

# The Affect of Cultural Background Knowledge on Communication Between Japanese and Americans in a Business Context

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## 1 Introduction

"It is precisely because we have learned so well to interpret the expected behavior of our own groups that we can function so easily with other people from those same groups" (Singer 1998:177).

When people think of communicating with someone in a second or foreign language, they often confuse language problems for cultural problems. Educational institutions and multinational corporations spend an enormous amount of time and energy on foreign language and culture study yet little attention has been given to the influence of the speaker's own cultural background knowledge on the communication context. It is this culture-specific knowledge of how we assume everyone else communicates that often causes misunderstandings, ethnocentric interpretations and potentially lasting negative impressions of "the other" speaker. More importantly, these negative interpretations are often erroneous because they go unrecognized by one or both interlocutors affecting future interaction.

Acquiring cultural competence is not as straightforward as addressing language competence because "culture" is not apparent in our daily lives. Americans tend to resist the notion that they have a "national culture" and that it affects their communication behavior (Bennett 1998:4). Another way to address this problem is by asking, "How do our shared norms and values affect the way we communicate and reach decisions?" In a mono-cultural setting, the common bond of a single culture goes unnoticed and generally smoothes and facilitates the decision making process. Cultural values and norms, or what we regard as "right/wrong" and "good/bad", are very similar and, therefore, go unrecognized by those in communication with each other. This is partly because speakers from the same culture, although unique as individuals, have similar cultural values, draw off a very similar set of communicative background knowledge and, generally, know what to expect from their communication partner. The context of communication also plays a significant role in shaping how interlocutors will achieve their communicative goals. For example, in a business meeting, Western English speakers are expected to have an opinion and be able to articulate this directly

to their colleagues to show that they are being attentive and participative. In data collected by the author in Table 1, American and Japanese university students were asked how they would approach their first meeting at their new job after graduating.

Table 1

<b>Situation:</b> You have just graduated from college, have a new job, and are attending your first meeting. There are about 15 other co-workers in the room. What actions would you probably do?	
a) [ ]	I would introduce myself to everyone. J: 32.1% A: 51.1%
b) [ ]	I wouldn't say anything. J: 5.7% A: 4.3%
c) [ ]	I would try to occasionally contribute to the meeting by making relevant comments. <b>J: 14.3% A: 57.4%</b>
d) [ ]	I would wait until I was spoken to before saying anything. J:16.4% A:21.3%
e) [ ]	I would keep quiet and only listen to everyone attentively. <b>J: 44.3% A:19.1%</b>
f) [ ]	I would try to ask as many relevant questions as possible. <b>J:12.1% A:29.8%</b>
g) [ ]	I don't know/ other: J: 4.3% A:8.5
J=Japanese respondents average    A=American respondents average	

Statistically significant differences are shown in bold. As the data in Table 1 indicates, in an American workplace context, silence and ambiguity are not desirable and, indeed, may even imply incompetence or untrustworthiness to fellow native English speakers. Openness and explicitness, on the other hand, are highly valued and expected. While both speakers may not necessarily agree, if they can understand the other's position, they feel more comfortable. To those from another culture (e.g. Japan), however, this directness and openness may be interpreted as "immature" or "insensitive". Why is this so? How can two people experience the same communicative event and come away with a different, potentially harmful, interpretation of the other?

This paper aims to explore these two questions by presenting some of the core communicative values and norms that underpin Japanese and English speakers' communication culture in a business context. Cross-cultural conversations adapted from Storti's Cross-Cultural Dialogues (1994) will be analyzed to show how culture-specific knowledge can potentially affect communication.

## 1.1 Culture

Culture is a process of acquiring values, norms and learned behaviors that a group of people share. Yet, "no one member of a culture knows all aspects of the culture, and all the members of a culture have a unique view of culture" (Gudykunst & Kim 2003:16). An individual may have an infinite number of individualistic values and norms; but only a relatively small number of these that do not belong to their larger cultural norms (e.g. country, region, city, school etc). It is

