems, the top executives of Japanese multinationals do not seem to have developed communication competency. Japanese manufacturers are all good at designing and producing world standard products. However, their poor communication competency seems to impede quick actions when a problem occurs. Japanese businesspersons should learn a lot more about Western styles of reasoning and problem-solving through studying not only English but also the theory and practice of business communication. The result will be smoother communication and successful global negotiations and management.

I would like to touch on three points in this paper. First, I will describe the globalization of Japanese businesses and their communication practices. I will refer to the importance of a common tongue among people working for the same company around the globe, alliance partners, and those in buyer-seller relations. Second, I will discuss the relationship between language and communication, particularly when a lingua franca such as World English is used for global business negotiations. I also will touch upon the question of culture, which influences people's communication style, while giving some examples of failed partnerships across cultures. Third, I would like to analyze some of the unique features of Japanese language habits and their use in cross-cultural business negotiations, and discuss whether or not they impede smooth business negotiations in the global arena.

Globalization of Japanese businesses and their communication practices

Salacuse (1996) wrote, "For businesses, the world has become a kaleidoscope, a place of constantly changing patterns and forms." He introduced various changes seen in the world and continued, "For one thing, they have made meaningless the traditional, neat distinction between domestic and in-

ternational business, once so basic in the minds of executives. Indeed, the very term 'international business' contains a redundancy, since all business today has international connections and implications. . . . it requires executives in all countries to develop new, special skills necessary for creating and managing international business relationships and transactions." The Japanese corporations and managers are not exceptions.

We have seen remarkable changes in the structure of worldwide business of Japanese corporations in the past thirty years or so. Many Japanese multinational corporations have overseas turnover exceeding 50% of their total sales. Their foreign stockholders have increased because of strategic alliances with overseas partners and the increase of their offshore production.¹ Nearly 65% of Japan's exports by value go to the subsidiaries of Japanese corporations.² Some Japanese corporations have started shifting their headquarters to foreign countries. Some others already have non Japanese CEOs and COOs. In short, national boundaries are fast disappearing today in global economic activities with the advent of "nationality-less" products, executives, turnover, shareholders, and even headquarters.

All these changes mean that Japanese global managers, like it or not, have to communicate with their counterparts on a daily basis through various media such as phone, email, fax, and face-to-face meetings much more than they ever expected to before. Whether it is the language of one of the parties or a lingua franca, they must exchange ideas or share knowledge in a common language both of the parties can understand. In this regard, English-speaking executives are fortunate in that English has become a lingua franca for business worldwide today. However, the matter is not so simple. Although it has become a world language, English can no longer be said to be a British or an American language nor the property of its native speakers.

English-speaking Japanese executives must cope with "new Englishes" which have different styles influenced by local languages and cultures of their counterparts. They must be able to understand such English as "One person come?" The intended meanings of this literally translated expression from Chinese are "Have you come alone?" or even "You must feel lonesome if you stay here alone." Understanding in a common language, then, is not only a sharing of information but also a sharing of human emotions and meanings.

Here is an allegory to show how important it is to share a common language. Edison, the great inventor, tried to foster a commonly agreed on set of definitions of key terms used by his staff by inviting them to his home every night for dinner. He believed that this informal communicating would help build tacit common understanding to make formal communicating easier and less prone to misinterpretation called "bypassing". In the case of global business, too, this language use is important to communicate each party's hidden aims, values, and beliefs.

One of the main difficulties of negotiating business across borders lies in communication prob-

lems involving cultural differences. If an American executive responds to another American's proposal by saying, "That's difficult," the response, interpreted within the context of American culture and business practice, probably means that the door is still open for further discussion. The word "difficult" is not taken to mean that it is impossible, given the American's "can-do" culture. However, in some other cultures, particularly those in Asia, a person is reluctant to respond with a direct and emphatic "no," even when he means it. When a Japanese businessperson, in response to a proposal, says, "That's difficult," he is clearly indicating that the proposal is unacceptable. "It is difficult," means "no" to the Japanese, but to the American it means "maybe (Salacuse, 1991)." I would like to label this type of problem as "Problems of Literal Translation from L 1 to L 2" which delivers an unintended message.³

A second type of communication problem also stems from cultural difference. Let me name it as "Problems of Underlying Assumptions from C 1 to C 2" which is about a situation or action in C 1, culture one, being different from that of C 2, culture two. For many Westerners, the purpose of a business negotiation, first and foremost, is to arrive at a signed contract between the parties. Westerners view a signed contract as a definitive set of rights and duties that strictly bind the two sides. Japanese consider that the goal of negotiation is not a signed contract, but a relationship between the two sides. For the American, signing a contract is closing a deal ; for the Japanese, signing a contract might more appropriately be called opening a relationship (Salacuse, 1991).

