

# A Review of Past Cross-cultural Research Relating to Miscommunication Between Japanese and Americans

Stephen B. Ryan  
(Intercultural Communication)

## 1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review research and theory regarding the affect culture can have on communication by discussing relevant work done in the field of Intercultural Communication (IC), as well as relevant studies comparing Japanese and American communication. In this paper, *cross-cultural communication shall refer to specific concepts between the two distinct cultures that do not share that same linguistic or cultural background* (Thomas 1983:91) while IC shall generally refer to interactions in a broader sense between people of different nations (Lustig and Koester 1993:61).

## 1.1 Research stance

Most cross-cultural misunderstanding studies have emphasized a particular social context such as a language instruction or workplace context (e.g. Nakajima 1993, Tyler 1995, Masliyah 1999). This is logical because deviant communicative behavior in these contexts is usually regarded as undesirable and frequently leads to mistaken interpretation by the native speaker (NS) of the non-native speaker's (NNS) utterance and negative value judgments of him or her. In this paper, it is argued that cross-cultural misunderstandings should be understood in terms of identifying the unrecognized background knowledge (content schema) that reflect the speaker or hearer's cultural self-identify. It is believed that, by isolating culture-specific socio-cultural variables and making them explicit, some cross-cultural misunderstandings may at least partially be prevented. The term schema is defined as *information that is organized in a generic way for the purpose of activation to aid in comprehension in a particular context*. Generally,

schema greatly aids in comprehension. However, in this paper we shall discuss it from the stance of investigating cross-cultural miscommunication. The term “culture” used throughout is defined as, “*a set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next*” (Matsumoto 1996:16).

## 2.0 IC and miscommunication

Intercultural Communication studies (Samovar & Porter 1994, Bennett 1998a, Asante & Gudykunst 1989, Singer 1998, Lustig & Koester 1999) begin by asking a basic question, “How do people understand one another when they do not share a common cultural experience?” (Bennett 1998a:1). Intercultural Communication is a difference-based approach (Bennett 1998a:2-3). This approach fits well with studies on cross-cultural miscommunication because of the emphasis placed in IC on communicative differences which larger groups of people value. There is a fine line between recognizing and predicting cultural generalizations that affect communication and dangerously stereotyping a group of people. Yet, it is a necessary risk for intercultural communication,

“...it is necessary in intercultural communication to make *cultural generalizations*. Without any kind of supposition or hypothesis about cultural differences we may encounter in an intercultural situation, we may fall prey to naive individualism...or we may rely inordinately on “common sense” to direct our communication behavior” (Bennett 1998a:6).

Lieberman (1989:5) agrees with Bennett that using one’s “common sense” can lead to ethnocentric interpretation because of the reliance on cultural perception to judge what is good or bad about communication. Indeed, most discussions of IC warn of excessive ethnocentrism because, in comparing cultures, it is natural to have preferred ways of interpreting behavior. To overcome this tendency, Lustig and Koester suggest a competent intercultural communicator must recognize the “categories of your own culture to judge and interpret the behaviors of those who are culturally different from you” (1999:149). This, recognition of our own cultural categories is problematic, however. Fisher (1997:27) contends that our learned patterns of perception and reasoning are “locked in”

unless we make a concerted effort to open our mindset to another way of thinking.

## **2.1 Communication**

The study of IC first involves an understanding of communication in general. Samovar and Porter (1994:8-9) list the eight key “ingredients” of communication as: a behavioral source, encoding, the message, the channel, responder, decoding, response and feedback. The first “behavioral source” is, perhaps, the most important because, in order for communication to occur, there needs to be a desire and need to do so. This motivation may be social, or just information transfer or even for the purpose of influencing the attitude of the receiver (1994:9). Samovar and Porter’s discussion of IC overlaps with Singer’s (1998) perceptual approach of how people share meaning which regards perception to be one of the key elements (1994:14) in recognizing culture along with verbal and nonverbal processes. Perception plays an important role in IC because it often goes unrecognized in the cross-cultural context. Perception is highly influenced by one’s world-view and various socio-cultural elements. Thus, identifying and comparing the systems of beliefs, values and attitudes that make up worldviews across cultures is the focus of Intercultural Communication.