from these groups that we learn what to regard as right and wrong or normal and strange. In fact, this "cultural conditioning" results in a very limited number of group-learned experiences (Singer 1998:4). Group members belonging to one of these cultural groups will often share a similar pattern of perception and interpretation of events. For example, in the US, someone who has a firm handshake and good eye contact is generally perceived as "confident" and "trustworthy" in American culture. This sharing of norms, values and perceptions makes communication smoother and simpler - and unconscious or unrecognized. Thus, a major supposition of intercultural theory is that people raised in Culture A can communicate more easily with people in Culture A than in Culture B. What about when we carry our own cultural values into a cross-cultural context? Will we adjust to compensate for the new culture or carry on using our own background cultural knowledge? One recent study (Fisman and Miguel 2006) compared UN diplomats in New York from countries whose governments were rated as being more corrupt than others (using the Transparency International Corruption Index). It was found that UN diplomats from countries who are known for having the more corrupt governments are the ones who habitually tend to break the traffic and parking laws in New York. Diplomats from countries not regarded as corrupt tended to follow the law even though their diplomatic status protected them from prosecution. This type of evidence indicates that people do indeed transfer their native cultural norms to the cross-cultural context. In other words, although we may be able to "get by" for a short period of time in a foreign culture, we cannot quickly or easily shed a lifetime of acquired learned values and norms anymore than we can "unacquire" our native language.

The term "cultural background knowledge" specifically refers to the culture specific information that we do not consciously recognize because it has become subsumed into our cultural identity. Cross-culture refers to a specific comparison of two cultures whereas intercultural shall refer to the comparison of cultures in general.

## 1.2 The focus of Intercultural Communication

Intercultural Communication (IC) research focuses on face-to-face interaction as opposed to comparing the same phenomenon across cultures (Bennett 1998:9). Recognizing how and why particular cultures tend to communicate the way they do is central to the IC field (see Ting-Toomey & Chung 2005, Gudykunst & Kim 2003, Gudykunst 2005). However, it is more important to first understand and recognize our own cultural communication tendencies. People take for granted their norms and values based upon the centralizing tendencies of their larger national culture. For

instance, because of their strongly held value of individuality, Americans are even reluctant to acknowledge the existence, much less influence, of a national culture on their communication.

"U.S. Americans are particularly resistant to recognizing their national culture. Despite the fact that nearly everyone else in the world immediately recognizes them as Americans, many of them still insist on labelling themselves as "just individuals" or "a mixture of cultures". Of course, the very commonality of this tendency is an example of U.S. American national culture; no other people in the world but U.S. Americans are so quick to disavow their cultural affiliation" (Bennett 1998: 4-5).

This makes cross-cultural training and education at times a challenge because Americans tend to assume that "we are all basically the same". Thus, one of the keys for interculturalists is to have an expert knowledge of their own cultural tendencies.

### 1.3 Ethnocentrism

One of the concerns with focusing on cultural tendencies at the national level is that it can lead to ethnocentric value judgements of "the other" speaker or culture. This is indeed a legitimate concern and one that we must be constantly self-aware of because what feels natural in cross-cultural communication is often a cultural singularity. Considering how another culture prefers to communicate involves addressing potentially stereotypical information. However, with a good understanding of our own cultural communication tendencies, we are better prepared to compare subjective information about another. For example, imagine that you are about to embark on a business trip to the country being described below using two types of information. Which type of information, A or B, would you find most useful in your stay in this country?

**Table 2 - Information types**

Read the two types of information about a country. Which type was most useful to you?

Type A	Type B
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Population: 9 million</li> <li>2. Constitutional Monarchy</li> <li>3. 450,000 sq. km.</li> <li>4. Mixture of socialism, capitalism and entrepreneurialism</li> <li>5. Average temperature in summer is 17C and in winter -2.8C</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They speak English very well</li> <li>2. They are logical and restrained in their behavior</li> <li>3. People tend to be shy and not so talkative</li> <li>4. A lot of people have blond hair and blue eyes</li> <li>5. Sensitive subjects should be avoided in conversation (e.g. sex, religion)</li> <li>6. Gestures / physical contact are not approved of</li> </ol>

6. Large middle class	7. The public and private sector services tend to run efficiently
7. They learn to speak English as a Second Language in school	8. Humor is not as important as in some countries
8. Religion: 80% Evangelical Lutheran	9. Teamwork is common and appreciated
9. Life expectancy: 78 men, 82 women	

