Silence during intercultural communication: a case study

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Abstract This is a case study of USA-Japan intercultural communication, analyzing a one-hour meeting between a US manager, a Japanese manager and a Japanese junior staff member of a US company operating in Japan. The study focuses on miscommunication caused by pragmatic transfer from Japanese, especially relating to silence, the ambiguity of “yes”, and different strategies of politeness between the US and Japanese managers. It is also discussed how both native and non-native speakers should make their approach in order to understand each other and co-construct the conversation in intercultural communication in an age when English is becoming a global language and could be separated from the cultures of English-speaking countries.

Introduction
As Barnard (1938) states, “communication” is one of the three essential elements to form an organization, as well as “common purpose” and “willingness to serve”. In fact, the influential power of communication could be a determinant of a corporate culture when communication is taken from various facets: not only as exchange of information, but also as collection, storage, reproduction and transfer of information.

Especially, the role of communication is crucial in the case of global companies where serious miscommunication could be caused by cultural elements as well as linguistic ability: little shared knowledge in cultural behaviors, business customs, the way of discussion or communication styles.

As many studies have pointed out (Barnlund, 1975; Hall, 1976; Condon, 1984; Hofstede, 1991), the Japanese communication style is unique and in a sharp contrast with the English one. One of the widely accepted differences from the Western culture is the way of thought-organization, represented as “gyre” pattern, which develops and conveys ideas rather indirectly and implicitly, while the thought-organization in English is “linear” pattern, which develops ideas linearly from the beginning to the end.

This type of uniqueness in the Japanese communication is more specifically explained in Kameda (2001):

• **A roundabout pattern**: Japanese often speak in a roundabout manner in contrast with Westerners, who prefer expressions that are to the point.

• **Explanation first pattern**: Japanese start with an explanation or background and follow it with the point of what they are getting at.

• **Non sequitur pattern**: Japanese dislike specifying things down to the last detail or do not feel it necessary when speaking with one another. Therefore, the interlocutor has to figure out the parts that have been left unsaid.
In this study, actual data taken from a US-based global company is analyzed, focusing on how miscommunication is triggered through such ambiguity of Japanese participants and how the meaning is negotiated following the miscommunication, from the viewpoint of language and culture, that is, pragmatics. Furthermore, it is discussed how both native speakers and non-native speakers should approach each other in intercultural communication.

**Pragmatics and pragmatic transfer**

Pragmatics is defined as “the study of how language is interpreted by its users in its linguistic and non-linguistic context” (Johnson and Johnson, 1998) and covers a wide range from the linguistic aspect (pragmalinguistics) such as direct versus indirect expressions to the cultural and social aspect (sociopragmatics) such as relationships between participants. This study focuses on the former, taking the latter into consideration, especially the relationship between the participants. Throughout the data, three outstanding pragmatic features are observed:

1. pauses and/or silences;
2. the ambiguity of “yes” by Japanese participants; and
3. different politeness strategies by an American and a Japanese manager when they face up to the difficulty of understanding the other.

Especially, the first two could be considered as pragmatic transfer, which is defined as “use of first language pragmatic knowledge to understand or carry out linguistic actions in the second language” (Kasper, 1997). As for the first point, different values and attitudes toward silence are discussed in a later section, “Discussion”. The second feature, the ambiguity of “yes” by Japanese participants always leads to a lengthy negotiation of meaning, entailing various types of communication strategies. In this data, there is a clear tendency in the types of strategies used by participants, which might be related to one’s attitude toward communication as discussed in the section of “Analysis and discussion”.

The third feature, politeness, is categorized into positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness derives from the positive face, “the want of every member that his wants to be desirable to at least some others” and is realized as avoidance of disagreement and emphasis on agreement, while negative politeness is based on the negative face, “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others”, and is realized as avoidance of imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In the following data, a sharp contrast is observed between the direct expressions by the Japanese manager that might be face-threatening for the American manager and the indirect ones by the American manager when they cannot agree with each other and when positive politeness strategies should be used.

**Analytical framework**

**Outline of the data**

The observed data is a one-hour in-house meeting between an American manager, a Japanese manager, and a Japanese junior staff member in an American-based global company operating in Japan. The objective of the meeting is to find out how the Business Research Department headed by the American manager can contribute to the
Japanese market. Therefore, the American manager basically asks questions about the Japanese market and the Japanese side answers these questions.