## **2.2 Two schools of thought**

Intercultural Communication studies traditionally have taken two approaches (Bennett 1998:ix). The first school of thought emphasizes the traditional theory-and-research traditions based on sociological and communication studies (e.g. Moon 1996 Garcia 1996). The theory-in-practice school is represented by the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR) and includes interdisciplinary studies in psychology and anthropology as well as language learning (e.g. Johnson 1995). It is in the area of language learning and NS-NNS interaction that emphasis is placed since we are concerned with practical communication in a cross-cultural context.

In sum, one of the main goals of IC is to improve interpersonal communication skills of people from different cultures and languages so that one’s cultural background does not inhibit understanding. IC is a difference-based theory. It is at times problematic but necessary to search for cultural patterns and generalizations that can help explain these differences. However, to avoid unnecessary stereotyping, it is extremely useful to be able to recognize how our own world view shapes our perception and communication choices.

To better understand how one can (mis) communicate with another culturally diverse speaker, it is useful to discuss further what is involved in the communication process.

### **3.0 Making meaning**

In section 1.1 above, it was argued that the way we communicate is dependent upon our culture and influenced by our worldview of the daily events around us. However, this communication process is complex because the responsibility for understanding one another's intended message rests with both speaker and listener who must draw meaning from a dynamic context of interaction.

“Making meaning is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance” (Thomas 1995: 22).

Understanding how we make meaning can help us become more aware of some of the internalized socio-cultural rules that underpin it. Intercultural pragmatics is important, in this regard, because of its emphasis on the processes of making our meaning understood. Gudykunst describes communication as a process whereby the exchange of each speaker's message is used to create meaning (24:1991). In this process, each speaker creates meaning via the spoken message by the how an utterance is said (e.g. sentence structure, intonation, lexical choices etc.). In addition, this meaning is created in a particular social context that will affect the force of the message. In most linguistic studies, the focus is on structure and language function (e.g. Fukuda 1996, Linnell 1995) as opposed to how an utterance generates meaning in a particular context. While the field of pragmatics fundamentally attempts to define the “effects of language on human perceptions and behaviors” (Lustig and Koester 1999:204) in a particular context, it often overlooks why an utterance was made or understood in a particular way. The study of Interlanguage Pragmatics extends the field to include the language learners' discourse and pragmatic knowledge by focusing on the NNS' “inappropriate speech act realizations” (Blum-Kulka & Kasper 1989:10). The link between the NS-NNS cross-cultural speech event and second language (learning and teaching) theory is a natural connection

because both generally concern one speaker who is less competent than the other often affecting communication. But, it is not merely the NNS's utterance or hearing ability that is at question here although this has significance. It is that the pragmatic rules of a language, that are "firmly embedded" in the larger rules of the culture and are "intimately associated with" (Lustig and Koester 1999:178) cultural patterns such as uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and high-low context, that take precedence. Indeed communication in these three areas plays a central role in a Japanese context of cross-cultural interaction.

### Example 1

One day Jane talked with her advisor, Professor Hashimoto, about the book he had recently written in English concerning various aspects of Japanese culture. The book had just received very favorable reviews from both the academic and popular press...Jane told Professor Hashimoto how wonderful his book: she said, "Sensei wa hon wa tottemo yokatta desu. Kanshin shimashita" ("Your book was very good. I was impressed."). As Jane left the professor's office, though, Masako came out of the office and whispered in her ear, "I've got to tell you something about compliments to social superiors!" (Kataoka 1991:5).

The power-distance relationship is different for Japanese in this context that it is for Americans. Japanese typically refrain from complimenting a social and academic superior as this gives the feeling of being evaluated by someone of lower status.

The study of the process of making meaning is central to the fields of psycholinguistics and pragmatics. In order to make meaning shared between both speaker and hearer, both cross-cultural interactants must have an understanding of the sense, force and reference of the message (Thomas 1995:13). The point being made here is that both speaker and hearer have an equal responsibility for interpreting these three areas of meaning. Indeed, past pragmatics studies have been criticized (Thomas 1995:2) for focusing on either speaker meaning via a social viewpoint or utterance interpretation of the listener via a cognitive viewpoint. Traditional rules of understanding such as Grice's conversational maxims (1981) have been intended for native speakers rather than NS-NNS interaction.