We can see from Table 1.0 that there are two types of information given about a particular country. The left side lists objective information and the right subjective information. Most readers will probably recognize that the country being described is Sweden. If you were about to embark on a business trip there, which type of information would you judge to be more useful? Most people would agree that the subjective information can tell us more how the people living there may view us and the world around them as well as their preferred way communicating. Yet, almost all of this information is ethnocentric in nature. The point being made is that, when we try to understand something as complex as culture, subjective information is more useful to the sojourner or international business traveler. Why is this so? In short, all humans need to stereotype because it makes things easier for us to understand. For example, if you ask Americans what comes to mind when they think of the state of Arizona, most will say, "hot" or "desert". While there is desert and hot weather in Arizona, there are also lots of mountains and snow and very cold weather. Yet, the simpler image helps us understand this region because it would be confusing to say it is "hot", "cold", "desert" and "mountains". Most of the time these generalized deductions cause no harm and achieve their intended purpose, especially in a mono-cultural context. However, in cross-cultural contexts, they are often erroneous because they are underpinned with norms and values that are different from the person's behavior being observed. By projecting our own cultural view on to "the other", we are filtering what we regard as important information so that we can understand it more easily and make the "correct" decision.

#### 1.4 High and Low Context Culture

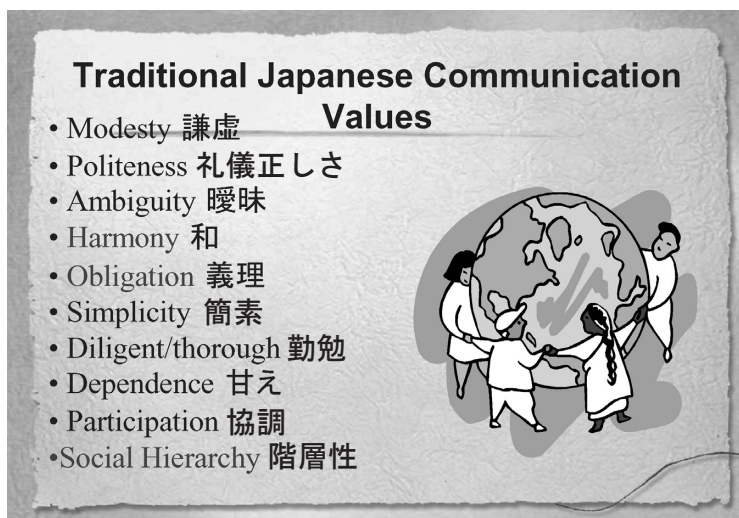
High Context (HC) communication cultures (e.g. Japan) and Low Context communication cultures (e.g. US) approach communication and decision-making differently. HC is characterized by nonverbal communication, meanings that are shared implicitly by speaker/listener which are highly dependent on the context. A high context system is one in which information and interaction are constantly shared by all members of the group, thus building up and maintaining a high level of context. The emphasis is not so much on the direct meaning of each utterance but how and

by whom it is uttered because there is meaning associated with the context in which it is spoken. A Low Context (LC) culture values explicit communication between speaker/listener; the context is less important than what was actually said. LC cultures place more value on the individual's content of the message in order to "better predict listener's behavior in direct communication" (Gudykunst & Nishida 1993:151). High context cultures typically value their relationship to the group more than low context cultures. Cross-cultural conversations presented in Section 4 shall be analyzed using this theory.

## 2.0 Basic Japanese Culture-based Communication Concepts

The cultural concepts below are a result of the author's research and data collected and synthesized from both American and Japanese university students as well as relevant literature that discuss Japanese communication (e.g. De Mente 1993, Yamada 1997, Donahue 1998, Matsumoto 2002, Davies & Ikeno 2002, Sugimoto 2003). Although it has been argued that Japanese societal norms are in a state of transition (see Matsumoto 2002), the traditional nature of these values determined by those in "transition" (i.e. young Japanese university students) suggest that dominant cultural values of Japan remain relatively stable taking time to change as each generation faces new challenges.

Table 3



At the very core of Japanese communication is, *WA*, or the concept of social or relational harmony. Relational harmony is so prevalent in Japanese communication that it goes unrecognized much the same way that individuality is stressed in the US. In most cases, the Japanese core value of social harmony can be directly or indirectly attributed to a variety of other Japanese communication values and norms such as: ambiguity, politeness, and indirectness. Saying that the Japanese speaker values relational harmony is not the same thing as saying that they are not individualistic or do not like to behave independently. Rather, because communication is done in groups, and it is the shared group norms of Japanese society that value communication, the speech act is perceived in a more interdependent and harmonious way.