Participants[1]

- **The American manager (A):** Director. She belongs to the Headquarters in the USA but has been living in China for five years and involved in the Asian region business research. Therefore, she is accustomed to intercultural communication although she has never visited Japan before.

- **The Japanese manager (S):** Regional Business General Manager and Vice President. He also has rich experience in intercultural communication since he had lived in California for nine years for his previous company in a different industry. It means he has relatively little knowledge about the current company and also industry. As far as the title is concerned, S is superior to A. However, there is no direct report line between the two.

- **The Japanese junior staff (J):** He is in charge of the research projects discussed in this meeting and reports to S. He has been working for seven years in a department which has regular contact with its headquarters.

Objectivity of analysis

In order to make my analysis as objective and accurate as possible, I adopted a research method called triangulation, which enables the data to be analyzed in several different ways. In addition to my qualitative analysis of the data, I conducted a post-interview with S and collected several comments from American exchange students, Asian exchange students, Japanese researchers, and Japanese business people[2], which are listed and compared in the section of “Analysis and discussion”.

Analysis

A close analysis was made for the following examples that include the above three distinctive features:

1. silences;
2. ambiguous answers; and
3. politeness strategies.

Part 1[3]

This part is very short but thought-provoking. The dialogue follows the part where a problem in the Japanese market was presented:

A1 Does that show up in the Customer Satisfaction Surveys?

J1 Hmm – ah – I think so.

A2 Yes?

J2 I think so.

A3 Will we see some of those results?

S1 But you know as I said, the problem has started October last year.
In this part, A tries to have a clear answer “Yes” from J, who answered in an ambiguous way, “Hmm – ah – I think so”. J’s way of answering seems to be partly because of his uncertainty of the contents of the report and partly because of a negative transfer from the Japanese way of answering[4]. In the following negotiation of meaning, A uses various strategies in order to obtain a clear answer, “Yes”. Following her first confirmation check “Yes?” in A2, which only elicits J’s second ambiguous answer “I think so” (J2), A tries to clarify J’s answer by using a paraphrase, “Will we see some of those results?” (A3). Thus, A uses three different forms to ask the same content in A1, A2, and A3. Here, S intervenes to protect J, saying “the problem has started October last year” (S1). In response to his comment, A pushes one more time, “Yeah, so it’s one year” (A4), and then decides to take a different and indirect approach in A5, after a 3.8-second consideration. She concedes by saying, “I realized I don’t have enough knowledge”, and asks a more general question about the Japanese market, “Could you give me a little bit of background?” This is a positive politeness strategy that avoids disagreement and raises common background for better understanding.

Part 2
In this part, a very lengthy negotiation of meaning continues about the relationship between customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction:

A1  Do you see – when you look at the customer satisfaction results and J mentioned that he’s also involved somewhat in employee satisfaction,

J1  /Somewhat./

A2  Somewhat, yeah. When you look at those two things together, do you see relationships (1.8) between customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction?

S1  (2.0) Yeah.

A3  (3.7) Which comes first?

S2  What is your assumption?

A  Well I don’t know – I mean...

S3  /Since you have an assumption/ that’s why you’re asking – right? – the question?

A5  Well I don’t know whether I have an assumption or not. I think they’re related. But I’m not quite sure how. I’m not sure whether – um – on the one hand you could say – if we have very satisfied employees – whatever that means – motivated, productive – um then customers will recognize that and see that we are providing good, friendly support...

S4  /I think to begin with it/ people are motivated, they do a better job to serve customers. That’s why the customers become happy.
A6  OK, and the other way to look at that is if we’re providing good products and customers are happy with them, the employees will feel good and they feel motivated. It’s like a circle. That is, you can’t...

J2  /Chicken or egg./

A7  Yes, right.

S5  Right, I agree.

In this part, many interesting utterances are condensed.

First of all, J1’s insertion, “somewhat” is worth observing. It could be interpreted that J tries to emphasize his limited involvement in the employee satisfaction survey and defend himself in advance, which reveals his basic and defensive attitude in this meeting.