Cross-cultural interactants will have their own unique understanding of the sense force and reference of a message that is underpinned by the intricacies of their culture-specific daily experiences that may cause communication problems.

### Example 2

Japanese homestay students in the US are frequently told to “help yourself to anything you want in the refrigerator” by their American host family. However, this goes against the Japanese cultural value of AMAE or co-dependency in relationships. Japanese students are expecting to be given food or drink when asked for and may feel strange in freely helping themselves. The American cultural value is one of self-reliance and the opportunity to exercise one’s independence to show that one is being sensitive to the other.

A tacit misunderstanding such as this may arise simply because each cross-cultural interactant is not aware of their own cultural tendencies. Why emphasize cross-cultural miscommunication in this way? Unrecognized cross-cultural misunderstandings are, or have the potential to be, much more serious than those due to surface features of language such as pronunciation, syntax or lexis.

“Reports of “things going wrong” communicatively often relate to cross-cultural encounters, and their consequences can be devastating. Mismatches may be found in the ways different communities assign meaning to linguistic forms – or for that matter silence. Even cultural *beliefs* about the functions of talk and silence can be a major source of difficulties.”

(Coupland et. al. 1991:5)

Unrecognized miscommunication is neither easily corrected nor apparent to the speaker or hearer. It can undermine the interactant’s confidence in the other and negatively affect future interaction with others. The processes of understanding an utterance involve complex unrecognized psychological assumptions that originate from a speaker’s unique cultural background.

Cross-cultural communication, like monocultural communication, involves encoding (speaker) and decoding (hearer) a spoken message. However, unlike communication for speakers of the same language and cultural backgrounds, cross-cultural communication involves at least one of the participants attempting to comprehend a foreign or second language.

There has been a relatively small amount of research done (Lambert 1999, Fillmore 1985, Wierzbicka 1994, 1996, Tyler 1995, Yoshida 2000) specifically in the area of cross-cultural miscommunication due to problematic culturally specific schemata and perceptions. Theories that have been advanced to explain culturally based misunderstandings (Lakoff 1980, Singer, 1998) are often related to the controversial Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1964) that explores the relationship between language use and thought. Linguistic and cultural relativity are central to the field of Intercultural Communication (Bennett 1998a:15) and worth further discussion here.

“The Whorf/Sapir hypothesis alerts us to the likelihood that our experience of reality is a function of cultural worldview categories...And since culture through language guides us in making these distinctions, culture is actually operating directly on perception” (Bennett 1998a:15-6).

The weak version of this theory would seem to have a general acceptance for many of those most concerned with cross-cultural communication research. This theory, however, is difficult to test because the results often interpreted from our own bias cultural filter and cognitive communicative strategies are not readily observed. Because of the difficulty in identifying these features, there has been a relatively small amount of research devoted to cross-cultural misunderstandings linking culture-specific background knowledge. Coupland et. al (1991:1) suggest that language and communication research has “failed to embrace” the term miscommunication because of a past focus on only the positive aspects of communication. Yet, this is an important area because of the potential harm that misunderstandings at all levels of cross-cultural interaction can cause.

#### **4.0 Speaker/listener accountability**

It was mentioned in section 1.2 that pragmatic research has regarded the speaker/

listener roles as being mutually exclusive by focusing on either the speaker's intended meaning or the utterance interpretation by the listener. Past cross-cultural research has been similarly criticized (Baxter 1983:302) for the tendency to fault only the non-native speaker for not conforming to the native speaker model. ESL theory naturally emphasizes the errors of the L2 learner to learn the best way to overcome communication difficulties in cross-cultural interaction. This emphasis on the non-native speaker's less-than-perfect output is understandable but faulty if it assumes that the non-native speaker must conform to the native speaker's communication behavior to communicate effectively. Indeed this issue has been recognized more recently (Brutt-Griffler 1998, Jenkins 1998) and is an ongoing debate today. In particular, there has recently (Davies 2002) been a call for the re-examination of the term "native speaker" because of the difficulty in retaining one's cultural identity when interacting in an English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) context. It has even been suggested (Stalker 1997) that international students in British or American colleges should not have their errors addressed at all unless they affect communication solely in an academic context. This complex issue of accountability in cross-cultural contexts is an important one if we are to preempt misunderstandings. It is the affect of culture that would seem to have the most impact.