The concept of *AMAE* or interdependence is also crucial to understanding Japanese communication. *AMAE* has been defined as, "...depending on the benevolence of others" (Doi 1973:17). A quick investigation into contemporary Japanese TV can reveal some of these cultural concepts. Popular nationally televised TV shows are often a barometer of what a society values albeit in an empirical way. Japanese TV is rife with quiz-game show programming that gives the audience and participants a high level of information (high context) and then requires them to give an answer while considering what the other participants may say. Unlike in the US, where quiz/game shows typically tend to have individuals competing against one another, in Japan, they are almost always made up of panels or a group of individuals charged with solving a riddle or "*MONDAI*" (lit. problem). One nationally televised program had participants drawing pictures of a word that the host held up. The goal of the game was to try and draw the same picture as the other participants. In other words, participants wanted to have the same interpretation as the members of their group or they would "lose". This thinking may seem strange to western native English speakers who were brought up on the concepts of individuals or teams competing against each other to win a prize. Most likely, if this quiz show were in the US, the participants who would have given a different answer from the others would be the "winners" and those who had similar answers to the others would be the "losers". One reason accounting for this disparity is because, in interdependent cultures like Japan, one's self-identity is already at least partially defined by group affiliation. Whereas in individualistic cultures, one's self-identity is usually something you are continually trying to define; that is, for American style communication, the glass is half-empty and there is a continual need for explicitness in language use so that it can be "filled-up". It is a documented phenomena in cross-cultural research that questionnaire respondents from high context cultures will answer questions less categorically (e.g. not say, "I hate...", or "I love...") than their American counterparts. This has been called "cultural response sets" (Matsumoto 1994:33) or "extreme response sets" (Cheung

and Rensvold 2000:189) and is a factor that should be accounted for in cross-cultural research that compares HC and LC cultures.

### 3.0 Basic American Culture-Based Communication concepts

Table 4 introduces the top culture-derived communication concepts for Americans. These concepts, like the Japanese ones in section 2.0, came from both background literature (e.g. Stewart and Bennett 1991) and raw data collected and categorized from American university students.

Table 4



At the core of the American value set is personal "independence" and "individuality". You can see that many of these concepts are very different, if not opposite in some cases, from the Japanese ones listed in section 2.0. These norms and values greatly affect how Americans communicate and make decisions and have a significant impact on cross-cultural interactions with Japanese and others. It is important to recognize that these differences should only be interpreted as simply different and not "wrong" or "strange" when compared to another cultures preferred way of communicating. These values will be used to analyze the sample conversations in section 4.

One way of highlighting a society's cultural values would be to consider someone who is thought to be a cultural "hero" or "icon" in that country. For example, in the US, John Wayne, a western movie actor, is an American cultural icon. In his movies, he portrays all of the qualities that Americans admire most: independence, rugged individualism, an explicit and direct way of talking, openness, hard-working and honesty. In the author's on-going research utilizing cross-cultural



data between Japanese and Americans (Appendix A), respondents were asked to freely associate words\* with "communication". Results indicated that Japanese respondents viewed "communication" in a more attributive, process-oriented way by answering with words such as "important", "difficult", "exciting" and "friends". The American respondents, on the other hand, preferred a more action-oriented interpretation by using words such as, "talking", "listening" and "writing".

#### 4.0 Sample Cross-cultural Conversation Analyses

Sample conversations and subsequent analyses have been adapted from Storti's Cross-Cultural Dialogues (1994). These conversations will be analyzed using cultural terms briefly introduced in sections 2 and 3 to illustrate how cultural background knowledge can affect cross-cultural interaction.