Next, S’s answer, “Yeah” (S1), to A’s question reflects a typical feature of Japanese communication in which “yes” is not necessarily an affirmative answer but a sign of listening. One of the Americans later commented that this “yeah” sounded strange and was similar to the “yeah” to a question such as ‘Do you like vanilla or chocolate?’ Therefore, A is waiting for an additional explanation from S for 3.7 seconds, and paraphrases her question in A3.

S’s following response in S2, “What is your assumption”, could be debatable. Although he said in his post-interview that he was just trying to clarify A’s question, it could possibly be interpreted that he was trying to take the initiative through evading to answer it and sounding out A’s ideas, as seen from his next push in S3, “Since you have an assumption, that’s why you’re asking – right?”

Lastly, there seems to be some gap between A and S in the degree of being specific or “non sequitur pattern” mentioned in the “Introduction”. In a way, S answers in S4 that employees’ high motivation brings customer satisfaction. It is likely that S regards what he said in S4 as the end of this topic, considering his utterance below in S6, “What’s the question?” On the other hand, A may have interpreted that they have just established a common ground for discussion and have not reached a mutually satisfactory conclusion yet, since she continues her question in A6 and A8 below. At the end of this part, J shows his understanding in J2 and all of them emphasize their agreement, which is another positive politeness strategy:

A8  (2.7) Yeah where do you see XX relative to that? I mean I don’t know I haven’t seen any of the survey results. So I don’t know what they’re like.

S6  What’s the question? I’m not sure.

J3  Which comes first?

S7  What do you want?

A9  I guess I’m looking to, if we look at customer satisfaction results and employee satisfaction results at the same time on the table /S: OK/ and I don’t know what they are but let’s say on the table which one would you pick first to improve the other? (4.0) I mean obviously we have performance measure for both and so we need to work on both. But in Japan or in your business, do you have a clue or a thought? Maybe you don’t and that’s OK, but a thought as to which one is driving at this point?
After the 2.7-second pause, the American manager paraphrases her question again in A8, which is not very clear partly because of her hedges, the repetition of "I don’t know". Therefore, both S and J try to clarify it. It is noticeable that S uses very direct and open questions (clarification requests) in S6 and S7, while J tries to help A to answer by providing specific information to respond to (confirmation checks) as further explained in the "Discussion" (Williams et al., 1997).

In the following turn in A9, A first confirms mutual understanding or common ground, saying "let’s say on the table" and paraphrases once, "which one would you pick first to improve the other?" The following 4.0-second pause tells us that she is waiting for S’s answer. Not receiving a response, however, she paraphrases two more times, "do you have a clue or a thought?" and "a thought as to which one is driving at this point?", finally before receiving the answer she has been trying to elicit.

This part is a lengthy negotiation process and, especially A might have been slightly frustrated, as one American student pointed out that her frustration was reflected in her expression such as "do you have a clue?", which is used with a little irritation in the USA.

Discussion

When I showed the above data and collected the comments from American and Asian exchange students, Japanese researchers, and Japanese businessmen, there was an interesting contrast between those by American exchange students and by Japanese researchers. The former focused on silences and unclear answers by the Japanese participants as simply frustrating and uncomfortable. On the other hand, the latter, partly because they are researchers and professors, focused on S’s directness and rudeness and silence was only quickly touched on. The following is a list of their major comments:

Four American exchange students

- Silences by S are very uncomfortable and frustrating for Americans.
- S does not give any answer nor explanation to A’s specific questions. A must have felt that S does not know the answer at all.
- “Yeah” in this case (Part 2, S1) does not make sense.
- A tries to use a leading question first, “Do you see the relationships . . .?" (Part 2) and moves on to more detailed questions.
- A seems to have started the meeting without previous knowledge of how meetings are run in Japan.

Two Asian exchange students

- S's way of answering is a typical Japanese way, especially the use of “yes”, even if he has a good command of English.
- The fact that A is a woman may have influenced their communication.
Six Japanese researchers

- S’s attitude, especially his questions such as “What’s your assumption?” or “What do you want?” are very rude.
- Politeness should be more emphasized in English education in Japan.
- Silence might be caused by a cultural reason: Japanese sense of shame for making mistakes.