It has been argued (Thomas 1983) that the most serious forms of cross-cultural miscommunication occur as a manifestation of cultural difference not linguistic difference. For example, Greenall (2000) describes a cross-cultural encounter with devastating consequences. He reports that before Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein told the American ambassador that he planned to invade Kuwait. The ambassador said nothing, which was correct diplomatically, but was misinterpreted by the Iraqis as signaling that the invasion would be acceptable to the Americans. Most cross-cultural misunderstandings are obviously less consequential but the point here is that our cultural beliefs may influence our communicative behavior into a negative cross-cultural interpretation with one or both sides not knowing it. Both speaker (the former Iraqi President) and the listener (the US ambassador) were at fault for such a misunderstanding regardless of who was the second language speaker. How could this misunderstanding have been prevented, if at all? Perhaps a beginning would be to recognize the values of the other culture via ethnographic description. An ethnographer (see Saville-Troike 1982) seeks to describe, "...routine daily lives of people" (Fetterman 1998:1) while focusing on the common patterns of thought and behavior. This



approach fits well with IC because both seek to identify and describe cultural generalizations by studying culture from the bottom-up. The ethnographic approach to interpreting culture and emerging behavior, as opposed to the traditional top-down nationalistic view, has become a point of emphasis recently (e.g. Holliday 1999). It is believed that cross-cultural research should take a participant-observer approach so that the daily lives of those being studied can be understood in a way that can avoid unnecessary stereotypes but can also be systematically compared with the observer's native culture.

In sum, overcoming cross-cultural misunderstandings requires one or both of the participants to recognize that a problem has occurred. Miscommunication is a collaborative effort in the sense that it takes two people to create one. However, it is also possible for only one person to walk away from the speech event not recognizing that a misunderstanding has occurred. The path to becoming a more aware cross-cultural communicator involves learning the simple everyday life experiences, which make up the common values of the other society.

## **5.0 The role of ESL/EFL theory**

In section 1.3, it was suggested that English as a Second or Foreign Language learning and teaching research plays an important role in understanding cross-cultural miscommunication because of its emphasis on the processes of learning a second language and the fact that cross-cultural interaction involves a second or foreign language for one of the interactants. Recent studies on second or foreign language teaching have examined learning styles across cultures (e.g. Peacock 2001, Dycus 2000, Degen & Absalom 1998, Hough 1997). Culture is increasingly being recognized as a significant factor and focal point in how learners and teachers interact. While emphasizing the inseparability of culture and language in the EFL classroom is generally a desirable goal for many EFL programs, it has been criticized recently (Zaid 1999) for encouraging cultural confrontation as opposed to the acquisition of culture. Zaid argues that schema theory assumes that language and culture cannot be separated and therefore “fails to account for the ability of a language to dislocate itself from some of the cultural “baggage” of the language in its original culture” (1999:123). Thus, learners are confronted with non-native cultural values that are at odds with their own resulting in a denigration of their own native culture. Proponents of this approach advocate the “nativization solution” (Hyde 1994)

where the target language (English) is independent of the EFL teacher's culture (e.g. UK, US). Indeed this argument seems to have gathered momentum today (e.g. Winter et. al. 1996) and recent studies seem to be taking this kind of approach. For example, one study (Youssef & Carter 1999) examines the relationship between native culture and local dialects in the Venezuelan EFL setting for instructional purposes.

Within the field of applied linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA) concerns itself with processes of learning a second or foreign language. Traditionally, most SLA studies are concerned with the learners' utterances to see what errors can tell us about the underpinning processes of their interlanguage (Seliger 1988:27). More recently, relevant research has addressed issues such as the role of L1 (Foster-Cohen 1999) and individual differences (Robinson 2001) in trying to learn a second language. Interlanguage, or language produced by a foreign language learner while learning the other language, is "encoded" or mapped onto the already existing L2 system of knowledge and possibly modified to fit into the native speaker's culture. Stevenson (1993) discusses how language rules can become encoded and automatized into unconscious (language) production rules.