**Table 4 - Cross-cultural conversation #1**

<p><b>Mr. Chapman:</b> We can offer a bulk discount of \$15.00 per unit if you order up to 50,000 units.</p> <p><b>Mr. Shibata:</b> That's a good price, Mr. Chapman.</p> <p><b>Mr. Chapman:</b> So, do you accept the price?</p> <p><b>Mr. Shibata:</b> It's very good.</p> <p><b>Mr. Chapman:</b> Great! Let's talk about a delivery schedule then.</p>
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In this business meeting context between Mr. Shibata and Mr. Chapman, we can see that they are negotiating a price for their two companies. Mr. Chapman, as the producer, has made an explicit offer of \$15 per unit. Mr. Shibata, the buyer, has responded positively but implicitly as he does not say if this is an acceptable price or not. Because Mr. Chapman expects an explicit reply, he tries to clarify this remark by bluntly asking, "Do you accept the price?" Mr. Shibata again answers positively but ambiguously. He is also expecting Mr. Chapman to interpret his utterance appropriately. That is, he is using an implicit communicative style by avoiding any directly negative reply (i.e. saying "no") and, therefore, depending on Mr. Chapman to interpret his utterance as, "this is a good start, I'm listening, but let's keep discussing this further". Unfortunately, Mr. Chapman's

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\*Associative Group Analysis (see Ryan 2006)

cultural background knowledge emphasizes explicitness and he mistakenly interprets Mr. Shibata's remark to mean "yes" (e.g. Great!..). Mr. Chapman assumes that Mr. Shibata will directly say this is acceptable or not and interprets, "it is very good" to mean "yes". Mr. Shibata, on the other hand, has been put into a difficult position since we expect Mr. Chapman to interpret his response, "It's very good" as "we are moving in the right direction, but lets keep discussing this further". Japanese communication is characterized by putting the responsibility on the listener to interpret the speaker's true intention without a loss of face. Conversely, American or Western communication is characterized by the responsibility resting on the speaker to make him or herself understood. We can see that Mr. Chapman has several unrecognized cultural values that Mr. Shibata does not.

- 1) He will be direct: explicitly agree or disagree
- 2) He will act independently: He will not depend on me to interpret his utterance, be able to decide at this point in time whether his company will take the offer
- 3) be individualistic: be able to make the decision himself without checking with the higher ups in the company.

Mr. Shibata, on the other hand, assumes that Mr. Chapman will more or less follow the following Japanese communicative values :

- 1) be more participative and interdependent: allow more time for him to decide, be sensitive to the implicit meanings
- 2) ambiguity/politeness: be less explicit allowing him to save face by being able to say "yes" or "no" more overtly
- 3) social hierarchy: Mr. Shibata probably assumes that Mr. Chapman knows that he alone cannot make this decision without extensive consultation with his company president or others involved in the group.

One of the main underlying values for American business people is the value of "time is money" which requires that language use be efficient and explicit. Of course, Japanese business people also value "time is money" but to a lesser degree because relationship building and maintenance (i.e. social harmony) take precedence. Therefore, business decisions may take more time for Japanese (but get implemented more quickly) than their American counterparts because everyone is in agreement. Americans prefer quicker decision-making but then the implementation may still need some adjusting

to accommodate everyone. The process of a bill becoming law in the US Congress would be an example of this. The decision to introduce a public bill before Congress to become law, which can affect everyone, can easily and quickly be introduced by any individual. However, before this bill can become law, it will certainly be modified through numerous congressional committee actions and "mark ups" before it can come before both houses of Congress to be approved or disapproved via majority vote. This (LC) process is similar to the way Americans prefer to communicate. In Japan, topics tend to be more or less agreed upon before being formally introduced via behind the scenes informal consultations or NEMAWASHI in Japanese. NEMAWASHI literally means to "tie the roots up" meaning to secure everyone's opinion before deciding publicly. This style avoids unnecessary loss of face and maintains relational harmony.

Another difference in culture affecting decision-making between Japanese and American business people, is the way each learns leadership and management skills. Here is an excerpt from one of a large number of popular "how-to" or "self-help" books that permeate American culture. This excerpt describes how to be a good manager in the US.

"If you're a manager, you would want to expound upon how you feel individuals should be managed. Show flexibility and avoid using "participative management". Participative management is interpreted by many as group decision making. Instead, you may want to say your philosophy of management is to be managed in a fair manner, to be trained and supervised appropriately, to have your work criticized from an improvement standpoint, and to be acknowledged for a job well done. "

(Stuenkel 2002)

This management approach would be problematic if applied in a cross-cultural context particularly in a high context culture where participative management is highly desirable. Because American and Japanese cultures value "leadership" differently, there is a difference in what is considered "good" and "bad" management. In the data collected by the author in the table below, 47 Japanese and American university students were asked to qualify what makes a "good leader".