Culture, language, and communication

The word "culture" is used in many different ways in academic circles such as anthropology. One of such definitions is "Culture is communication (Hall, 1987)." Culture includes the socially transmitted beliefs, behavioral patterns, values, and norms of a given community. When two negotiators come from different cultures, the risks of misunderstanding during a negotiation increase so that culture is a special barrier in international deal making.

From a business point of view, successful communication is the foundation of a productive relationship. Within a strategic alliance, for instance, there should be certain shared perceptions and shared codes between the top executives to establish a successful partnership. The more the top executives share ideas not only regarding their business but also each other's philosophy, favorite books, hobbies, etc., the more the alliance will be successful. It is essential for the top executives as well as those in charge of the strategic alliance to develop communication competency (Enatsu, 1995). When dealing in multinational business situations, competency requires an understanding of the other's culture as well as his or her individuality. Berlo (1960) referred to this point and said,

“The goal of interaction is the merger of self and other, a complete ability to anticipate, predict, and behave in accordance with the joint needs of self and other. We can define interaction as the ideal of communication, the goal of human communication.”

To make communication with their foreign counterparts successful, global managers must understand that becoming familiar with a foreign language and learning the skills of communication are two entirely different things. A language is naturally an important factor of communication but not a sufficient one. According to some research, the role language plays in successful communication is 7%, the features of voice or diction 38%, and facial expression is 55% (Mehrabian, 1968). Non-verbal communication also is culturally determined and can lead to misunderstandings. For example, Japanese people often use flat intonation which in English can communicate disinterest or boredom or worse yet sarcasm. This data suggests the limits of written communication such as email, fax, letter, etc. as a major tool for business communication, in which understanding is apt to be delayed or distorted because of the physical distance between the parties involved. How then should people in a partnership deal prepare their daily contacts with their partners to achieve smoother communication? My answer is to practice “putting yourself into another’s shoes” or being empathetic.

“To love is not to stare at each other, but to look in the same direction.” This is what Saint-Exupery, a philosopher and writer famous for his *The Little Prince*, wrote sixty years ago (Yamazaki, 1968). You have to stand next to your partner in order to look in the same direction; you have to look at an object from the same position. If you try to be empathetic toward your foreign counterpart, your messages will become easier for him or her to understand.

When communicating across nations and cultures, we should assume the receiver of our message may have different images of the fact we report. And, if so, we should expand a message by giving additional information elaborating on what we think the receiver should know, thereby making what we view what he also views. The following three sentences cannot convey what the sender of the message intended to tell the receiver :

1. He’s got a hundred sixty five square meters of land in Ginza.
2. He stands six feet three.
3. She earns fifty thousand dollars annually.

The true meanings of these three messages, that he is super rich, he is tall, and she earns a lot, cannot be conveyed to the receiver if he or she lives in a different cultural sphere where people have different measuring systems or monetary value. When, therefore, you think that your counterpart does not have the same judgment criteria and necessary information as yours, (1) you should give suffi-

cient additional information to him or her, or (2) add your own judgment and viewpoints to the original messages as follows :

- (1) 1. One *tsubo* (3.3 square meters) costs roughly US\$500,000 in Ginza.
2. The man's average height in this country is six feet.
3. The amount falls into the high income bracket in this area.
- (2) 1. He is really a wealthy man in our world.
2. He is tall in our society.
3. She earns really a lot for her age.

