

New Opportunities for Polish-Japanese Cooperation: Diagnosis and Prospects

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Japanese language teaching in Poland in the contemporary world of cross-cultural communication (CCC)

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1. Foreign language education

I feel obliged to acknowledge at the very beginning of this paper that my sincere intention is not to provide the reader with technical and statistical details of Japanese language teaching in Poland, which may be easily found elsewhere. Instead, I plan to focus on several issues regarding the (Japanese) language education in the contemporary world of cross-cultural communication (CCC).

Education is a process of achieving goals and the education of a foreign language is focused on providing the student with the language as a means of communication. Communication should be understood as a process of exchanging messages in order to communicate a certain meaning, which is usually embedded in certain context. In the process of foreign language education it is necessary to take into account numerous factors and phenomena that may differ in the source (student's) and target (the foreign language) environments. Language teaching should hence be regarded as an act of translation/interpretation.

Translation/interpretation acts are usually perceived as the subject of research belonging to the scope of applied linguistics. While linguistic theory usually deals with declarative sentences (*Is it true/false that X?*), applied linguistics provides means to achieve certain goals (*What X is effective to perform in order to achieve Y?*) [Bańcerowski et al. 1982: 27]. Furthermore, speech communities not only require the use of certain codes, but also a substantial competence on the patterns of its use

[Hymes 1974: 51]. This usually requires a far more advanced approach than that of classical autonomous linguistics, which again means that not only is the language important, but also its relation to thought (reality), as mentioned by Sapir [1978: 151] and its function as a “cultural key” to understand social events.

2. Mutual images

While language teaching is focused on goals, language learning is without doubt strongly supported by motivation, be it individual or group-oriented, and driven by more or less systematized data and convictions on the heterogeneous country and culture. Numerous stereotypes on Japan exist in Poland. It is usually considered a (very) faraway country, revealing properties most often defined as exotic or even cute. The Japanese language is perceived as difficult to master, which does not prevent relatively many Polish students from making attempts to master it.

The above fact may be contrasted with the fact that there are virtually no stereotypes on Poland and Poles in Japan, which is a rather typical consequence of the traditionally perceived opposition between Japan and the rest of the world. Poland and Polish culture, including the language, quite apart from the difficulties of the latter for foreigners, are rarely viewed as salient items by most Japanese against the background of the world or even Europe. This is also visible in the relatively small number of Japanese students who choose to learn Polish. This observation is no more than this author’s rough estimation, not supported by any detailed data, but it seems to be correct to point out that while Japan’s population is three times larger than the population of Poland, the number of students in Japan who learn Polish is well below even half of number of Polish students of Japanese.

As the main reason and, at the same time, often the main advantage of the above mentioned *status quo*, one may also emphasize that there is no past experience of a “harmful vicinity” between Japan and Poland. One positive consequence of this fact is that while Japan is perceived in Poland as a geographic part of Asia, it is exactly in case of Japan that the mental stereotype of Asia and the so-called Orient (heterogeneous and uncivilized, whether existent and based on verifiable grounds or not [cf. Sekiguchi 2008]) is not actively used at least in some areas of perception.

3. Japanese language vs. Polish students

The fact that the Japanese language enjoys a substantial level of popularity among Polish students may not necessarily depend on the relatively easy pronunciation of Japanese phonological units from the point of view of Polish speakers, which can be illustrated in terms of a few consonant clusters and the generally open structure of Japanese syllables, properties completely different from those of consonants and syllables in the Polish language. At the same time, the Japanese writing systems, borrowed from Chinese language and as such still revealing numerous inconsistencies and inconveniences, is difficult but absolutely necessary to master the vocabulary of the code. Another feature to be taken into consideration are the alphabetical and phonetic incompatibilities of Japanese as it is romanized in Poland using the Hepburn romanization, which is suited to English, not Polish, although the difficulties in romanizing Japanese according to the manner of Polish spelling are of a substantially less misleading character.