### Example 3

"Thank God, it's Friday!" Steve finished his work and was about to leave the office. Since during his time in Japan he had been studying the language, he thought he would try using a little Japanese. As he walked to the door, he said to his colleagues, "Yoi shuumatsu o!" ("Have a nice weekend!") Steve was curious to know how they would respond in Japanese, but they just smiled and gave no reply" (Kataoka 1993:49).

While Americans typically use the phrase, "Have a nice weekend!" or "Have a nice day!" to say goodbye, Japanese do not employ such a strategy. Thus, the speaker's newer L2 knowledge mapped onto his already existing L1 knowledge (how to say goodbye) failed to result in what the NNS speaker had intended.

This kind of example is relevant because this mapping onto and encoding/decoding process is where the cross-cultural miscommunication or unrecognized misunderstanding may occur. The encoding of a message in a second or foreign language is inherently

problematic, as it not only involves communicative competence but cultural competence as well. If either one of the speakers possesses a limited background knowledge of the other culture, there is more potential for a culturally based misunderstanding. This is especially true with EFL learners as opposed to ESL learners because the former generally lack the familiarity with the target language that the latter often possess. Although the beginner non-native speaker may have less to lose personally since communicative expectations are lower, (s)he is faced with the difficulty of a low level of linguistic and cultural competence. For instance, most intermediate Japanese or English language learners generally do not possess adequate linguistic knowledge of the target language to negotiate around miscommunication (i.e. stating something in a different way). EFL speakers then must rely more on their native culture (C1) knowledge to be able to fill in the gaps of understanding in the cross-cultural speech event.

L2 learners or their native speaker instructors may not be aware of cultural differences that have adversely affected communication. For this reason, it is important to research the underlying cultural differences that contribute to cross-cultural communication difficulties not only the output or “errors” of the L2 learner. The “errors” in language learning and teaching, however, are a vital part of learning and are not something one should necessarily try to avoid. They let us know when something has gone wrong in cross-cultural interaction. When a learner attempts to learn a foreign or second language, language hypothesis testing is central to the learning process.

“In the process of attempting to relate the new language to the language they know, they will hypothesize about the similarity (or difference) between the target and the source language. In so doing, they will attempt to subsume this new knowledge under categories already existing in their first language competence” (Seliger 1988:23-24).

Thus, in a cross-cultural misunderstanding, the NNS will attempt to fit this new knowledge into an already existing set of L1 knowledge. The beginning language learner is severely limited by the hypothesis testing theory because (s)he needs negative feedback to reflect or accept a hypothesis. Yet, this language feedback, is often too little for the learner to rule out an incorrect perception. The beginning learner is only left with their native (C1) knowledge, which is used to fill the void of incomprehensible L2 information.

This specific C1 knowledge may be distinct from their cross-cultural counterpart's, preventing an accurate hypothesis of the novel L2 utterance. For instance, Japanese assign meaning to the word (マンション) "mansion" as a condominium or nice apartment. Americans, on the other hand, generally associate this term with a large house owned by a wealthy person (Ryan 2000:50-1). It is notable here that words that are similar cross-culturally may also cause more difficulty in intercultural communication because both speakers think they are talking about the same thing since the word exists in their own language. The potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding is more prevalent than if these words were not the same because the L2 learner recognizes this lexis in their pre-existing conceptual system and fails to *recognize* any disparity.

### 5.1 NNS Comprehension strategies

Theories such as the Competition Model (MacWhinney and Bates 1989) have been suggested to offer a framework for analyzing the second language learner's comprehension process. This model claims that it is the relative strength of one of three cues (grammatical, phonological, or semantic) that determines how the speaker/hearer will interpret an utterance. Past research has shown that the native speaker's L1 comprehension strategy affects the processing in the L2 albeit in a complex way (Sasaki 1997b:509). Sasaki has done considerable research in the area of Japanese and English sentence comprehension strategies based on the competition model (1991, 1994, 1997a, 1997b) involving semantics. He presents evidence (1991) that Japanese EFL learners showed transfers from their L1 (Japanese) while the native English JFL speakers more closely resembled the J1 speakers. Granted these speakers were not held completely equivalent in every way, as the Japanese L2 speakers were more advanced and attending an American university, it does offer some intriguing evidence that one's L1 comprehension strategy can interfere or "compete with" (Sasaki 1991, 1997b) the competing L2 strategy.