**Table 5**  
**What are some qualities that make up a good leader?**

<b>Japanese</b>	<b>American</b>
understands others' thinking (28)	knowledgeable/intelligent/resourceful (19)
charisma (19)	good communication skills (17)
good leader (17)	decisive/confident/forceful/outgoing (16)
made a good effort/work hard (9)	respected by peers/responsible (11)
	empathetic/fair/open-minded (11)

We can see that the American respondents applied their cultural value of individuality and speaker explicitness (e.g "resourceful and good communication skill") while the Japanese respondents applied their cultural value of relational harmony and interdependence to answer, "understands others' thinking". These respective values then become background knowledge for both speakers which they may transfer to the cross-cultural context.

#### 4.2 Conversation #2

In the cross-cultural conversation in Table 6, Mr. Browning and Mr. Otomo are just about to finish a business meeting when Mr. Browning suddenly brings up the topic of Yamada Distributors.

Table 6

<p><b>Mr. Browning:</b> Since we have a few minutes left in our meeting, I'd like to bring up the subject of Yamada distributors.</p> <p><b>Mr. Otomo:</b> Yamada? What about them?</p> <p><b>Mr. Browning:</b> Well, I don't think any of us are that pleased with their services. I think we should find a new distributor. I've heard that Inoue Company is quite good.</p> <p><b>Mr. Otomo:</b> I wonder what others think. Have you discussed this with anyone else?</p> <p><b>Mr. Browning:</b> Not really. That's why I'm bringing it up now, to get your opinions.</p> <p><b>Mr. Otomo:</b> Yes, we should get people's opinions before we decide.</p> <p><b>Mr. Browning:</b> Good so what do you think, Otomo-san?</p> <p><b>Mr. Otomo:</b> I couldn't really say.</p>
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(Storti 1994:93)

Mr. Browning probably feels it is a good time to check other's opinion since they are all together at one time, and fails to see any difficulty with everyone voicing their opinion on the matter.

Mr. Browning has assumed the following American or Western cultural values:

- 1) Direct/explicit talk, "time is money" value, say your true feelings so a good decision can be made
- 2) Achievement oriented: Meetings are for the purpose of voicing individual opinions so that we can talk out the problem and come to a logical agreement
- 3) Independence: Mr. Browning is showing his "good" management skills by showing

independence and individuality and by taking the initiative on the Yamada issue.

- 4) Pragmatism: Since we are all together why not go ahead and decide on another topic to save time and energy for the future.
- 5) Social equality: Because Mr. Browning probably feels equal socially (i.e. we are all successful business professionals), he probably sees no harm in asking a sensitive business related question since no one has anything to lose.

Mr. Otomo, on the other hand, seems surprised at Mr. Browning's sudden decision to bring up such an important topic. He is then put on the spot in front of colleagues, those in his in-group, with a potential face-losing question. To deal with this dilemma that Mr. Browning as unwittingly created, he falls back on his culture-based communication strategy to deal with the problem. Rather than respond with his direct opinion, he shows restraint (**enryo**) because he is socially obligated (**giri**) to his group (i.e. his company). Mr. Otomo also seems to apply the Japanese communication concept called **tatemae**. "In Japan, individuals are expected to behave on the basis of **tatemae** (e.g., what is expected of them), not **honno** (e.g., what they want to do)" (Gudykunst & Kim 2003:58). Thus, Mr. Otomo uses ambiguity (**aimai**) with the Japanese concept of **tatemae**, or public face, in his encounter with the straight-talking Mr. Browning to save face since he unsure of the other's opinion of Yamada distributors. Because communication is generally high context in Japan, Mr. Otomo would have probably conferred privately (**nemawashi**) with his colleagues in an informal way to seek a consensus before showing his own opinion. Japanese instinctively switch between public (**tatemae**) and private (**honno**) face in order to maintain a sense of relational harmony. In sum, Mr. Otomo appears to use the following Japanese cultural values in the cross-cultural context in Table 6:

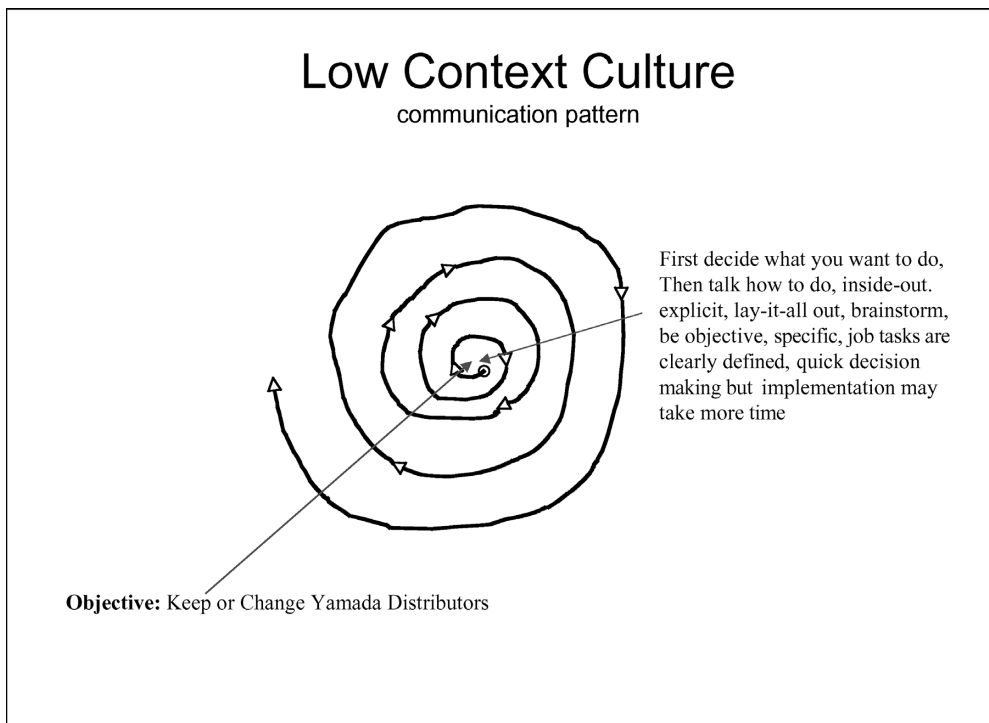
- 1) Social Obligation: Mr. Otomo shows obligation and restraint to the other members in his group by not voicing his opinion on the matter until he knows what others are thinking.
- 2) Harmony: Mr. Otomo instinctively seeks to maintain harmony by showing his social obligation to finding others opinions and not make decisions independently. In addition, his company may have a long history and deep relationship with people in Yamada Distributors. This would make it more difficult to suddenly cut ties since social harmony built up over the years would be damaged thereby reflecting badly on his own company in the eyes of others.

- 3) Interdependence: Mr. Otomo is dependent on other's opinion of Yamada distributors thus showing his social obligation and harmony, "I wonder what other's think".
- 4) Ambiguity: "I couldn't really say", saves face but probably confuses Mr. Browning.
- 5) Social hierarchy: It is also possible that Mr. Otomo is not in the position to say his opinion on Yamada because he does not know his bosses' opinion or older colleagues' views.

Both Mr. Browning, for being so blunt, and Mr. Otomo, for being ambiguous, may have slightly negative impressions of each other because of the way their respective culture values communication. Had one or both been aware of the others cultural communication preference, this conversation would most likely have been smoother.

If we analyze this conversation from Hall's High-Low context model (1989), we can see that Mr. Browning starts with the most specific topic, Yamada Distributors, and seeks to build context around it (see Diagram 1).