Japanese and Polish reveal a relative lack of semantic similarities (apart from the new layer of vocabulary imported phonetically from English in recent years, which is present in both languages). The different verbalization techniques, not to mention the different sentence order, along with elliptical properties of Japanese sentences (which sometimes do not mention the subject and/or other elements overtly) may constitute even more demanding challenges, both for the Polish student of Japanese and for the Japanese student of Polish.

Regardless of the above, the most striking and demanding differences emerging in actual communication between Poles and Japanese may be applied to the actual communication patterns. In Japan, vertical social ranks (formal status of a referent inside and outside a group) are valued substantially higher than horizontal ranks (actual competence, common individual preferences and so on), a fact that differs radically from the Polish attitude to ranks. The immediate results of this may be viewed both in difficulties related to the application of honorific modification (HM) patterns (most often – and incorrectly – attributed to the notion of politeness) in the actual schemes of communication.

4. Language and context

The HM patterns should be related to the actual use of language in a certain communication environment. The HM information is embedded in the actual message content, the meaning of which is far more complicated than simply “saying something”. Viewed in this light, social activity reveals substantially more complicated goals and implications than simply “expressing oneself”. Accordingly, HM techniques are also far more complex than “making messages polite” and not related solely to the grammar of the language [Jabłoński 2012].

While an act of communication in a homogeneous environment (a non-CCC act) requires certain competences related to language, context, goals and HM, an act of CCC (cross-cultural communication) must be linked to the appropriate competence level in heterogeneous languages, heterogeneous contexts, with heterogeneous goals and heterogeneous HM. In other words, in both the CCC and the non-CCC there is no inherent value of a message independent of a context.

5. (CC)C prerequisites

A basic prerequisite for an interaction, constituting a *conditio sine qua non* for communication activity, is the existence of common points of interest, which may be related to the above-mentioned motivation (both to learn a foreign code, and to communicate). Effective communication, however, and especially the CCC, also requires the implementation of the subsequent rules, which have been listed below along with the estimated degree of simplicity of their achievement:

- view the heterogeneous culture as a system (NOT EASY);
- avoid the practice of relying on meanings isolated from contexts (NOT EASY);
- avoid automatically linking the homogeneous and heterogeneous contexts (NOT EASY);
- avoid normative statements on cultural differences (NOT EASY);
- put the emphasis on consistency (trees vs. forest) and adequacy – (isolated) meaning vs. (systematic) effects of the message (NOT EASY).

Cross-cultural communication is the result of a significant, constant effort by its participants, which is hard to be achieved outside of a certain communication context, including the study of a language in a class-

room, which is usually separated from the actual acts of communication. Moreover, under the pressure of business CCC, it is usually not the communication problems *per se*, but rather the extralinguistic issues that are perceived as crucial problems to be solved. This may result in the lack of parties' readiness to abandon their native interpretation schemes.

Insufficient cross-cultural competence may be fostered by, among others, negative stereotypes, xenophobia and, last but not least, the uncertainty which results from incompatible expectations and incompatible aims of communication, which in turn may influence incompatible consequences of decisions and the recognition of incompatible units of information exchange. Such issues are analyzed in another source by the same author in terms of the homeostasis of a text and the homeostatic effort of the involved parties – including the translator/interpreter [Jabłoński 2013]. Below, I would like to concentrate rather on the trivial, but repeatedly occurring, factors which may influence the actual communication between the Poles and the Japanese, especially in the context of their explanation in the process of foreign language study.

6. On anti-translation: careless CCC narrations

It seems to be a common conviction that stereotypes may be useful to a superficial understanding of certain basic concepts of a heterogeneous culture. Superficial understanding, in any case, seems to be better than deep misunderstanding, especially in the case of Japan, traditionally perceived as faraway and exotic. It is for this reason that stereotypes may be (and sometimes are) useful for the student of a foreign language and culture. It should be noted, however, that the popularity of Japan and Japanese culture all over the so-called Western world may also foster the proliferation of myths and the instances defined below as 'anti-translation acts' or careless CCC narration issues. It may indeed be surprising how bizarre relations may originate on the subject of Japan and the Japanese culture, which although it could be considered the same as any other heterogeneous culture, which often seems to reveal its exotic, illogical and incomprehensible properties.