"For example, in a sentence like *the balls are eating the camels*, the first noun *the balls* is most likely to be a subject from a syntactic point of view. On the other hand, according to the lexical-semantic relation between *the balls*, *are eating*, and *the camels*, it is more reasonable to consider the animate, second noun, *the camels*, as the subject of *are eating*. In this case, the lexical-semantic (animacy/inanimacy) cue and the syntactic (word

order) cue *compete* with each other...” (Sasaki 1991:48-9)

Japanese generally prefer a lexical-semantic or animacy sentence interpretation (Sasaki 1994) as opposed to the syntax-driven strategy of English speakers in NS-NS interaction example. When an utterance is perceived to be unclear, as many native English speakers interpret Japanese, the chance for a cross-cultural misunderstanding is more likely. In addition, in the example above, if the speaker were to utter, “the balls were eating the camels” in the context of a zookeeper or a cartoonist, the listeners comprehension strategy would be influenced. So one could argue that the social identity one assumes (e. g. zoo keeper, NNS, NS, cartoonist) has some influence on comprehension strategy for cross-cultural speech participants.

Tyler’s study (1995) takes this idea further by concluding, “differences in perceptions of the negotiability of status and role can play an important part in cross-cultural miscommunication” (1995:145). A cross-cultural miscommunication is likely to occur if the native speaker is not expecting NS-like behavior from their L2 partner. That is, the native speaker many times does not expect or recognize a similar NS-like role. For instance, many Japanese hotel owners naturally assume that Westerners do not like or know anything about a FUTON. Thus, when making a reservation at a hotel, it is sometimes assumed that a Western person will prefer a bed to a FUTON and not even be asked their preference. Although identifying the cues language speakers rely on to interpret sentence meaning takes into account how each participant used the language in the speech event, it may be problematic to account for the culture-specific knowledge that caused this discrepancy in sentence comprehension strategies without considering the status or role.

If the negotiation of status does indeed play a significant role in L1-L2 speaker interaction, then the NNS may be at a distinct disadvantage as they may not have the competence to create their own status and, therefore, be assigned one, for good or bad, by their NS counterpart. It has been argued recently (Sugimoto 2003:5) that Japan is not as homogenous and egalitarian as many studies suggest. This argument, however, focuses on analyzing the complexities of Japan at a level under the nationalized culture. It is agreed that subcultural varieties of Japan’s social and economic stratification are indeed as diverse as any industrialized country. However, studies on the practical side of the IC theory need to focus on the cultural generalizations of underpinning values and natural

circumstances that make “the other” culture so distinctive when compared with one’s native culture. The definition of “culture” in section 1.1 suggests that culture is a stable, slowly evolving, phenomena where values are passed from one generation to the next. When “culture” is discussed from this stance, it could be argued that Japan is one of the most homogenous countries in the world in terms of unique daily events and values which make up their larger culture. Matsumoto (2002:47) gives evidence that Japanese culture and society are in a state of transition and that many of the cultural stereotypes such as “collectivism” are changing especially between the older and younger generations. Yet, it remains to be seen via cross-cultural research if this is indeed a relatively fast cultural phenomenon affecting society as a whole or predictable deviant generational difference. No society exists in a static state of existence but, if indeed there is a cultural shift of societal values as a whole, it will take a generation to be incorporated into the larger national culture of as a whole. By this time it is not longer seen as “deviant” but acceptable. It is argued here that much of the deviant behavior is indeed generational with the individual gradually abandoning this behavior in favor of what their societal values as a whole as they grow older. Even the 4% of “ethnic diversity” (Sugimoto 2003:6) that does exist in Japan is virtually indistinguishable from the larger majority in communicative behavior. Still, as cross-cultural researchers and educators, it is vital to be aware of not only past cultural stereotypes and how they came into being, but also how they are affecting communicative behavior between our own culture and “the other” culture.