Diagram 1

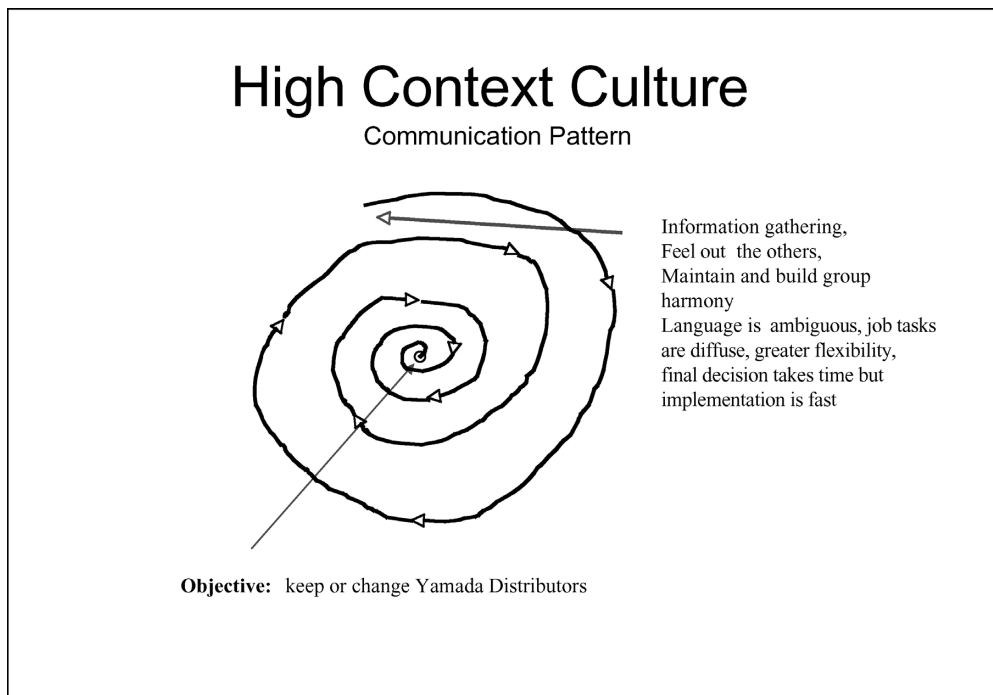


The flow of communication runs from specific to general. In LC cultures, speakers are expected to say their opinions or "put it all out on the table" so that this context can be built up so that

a timely and informed decision can be made after considering each individual's opinion.

HC cultures, on the other hand, prefer decision-making from the outside-in. That is, HC cultures prefer to build context around the central point before actually broaching the subject in order to "feel out" other's opinions so that relational harmony can be maintained (see Diagram 2).

Diagram 2



Mr. Otomo needs to know what others are thinking so that he can make an informed decision or compromise. No one loses face and all contingencies are considered before the actual decision is made.

Both communication styles have advantages and disadvantages. The HC communication style results in decision making being rather laborious and time consuming but implementation relatively quick. The LC style results in quicker decision-making because of explicit communication but may take much more time to implement to "work out all the details".

## 5.0 Discussion

This paper presented Japanese and American cultural values that can significantly affect

cross-cultural communication. Only a small amount of the cultural values were discussed and the analysis was empirical and subjective in nature. However, it was argued that we must make use of subjective information to help us understand the viewpoint of someone from another culture. It is also a necessity to acknowledge and have a good understanding of our own culture's communication tendencies.



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### Appendix A

Scored responses( to stimulus word "communication" (コミュニケーション)

#### American respondents

#### Japanese respondents

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Talk(ing)	84	Conversation/chatting	54
Tele(phone)	48	Difficult/hard/complicated	48
Speech	43	Friends/make friends	38
Speak	24	Eye contact/eye	23
Writing	24	Interesting/exciting	22
TV	22	Important/necessary	17
Listen(ing)	22	International/world	12
Internet	21	English/English conversation	11
Language	19	Interpersonal/person	10
Radio	16	Skinship/contact	10
2-way/sharing/ exchanging ideas	16	Shaking hands/hands	8
email	14	email	8
Getting point across/ message/relaying	11		
Sign	10		
Touch(ing)	9		
Important	9		

Hearing		8	
Letter		8	
Hard		8	
Sign Language		7	
Body Language		7	
Verba		17	
Gesture/nonverbal		7	
Conversation		6	
Feelings/emotional		5	
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Total	Salience	455	261
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\* The weighting of was done empirically via differential stability of rank place using the test-retest method (Kelly 1985)

Associative Group Analysis (see Ryan 2006)

# The Affect of Cultural Background Knowledge on Communication Between Japanese and Americans in a Business Context

Stephen B. Ryan

This paper considers how culture-specific background knowledge can affect cross-cultural communication in a business context between Japanese and Americans. Americans and Japanese have a unique set of cultural values and norms that go unrecognized in conversation often resulting in misunderstandings or negative first impressions which then affect future relationships. Sample cross-cultural conversations from business meetings along with data collected by the author from Japanese and American respondents are compared and analyzed highlighting culture-specific background knowledge. This work underscores the importance of, first, becoming more mindful of how our own culture affects how we communicate and, second, becoming more open to how people from other cultures prefer to communicate.