A typical negligence of careless narrations lays in the practice of perceiving isolated details of a Japanese cultural context instead of a coherent system and drawing quick conclusions on the "whole Japanese culture" on the basis of casual observations. Even manifestly casual relationships between the observed phenomena are neglected for the sake of Japanese

exoticism, which is usually accomplished in a manner that would appear completely unacceptable for the careless narrators, even if it was to be applied to phenomena belonging to their own cultural environment. Some of the examples of such practices given below may be shocking, especially when viewed in the light of common sense, but one should remember in the first place that they come from an (undocumented but unshakable) belief that Japan is a place in which virtually anything can happen, be it illogical, weird or even close to impossible.

It would probably not be worth noticing in normal circumstances, but it may be considered very typical against the background of common narrations on Japan that a philosopher named Roland Barthes from France, who visited Japan in the 1960s, noticed the remarkable lack of postal addresses in the country [Barthes 2004: 88–92]. His explanation was extremely simple and logical: the Japanese have no postal addresses, so they have to draw simple maps every time they invite someone for dinner or make an appointment. Owing to his strong disregard for the actual Japanese address system based on land slices (as a side comment one may remark here that it is probably much more effective than the European system based on lines/streets), Barthes was unable to come to the (proper) conclusion that another system of addresses could exist on the Japanese Archipelago. He interpreted the usual Japanese act of courtesy – a map drawn for a foreign guest who does not speak a word in Japanese in order for them not to get lost on their way – as proof of the non-existence of postal addresses. Using this sophisticated technique of cross-cultural reasoning, the French philosopher must have probably assumed that more than one hundred million Japanese people simply have to know one another and are able to deliver letters and packages only on the basis of personal data.

Another proof of Japanese uniqueness was delivered by a Polish quasi-expert on Japanese studies, Joanna Bator, who, having thoughtlessly repeated after Barthes the above mentioned untrue statement about the lack of postal addresses, informs the reader on the scandalous practice of discrimination of women in Japan [Bator 2004: 254–255]. This is indeed shocking. Who would like to have contact with a nation that discriminates against women? No one it would seem. Her proofs seem to be mercilessly solid at first glance: the Japanese ideogram for *yome* 嫁 ‘bride’ consists of the elements: 女 ‘woman’ and 家 ‘house’. One could reason that this probably means that Japanese women are forced to stay home. Quite apart from the obvious and definitely not hidden fact that the character in question is of Chinese, not of Japanese origin (which Bator failed to observe), one might have noticed that while the above-mentioned character for ‘woman’ is an image of dancing hips, the corresponding character for

‘man’ 男 consists of the elements 田 ‘rice field’ and 力 ‘[physical] power’, which could well be a proof of discrimination against men in Japan.

Another telling example of Bator’s methodology is the allegedly Japanese (in fact, borrowed from Chinese) epistolary and contemporarily rather obsolete term for ‘one’s wife,’ *gusai* 愚妻, consisting of two elements meaning ‘[my] stupid wife.’ This could indeed be a strong proof of discrimination, if it weren’t for the fact that an epistolary term for ‘one’s own son’ (also obsolete, but not more so than *gusai*) is *tonken* 豚犬 and consists of two elements meaning ‘pig’ and ‘dog,’ respectively.

While the forthright statements on Japan formulated rashly and thoughtlessly by Barthes and Bator may deserve no further comment, it is interesting that even more elaborate descriptions of Japanese culture tend to mention, among other things, the Japanese “distrust of verbalism” [Wierzbicka & Goddard 1997: 237] or even offer the reader an extremely misleading concept of the alleged “communication from the heart” [Kondō 1981: 135], which is related to the group-oriented character of the Japanese (collectivism) and close to the notion of telepathy, of which the participants of other cultures have been mercilessly deprived for the reasons unknown to the puzzled reader of such revelations. That is why this author would like to present below an extremely simplified analysis of basic properties of Polish and Japanese culture, which may both explain several representative misunderstandings related to such statements, as well as enable the reader to understand why the analysis of superficial context parameters may not always be a good method to deal with cross-cultural differences.