Saying that Japan is relatively homogeneous, however, is not the same thing as saying that all Japanese speakers will react the same in similar communicative contexts. In a cross-cultural business context, for instance, evidence has been presented (Nakajima 1997) that cross-cultural interactants value more their native culture (C1) speaking norms when interacting with higher status colleagues than lower colleagues. The reason for this is may be due to the importance Japanese culture and language place on status as acknowledgement of it smoothes relationships and encourages social harmony. On the other hand, it has also been found (Spees 1994) that Japanese are more direct than assumed by Americans if they perceive interlocutor status to be equal. Studies such as these suggest two things. First, while language learners may quickly acquire native-speaker pragmatic competence (Matsumura 2001) if living in the target speech community, they may still rely on C1 speaking norms in situations they perceive as face threatening. Second, native speaker expectations of particular L2 speakers (e.g. Japanese

are indirect and polite), may prove to be barrier in cross-cultural communication.

In sum, interaction between NS and NNS is complex and can easily result in negative consequences due to a lack of communicative or cultural competence. There is a tendency to emphasize how EFL learners can avoid errors or become more native speaker-like. These goals would seem to be problematic because they fail to take into account learners' background knowledge and experience first. This is no more true than in the homogenous Japanese university EFL classroom where students might be expected to be more direct in expressing opinions by their native English speaker teacher and are sometimes viewed negatively for not being so. In cross-cultural communication, errors are to be avoided but sometimes these non-linguistic "errors" are culturally based and need to be carefully considered before reaching any conclusions. Finally, the negotiation of social status in an EFL context is particularly consequential and can play a significant role in the context of communication because the foreign language speaker is at a distinct disadvantage in not having the ability to negotiate his or her social status and, therefore, may be assigned one in default by the native speaker.

## **6.0 Interpreting culture in IC**

“The original obstacles to cross-cultural understanding may be conceptualized as differences in cultural assumptions and values” (Stewart and Bennett 1991:174).

It has been stated (Quinn & Holland 1987:121) that Japanese and English speakers use a different form of logic to arrive at a “correct” conclusion. For instance, in a first-time business meeting, Japanese would value the building of an interpersonal relationship to judge if a business relationship is possible while the American businessman's goal stresses getting the deal done as quickly as possible (i.e. “time is money” value). Thus, the logic is value-driven and different because of what each participant values as being important to the conclusion. Stevenson (1993:89) describes how speakers and hearers construct a mental model of a premise to arrive at a conclusion. Speakers and listeners who have had different cultural experiences and have formulated distinctive assumptions may use particular L1 concepts to interpret the L2 according to their own logical script of events. This means that communication behavior such as indirectness or hesitancy that seems

irrelevant or trivial to the native English speaker can be highly valued to a Japanese speaker.

### 6.1 Semantic universals

Wierzbicka (1991, 1994, 1996, 2003) offers a unique approach to understanding culturally specific scripts and semantic universals to promote a “culture-free” comparison of cross-cultural understanding. She contends that Japanese culture can be described and compared to Western cultures using a “culture-independent analytical framework” (1991:333). That is, instead of attempting to contrast Western and Japanese cultures with semantically loaded words such as independent/dependence or sincerity/insincerity, “... we need a semantic metalanguage based on lexical universals” (1991:335) which uses basic lexis, or a natural semantic metalanguage, such as someone, say, good, bad etc. In other words, universally human concepts, such as “food” or “friend”, which exist in all languages offer a better starting point than do semantically loaded words. For example, the Japanese word *enryo* is a universal concept in Japanese and translates to “showing restraint”. However, in Japanese, the concept entails much more meaning (and unique communicative actions) than its English equivalent. There is no English equivalent for *enryo* (Wierzbicka 1991:346). Therefore it is better, to “reach for the level of conceptual universals or near-universals” (1991:381) when explaining and comparing culture-specific concepts. In this instance, the universal of *enryo* could be represented by a cultural script such as:

- a) when X is with person Y, X thinks something like this:
- b) I can't say to this person:
- c) “I want this, I don't want this”
- d) “I think this, I don't think this”
- e) if I did this, someone could feel something bad because of this
- f) someone could feel something bad because of this
- g) because of this X doesn't say things like this
- h) because of this X doesn't do things like this
- i) people think: this is good, (Wierzbicka 1997:279)

One difficulty in establishing this type of framework is in the researcher knowing



which words are truly naturally part of a semantic metalanguage and those which are not. How does the NNS know-if-they-know the true meaning to match with their own language's semantic universals or if it holds the same meaning in a different context. For example, Americans generally view the term "independent" as positive in the workplace. In the Japanese business office context, however, "independent" could be viewed in a negative light when teamwork and cooperation take precedence. As a result, it is useful if the researcher possesses considerable long-term ethnographic understanding of the daily life of the target culture as well as a meta-awareness of their own to be able to accurately interpret NNS communicative behavior.