The Communication gap : the language and communication style

If managers fail to practice this type of empathic philosophy when communicating with counterparts from other cultures, they will soon suffer from miscommunication and the resultant suspicion, since miscommunication of this kind usually fosters distrust among the parties. A good example occurred recently in the Daimler-Chrysler merger. Daimler-Chrysler was reported falling into a slump mainly because of poor sales in the American market. Many journalists and critics, however, have noted that a direct cause of the slump might be the downplaying of communication on the side of Daimler for its implementation plan. Here are some extracts from a list of communication difficulties⁴ in the merger :

1. Although Daimler announced the deal as a merger of equals, it clearly was a takeover. Thus the authoritarian behavior of the Germans was not acceptable to Americans, who thought they were supposed to be equals.
2. The new official language was supposed to be English, but the Daimler executives held some meetings in the U.S. in German.
3. The tendency of U.S. executives to be risk takers clashed with the German focus on highly rule-bound process management.
4. Germans analyze a problem, choose a solution, and act. Americans discuss a problem, analyze it, discuss it again, etc. until a solution emerges (at least that's what they do at Chrysler).
5. Executive assistants in Germany have regular communication duties to perform to keep the boss informed. American aides are more flexible and task-oriented. This was a problem.

We can observe in these statements some of the communication problem patterns I introduced in the previous section such as “Problems of Literal Translation from L 1 to L 2” and “Problems of Underlying Assumptions from C 1 to C 2.” For example, differing assumptions about how to behave, how Americans react to authoritarian behavior, how Germans view such behavior, etc.

In the case of the Daimler-Chrysler merger, major communication differences between the German and American business communities caused problems. I now wish to focus on similar types of communication problems caused by cultural differences between Japan and English speaking countries. Native speakers of Japanese and English have many communication problems which arise from profound differences in language, discourse style, and cultural assumptions about business situations.

Deutch (1985) says that communication is a two-edged sword whose first blade is language. The second edge of the communication sword, he wrote, is the “logic gap” representing differences in people’s values and thought processes, which do not run parallel to those in other parts of the world. Clearly, successful business dealings with peoples from other cultures are based on an understanding of peoples’ minds and knowing the cultures that produce those minds.

In his book *This is Plain English*, Itoh (1987) gives a thought-provoking example, which he found when he edited the English expressions in the pamphlets and other publications of KDD (the Japanese version of International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation). The original Japanese was “*Tsukawarenakatta koin oyobi telehon kado wa modorimasu,*” and its English translation was “Your remaining coins or telephone card will be returned.” He says this announcement should be paraphrased into “Don’t forget to take your remaining coins or telephone card.” The first English statement is just an implication and the second one is a specification. The Japanese people thus expect the listener or reader to be able to fill in the gaps between the implication and specification and to figure out the parts which have been left unsaid or unwritten. He is right in saying that many Japanese have this kind of tendency in logic and usually speak or write English with this type of communication style. In English, however, one should be aware that in English she must clearly state what she really wants others to do for her. Otherwise, she cannot have the receiver of the message understand her intention.

The Japanese business negotiation styles

These unique features of the Japanese style of communication tell us something about the business negotiation practices of the Japanese business people. Here are the basic styles in business negotiations found among Japanese business people (Kameda, 1989):

1. Japanese business people don't say what they want to say directly, but speak in a roundabout way. They don't utter all of their meaning but rather want their counterpart(s) to surmise the rest of it. Some peculiar euphemistic expressions such as "We'll think it over," "It's difficult," etc. actually are expressions of negation.
2. They don't express "yes" or "no" decisively. While they know they can't accept things proposed or requested during a negotiation, they don't say "No," but say something like, "We would like to go back to the HQ and study the matter. Will you please give us some time?"
3. They don't make an objection directly. First they agree, or at least seem to agree, to what their counterparts say. Then they deliberately start to utter a quiet objection. This pattern is represented by such an expression as "Yes, yes, you are right. . . , but. . . ."
4. Although a group of four to five members take part in a negotiation, only one speaks all the time. Each participant rarely expresses his or her opinion. The group's members are vertically or hierarchically related, consisting of division manager, section manager, and several of their staff. When and if required, an additional staff member such as an engineer, an ad-man, etc. may be called in to attend a specific part of the negotiation only.
5. It is often very difficult to judge whether Japanese statements are propositions, simple opinions, information, or fact reports. The negotiation makes progress within a large and somewhat vague framework, and gets to the heart of the matter at the very last.
6. Japanese have in their minds the central idea, for example, the request for a price reduction, for a negotiation. However, they often attend meetings without preparing detailed agenda for the subject. They also change their attitudes toward the subject after seeing the reactions or responses from their counterparts.
7. In many cases the participants are not fully empowered to make a final decision. Their ability to offer substitute ideas is usually very small. When such limited substitution is refused, they are compelled to say, "Well, we'll first have to ask our boss," or "Please wait until tomorrow as we'll ask our HQ about it today."