7. The challenge: actual communication

It is not feasible to predict all instances of communication or systematize them in any culture, be it homogeneous or heterogeneous to one’s native culture. Some simple statements, however, may be formed about certain nuclear parameters present in any culture. As a basic opposition related to the processes of actual communication between the Poles and the Japanese, I decided to define below the opposition between the collectivism and individualism, although I am painfully aware of its unavoidable limitations. One may hope that pointing out the most vital points of incompatibility on the basis of binary properties of Polish and Japanese culture and basic convictions on rules of social life is going to be sufficient for the purposes of this paper.

8. Binary properties (PL context vs. JP context)

Binary properties cover the possible choices in which the culture participants determine the basic shape of their social activity. The following points of choice may be listed for the purposes of comparing the PL and JP cultures and communication parameters:

- people are basically the same/different;
- everyone/not everyone can act freely;
- vertical differentiation is unfair/obvious;
- rank is based on competence/seniority;
- responsibility is individual/shared;
- junior is inferior to/dependent on senior;
- it is humiliating/convenient to be a junior;
- senior = more money/responsibility.

On the basis of the above binary properties, the following PL and JP basic convictions on the actual shape of social interaction in the respective speech communities may be defined (as modified after Jabłoński [2013: 219–220]):

8.1. PL convictions

1. People are basically equal. Most relations are symmetrical. Lower rank is a shame. Higher rank may arouse envy.
2. Free exchange of views enables interaction partners to know each other better.
3. Expressing oneself is natural. The group is not that important.
4. Hiding one's views makes co-operation difficult.
5. Sincerity means coherent behaviour, regardless of context.
6. Playing roles ought to be creative.

8.2. JP convictions

1. People are basically different. Most relations are asymmetrical. Lower rank is no shame. In any case, it is better than indefinite rank. Ranks are to be trusted.
2. Free exchange of views reveals rather undesirable individual differences.
3. Expressing oneself is not necessary for communication. Recognition of group relations is much more important.

4. Hiding one's views is necessary to communicate.
5. Sincerity depends on the context (accepted in one's own group).
6. Outside of one's group only predictable role play enables effective interaction.

9. Extremes in business communication

While being somewhat simple and unsophisticated, it may be assumed that the above listed binary properties and parameters remain present in the background of any actual instance of communication in the Polish-Japanese environment. Since the properties and convictions differ significantly, in the CCC context they may foster serious translation/interpreting issues. In business-oriented communication, this may lead to extremes in the interpretation of cross-cultural parameters and evoke, among other things, the following reactions of communication partners, which foreign students of the Japanese language are going to be forced to cope with in the more distant future:

- uncertainty (But what is this all about?)
- lack of greetings, lack of confirmation (But it is obvious!)
- incorrect recognition of schemes (But what do they think?)
- irritation (But who do they think they are!)
- lack of co-operation (But we do not care!)
- lack of responsibility (But it's their problem!)
- discouragement (But they do not understand anything!)

Needless to say, due to the complexity of actual situations which may emerge during CCC, it remains practically impossible to enumerate all possible incompatibilities related to CCC that a foreign student of Japanese may encounter in their professional experience as a Japanese language translator or interpreter. Still, it is postulated here that the consciousness of potential differences, while it may not be the cure for all the possible situations in which an incompatibility is encountered, it is at least an important prerequisite to prevent the students from feeling astonishment in such instances and enabling them to predict a number of issues that emerge in the heterogeneous Polish–Japanese communication environment.

10. What can the experts do?

As can be briefly concluded, foreign language teaching should not only be viewed as explaining grammar and vocabulary in the classroom. It may also be treated as an important means of preparation to actual acts of CCC (presenting the actual problem-solving techniques). Certainly, 100% success in CCC may not be always possible to achieve. It is precisely for this reason that acts of promoting awareness of unavoidable limitations in communication may at least prevent students from encountering unresolvable CCC situations in their professional life when the foreign language they intend to learn is going to be used as an actual communication (CCC) tool.