Two Japanese businessmen

- Answers by Japanese to specific questions tend to be generalized or silenced. Therefore, this is a typical meeting between Americans and Japanese.
- S seems not to have understood the point of A’s question. He might have thought about customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction respectively, but not about the relationship between the two.
- If he had taken some notes, he could have shown more active participation in the meeting.

Silences

As the above comments by American exchange students disclose, silence can be felt as frustrating and even irritating. In fact, through the data, A always starts talking after a two- or three-second pause. As for the different perceptions of silence, Ishii and Bruneau (1994) explains as follows:

Because silence is not valued and therefore not tolerated socially in US society, one function of speech is to avoid silence, generally, as well as to fill silences during the transference of messages. Contrary to the US practice, in Japanese society silence and silences are generally considered to be positively meaningful; they are socio-culturally accepted to a much higher degree.

Of course, the silences in my data are unlikely to have been caused by purely cultural reasons. Rather linguistic reasons would account for a larger percentage. However, as long as it is true that the Japanese have much more tolerance for silence, Japanese communicators should think about some devices to fill in silences, for example, some filling words such as: “Let me think about that”, or just simple repetition, “So you’re talking about xx”. Also, as a Japanese businessman commented about note-taking, more careful and sensitive preparation would also be important for a business meeting. For example, if they had used a smaller room, it might have created a cozier and more friendly atmosphere. And if S had brought a notebook and took some notes, it might have conveyed his commitment to the meeting to a higher degree. On the other hand, as listed above, it would be advisable that native speakers of English should be aware beforehand that the English spoken by non-native speakers, especially Japanese, is sometimes filled with pauses for their linguistic and cultural reasons.

Ambiguous replies

Ambiguous replies by Japanese could trigger miscommunication or at least unfocused communication. As it is often pointed out, Japanese people tend to use “yes” as a sign of listening, not necessarily as a sign of agreement, as a result of pragmatic transfer. In
my data, the ambiguous replies by Japanese such as “Yes, I think so” (Part 1, J1) or “Yeah” (Part 2, S1) are followed by a lengthy negotiation of meaning and resolved through several communication strategies. It is interesting that the types of strategies vary from participant to participant. For example, apart from paraphrases, A and J use confirmation checks to clarify the other’s questions, that is, offer some information to be responded by the interlocutor, while S uses only clarification requests, open questions such as “What do you mean?” His preference for clarification requests as well as his direct expressions might be related to his personality or bluntness caused by his insufficient linguistic ability. It is difficult, however, to confirm this through one case study.

Politeness
As observed in the data, S generally uses direct expressions to clarify A’s questions or possibly to defend the Japanese side, while A uses a more indirect approach as observed in Part 1. As for his directness or even aggressiveness, no informative reasons were obtained through his post-interview. However, possible reasons were discussed among the Japanese researchers: negative influence of S’s experience in the USA, his negative relationship with A or his face-saving act in the presence of other participants including the author who videotaped the meeting.

Again, further research will be needed to investigate this interesting point: whether this type of directness is caused by his insufficient linguistic ability, his lack of experience in this industry or more cultural reasons, and whether it is a tendency shared by other Japanese managers or just his idiosyncratic feature.

Conclusion
Recently, a new notion, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been drawing attention, which does not make native speakers as an ideal model for language acquisition; instead, emphasizes the ability to negotiate meaning according to the interlocutor’s cultural and background knowledge. It implies that all the participants, including native speakers of English, are intercultural communicators and both native and non-native speakers should learn each other and collaborate for intercultural communication.

Notes
1. These profiles are when the data was recorded in 1998.
2. The comments from four American and two Asian exchange students were collected in my lecture on intercultural business and those from six Japanese researchers and two businessmen were in my presentation at a conference.
3. In the following scripts – shows a short pause less than one second. For a long pause for more than one second, the actual duration time (second) is presented in a parenthesis, for example, (3.8). Also // shows an overlap. Because of confidentiality, any proper noun is substituted by XX.
4. The same type of transfer is mentioned in Fujio (2001) in an utterance of a Japanese learner of English. (Q: “You’re studying English Linguistics?” A: “Yeah, probably yeah, yes.”) Here the Japanese learner answered this way to show some kind of modesty.
References

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