I think the features of these business negotiation styles are based on the language styles of Japanese people at large. The language style is a reflection of cultural factors such as values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, all of which influence the style of communication.

In order to become a truly qualified communicator or cultural integrator, Japanese managers should be aware that English and communication are two different entities. In this day of internationalization and in an information-oriented society, communication competency is truly required for Japanese managers overseas. Communication competency is the ability to express oneself and effec-

tively understand others, and it is the basis of persuasion, negotiation, and integration — all of which Japanese global managers must accomplish wherever they are. Business people need to study both the target language and the target culture so that they can figure out how to best express their intended messages.

Conclusion

As we have observed, in many cases the external corporate communication of Japanese multinationals does not seem to be effective. To improve the situation, a need exists for intensified in-house training in both language and culture. The training program must be well designed in collaboration with qualified training specialists who are well versed in the subjects of International Business English and Cross-cultural Communication. An organization in Japan, International Business Communicators, has many such specialists, mainly from the UK and the US, and has been offering instructional services to leading Japanese corporations.⁵

Although Japan has become a leading economic giant, education has, in this respect, lagged behind. English ability is crucial in the office environment and for business communication when a corporation is in its globalization process or has been already active in the global market. However, it alone is not enough. Corporate pursuits in this respect will surely lead to the evolution of the “soft” language and culture side of corporate business communication while the “hard” side is now guaranteed because of the advent of information technology and the global information network. The combination of these two sides will in turn contribute to Japanese corporations’ sound and vital management in the new global economy.

Notes

- 1 The overseas sales turnover of Japanese major corporations as of March, 2000 is as follows : Honda 73.6%, Sony 68.3%, Toyota 57.3% and Matsushita 49.3% (Source : Nikkei Company information, 2000—III Summer Issue). The shares of total equity held by foreign shareholders of the major companies are as follows : Isuzu Motor 52.4%, Nissan 49.5%, Sony 45.6%, and Hitachi 30.1% (Source : *Diamond Weekly*, 2000. 5. 13). The selection of these companies is arbitrary and does not show the ranking of each category.
- 2 (A) Japanese exports purchased by Japanese companies’ overseas subsidiaries (US\$226.3 bl.)/(B) Japan’s total exports (US\$344 bl.)=65.8%. These figures are from 1992, the last year when the statistics for (A) were available, according to Nakano, K. (1995), *The Study of International Trade Marketing Channels* (3rd ed.), Hakuto Shobo, Tokyo, p. 16.
- 3 L 1 stands for people who have a variety of English as a first language, or a mother tongue. L 2 stands for people who have learned a variety of English as a second language, in addition to their mother tongue. Crystal, D. (1997), *English as a global language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 55.
- 4 Prof. Jeremiah J. Sullivan, a professor of international business at the University of Washington, my good friend and mentor, sent this list to me in November 2000. Some of the best sources for the DaimlerChrysler material are : Philip Scipio, “DaimlerChrysler IR is off to a Slow Start,” *Investor Relations Business*,

Sept. 6, 1999, pp. 1–14. Dorothee Ostle, “Culture Clash,” *Automotive News*, Dec. 6, 1999, pp. 1–32. Keith Bradsher, “Management by 2 Cultures May Be a Growing Source of Strain for DaimlerChrysler,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 1999, C, p. 2.

- 5 International Business Communicators. Their web site is <http://www.ibc-japan.org/> Here is a part of their introduction. “We are a network of corporate language, intercultural, and business communication skills trainers, consultants, and program managers involved in employee training in Japan. . . . IBC was founded in 1988 to provide a forum to increase opportunities to discuss business communication training issues.”

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