There are also other means of narrowing the cross-cultural gap that experts on Polish-Japanese CCC may significantly contribute to. It is important to build up mutual images of Poland in Japan and *vice versa*. Also, active countermeasures against careless narrations should not be neglected and, since they influence multiple areas of non-expert consciousness of CCC, they should be defined and implemented as a potential means of facilitating actual CCC acts.

Last but not least, another technical step to support the effective CCC between the Poles and the Japanese could be a creation of an official, intuitional Japanese-Polish romanization, which could be further established as a Polish standard of Japanese romanization, not necessarily related to the Hepburn standard and utilizing Polish orthography for the purpose of illustrating the actual sounds of Japanese. The upcoming 100th anniversary of the establishment of regular diplomatic relations between Poland and Japan might be a good opportunity for such event.

Streszczenie

Zarówno nauczanie języka obcego, jak proces komunikacji międzykulturowej, to zjawiska osadzone w konkretnym kontekście społecznym, stanowiące akty swoistego tłumaczenia. Należy je rozpatrywać w ramach stosowanego odniesienia do badań nad językiem. Dotyczy to przede wszystkim uwzględniania projektowanych i rzeczywistych skutków konkretnej aktywności językowej.

W kontekście nauczania języka japońskiego w Polsce stosunkowo rzadko podnosi się kwestie dotyczące wzajemnych wyobrażeń o sobie Polaków i Japończyków oraz technicznej odmienności obu kodów językowych.

Artykuł niniejszy, obok opisu stosunkowo oczywistych problemów, jakie może napotykać komunikacja w środowisku polsko-japońskim w perspektywie teoretycznej, dotyczy także kwestii praktyki komunikacji międzykulturowej, która wymaga opuszczenia terytorium kultury własnej i skonfrontowania z heterogeniczną interpretacją rzeczywistości.

Rzeczywista komunikacja międzykulturowa nie może abstrahować od gotowości stron do zarzucenia stereotypowych przekonań na rzecz wzajemnej odmienności, na rzecz skupienia się na efektywnej i bezstronnej analizie rzeczywistych schematów komunikacyjnych i interpretacyjnych typowych dla każdego ze środowisk kulturowych. Wymóg taki dotyczy przy tym nie tylko aktów rzeczywistej komunikacji, nieuchronnie powiązanych z pewnymi zmianami w pozajęzykowej rzeczywistości. Odnosi się on także do beztroskich narracji międzykulturowych, funkcjonujących w sposób niewidoczny a destrukcyjny w otocze zjawisk składających się na kontekst komunikacji międzykulturowej.

Efektywne uczestnictwo w aktach komunikacji międzykulturowej, obok znajomości odpowiednich kodów językowych, wymaga zatem także świadomości potencjalnych problemów, które mogą wpłynąć na zakłócenia w procesach komunikacji. Świadomość taka, mimo że nie zapewnia automatycznego i bezwysiłkowego rozwiązania wszelkich problemów międzykulturowych, pozwala uodpornić tłumacza – często jedyne go uczestnika aktów komunikacji międzykulturowej, który jest w stanie problemy takie dostrzec – na liczne zjawiska niepożądane, obecne w sposób nieunikniony w tle każdej interakcji.

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This monograph covers the output of the conference titled “2014 – New Opportunities for Japan and V-4 Cooperation” and contains Japanese and Polish contributions. It offers reflections on the *statu nascendi* of economic and cultural relations between the two nations. Viewpoints and research results mirror the various interests and arguments of the scholars (mainly economists, sociologists, and japanologists), businessmen, and representatives of administrative bodies (central and local governments) who participated in the conference, all of whom are searching for common solutions.

The presented papers are very much diversified with respect to their content and writing styles. The book itself reflects an eclectic approach. The multifaceted approach to the discussed issues facilitates the comparison of expectations against real life activities. The most important goal of the book is to identify the potential for collaboration and crucial fields in which there exist challenges and a need for changes, all in the interest of leading to a new stage of reciprocally profitable relations between Poland and Japan in today’s globalised world.



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