Wierzbicka argues further that every language does indeed have its own natural semantic (universals) metalanguage and that,

"It is this direct intertranslatability of explications that is the ultimate guarantee of the language-independent and culturally neutral nature of the natural semantic metalanguage" (1991:342).

Matsumoto (1996) and Killen (1997), like Wierzbicka (1997), also suggest avoiding dichotomies such as emic-etic, high-low, independent-dependent, to examine culture-specific behavior and instead "search for ways in which any given behavior actually represents both tensions" (1996:22) Yet, while Wierzbicka suggests a generic semantic universal approach, Matsumoto's (1996:24) theoretical framework suggests a search for "psychological markers" to characterize different cultures.

Similar to these approaches to characterizing cultures, it may also be possible to link cross-cultural misunderstandings to one's culture-specific background knowledge because both rely on generic or near-generic sets of information to attempt to understand the context of communication. Although schema theory in cross-cultural studies traditionally has focused on reading (e.g. Carrell 1987) and not on oral communication, it is argued that it can provide insight into the oral cross-cultural communication context as well. For both oral and reading contexts, however, recognition is a key yet problematic concept in which to investigate. That is, how can we know what another interactant recognizes in a cross-cultural context? And then, how much of this recognition is affected by L1 culture, personality or social circumstances? To attempt at answering these kinds

of questions, it may be useful to start by recognizing our own cultural “self” before we consider the “other” in cross-cultural communication.

## 7.0 Discussion

We have briefly reviewed relevant research and theory relating to cross-cultural communication with an emphasis on interaction between native Japanese and English speakers. This type of interaction means that one speaker/listener is a NNS and that there is not only linguistic competence in affect, but unrecognized culture-background knowledge influences as well. Linguistic competence of a NNS is readily observable as it is a result of their language use. Yet, it is cultural competence and the awareness of one's own culture that may have the more serious consequences in cross-cultural communication. Determining how one's culture-specific schema underpins self-identity and influences communicative decisions is a complex and risky process because of the dangers of overgeneralization or unwarranted stereotypes. Yet, it is a risk worth taking if we hope to understand why “the other” speaker communicates the way they do. Finally, a good starting point in cross-cultural research is to first understand the values that make up our own (e.g. Stewart and Bennett 1991, Davies and Ikeno 2002) C1 cultural patterns before attempting to interpret another person's communicative behavior. We are then better prepared to compare these values across common categories (e.g. Wierzbicka 2003) existing within each culture.

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## **A Review of Past Cross-cultural Research Relating to Miscommunication Between Japanese and Americans**

Stephen B. Ryan

The purpose of this paper is to review research and theory regarding the affect culture can have on communication by discussing relevant work done in the field of Intercultural Communication (IC), as well as relevant studies comparing Japanese and American communication. Recent studies and theories are discussed in the context of how culture can significantly contribute to a cross-cultural miscommunication. It is argued that the way we communicate is dependent upon our unrecognized schema or background knowledge of the simple daily events occurring around us. Within this context, four areas of interest are discussed. First, the field of Intercultural Communication is introduced with its stance towards communication. Second, how a speaker makes meaning is crucial in the native/non-native (NS-NNS) speaker context because of the NNSs limited competency with the second language. Cultural competency is also an issue because cultural concepts often go unrecognized in the cross-cultural dyad. Third, the NNS speaker has often been criticized for not conforming to the NS role model. However, to overcome the more serious cross-cultural misunderstandings, both speakers need a higher level of cultural competency with their own culture before attempting to interpret “the other”. Fourth, NNS comprehension strategies can adversely affect the processing of the second or foreign language. Finally, it is argued through relevant studies that it would be more useful for cross-cultural research to describe and compare Japanese and Western cultures by first establishing a common set of categories that can hold the same meanings for both cultures. This can free the study from unnecessary and unintended bias and provide a deeper insight into why misunderstanding happened in the first place.