

DIRECT AND INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

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1. Introduction

Communication is the activity or process of expressing ideas, feelings or information. It is a tool for social interaction. Important factors for communication are the use of words, including how they are said, non-verbal communication and the understanding of each other's words.

In this section, we have focused on direct and indirect communication. We understand direct communication as expressing opinions directly; the words used are important and hold the meaning. The spoken language is thus more important. With indirect communication you need more sensitivity to understand the true meaning of what has been said. The use of voice tones and silences has more influence as to what has been said in the spoken language.

Please note that we shall not talk about non-verbal communication under this topic because it has been explained in another section. We have concentrated on our personal experiences during our stay in Japan and the European Union countries involved in this project. Thus the information below is from what we encountered during this project and the conclusions are drawn based on those experiences.

2. Using humour

By Keiko Shibayama

Adding a touch of humour to the conversation is a largely shared idea between EU countries and Japan, when communicating with others. Humour always makes people laugh. However, there are many different senses of humour. They are used in different ways in different countries. The differences come from the cultural or historical context.

For instance, people in the Czech Republic like to belittle each other. It is found that they sometimes use words to belittle one another. This sense of humour is actually based on historical context; the Czechs have never won a war and they have lived under occupation until the Czech Republic was separated from Slovakia in peace. Another type of humour is the sense of irony that may seem to attack others. Although Norwegians and Danes have a good relationship, Norwegians say to someone visiting Denmark not to bring back any germs. Of course Norwegians do not think that Denmark has any germs and the people that visit Denmark know that.

Japanese do not use this ironical sense of humour very often. For example, a Japanese volunteer stayed with a German family, one day in the early morning he talked to his host mother. She listened to him and said, "Good for you that you are up this early!" She was being indirectly ironic because she felt tired and did not want him to talk to her so early in the morning but he did not understand the hidden meaning.

Sexual humour is also difficult to share with the Japanese in many cases. When a French said to a Japanese "Let's have sex!" as a joke, the Japanese did not take it that way. It seems that people in EU countries are more used to sexual talk and are more open to talk about sex. I think that is because most people in EU are from a Christian background. For Christians, having or talking about sex is supposed to be a kind of taboo, as stated in the Ten Commandments. As it is formally forbidden, I think the sexual metaphors are employed to express humour.

When communicating with people from other countries, we should consider that

people have a different sense of humour. We do share similar senses of humour occasionally but not always. Focusing on how people use humour in a foreign country is a good way to realise it.

3. Communication in different social settings

By Stefan Pecho

Communication between people always includes some informative and also social content.

The European society is characterised as a demographically mobile society. Its members are always confronted with new life situations and foreigners. Therefore in European society an information-orientated communication is typical. It is essential to give the required information, truthfulness and avoid ambiguous statements.

The Japanese society, because of its cultural and social uniformity, can be characterised as a demographically static society. Therefore the social aspects are the most important part of the Japanese style of communication. Making uncertain, vague and even “illogical” statements in communication are the standards. Even using white lies is not considered to be rude at all. The primary role of communication based on social content is to cultivate and maintain interpersonal relations in harmony. For such communication, the context of regulations in conversation is more important than the content of the communication itself. Indirect communication is one of the most vital attributes of the Japanese communication.

Familiarity:

Example

Japanese always use polite language to strangers or people whom they meet for the first time. When they are introduced to somebody they use formal language. Also when they answer the telephone they use the polite forms of speech because they do not know to whom they are talking to. Then, if they for example realise that they are talking with an old friend, they suddenly change their language to the informal form.

Analysis

The first factor in deciding the level of speech both in Japan and Europe is acquaintance or intimacy. Japanese are always polite to strangers. Also they use the polite form when speaking to the general public. When they speak to their friends or relatives, they may use very informal language. Similar rules apply to European society too.

Tips

We should always try to be polite when speaking to strangers and people whom we meet for the first time. In Japan politeness is very important. Being polite in Japan is always appreciated.

Age:

Example 1

Communication between young and old people is very strict in Japan. Younger people talk politely to older people and older people talk in an informal way toward younger people.

Informal conversation is common between people of the same age. However, classmates in the same grade at school are regarded as being at exactly the same level, while students who are one year ahead are considered to be older and superior. Those who are ahead either in school or at work are called *senpai*. Those who are younger are called *koohai*.

The *senpai-koohai* relationship is very strong among Japanese students, particularly among students belonging to the same group in sports or other activities. *Senpai* are regarded as absolutely superior and *koohai* have to obey them completely.

Example 2

In Europe students of all grades act informally with each other. Wherever they meet or whatever they do, they are always informal. Younger students speak to the older students in the same way as to their classmates. Older students cannot expect that the younger students will obey them.

Analysis

Age plays a very important role in the Japanese society. As a rule, younger people act politely to older people and older people act in an informal way toward younger people.

The *senpai-koohai* relationship in Japan is strictly determined. *Koohai* have to obey *senpai*. On the other hand, *senpai* are supposed to teach *koohai* and be protective toward them like an older brother or even a parent. However this relationship does not happen in small kids' society and sometimes it can be chipped away due to an older person's friendliness.

In Europe, especially in school, age does not play that important role in the society. Students of all grades are considered to be equal.

Tips

To Europeans:

When you are in Japan you must never forget how important the age factor is for the Japanese society. Even at school or work you must be careful when speaking to older classmates or colleagues. The levels of speech are quite different among *senpai* and *koohai*. A *senpai* uses the plain form and a *koohai* uses the polite form.

To Japanese:

In Europe usually we can act informally towards older students or colleagues at school or work. In Europe the age factor is not as important as it is in Japan. At school you cannot expect younger students to automatically respect and obey you.

Social relations:

Example 1

In Japan the relationship between students and teachers is very strict. It seems that teachers have a high social position in Japanese society. Generally the role of school is very important in Japan. Students must be very polite towards teachers. There may be some exceptions, for example the homeroom teacher can be friendlier with his/her own students than with other students. Also children in primary school do not always use formal words when speaking to teachers.

At work, in some cases, both bosses and employees use plain or informal forms but usually employees speak politely to their boss. An average businessperson in Japan would use polite forms to his/her boss and plain forms to fellow workers of a similar

age. Also the age factor is considered. Namely, a boss will often use polite forms towards an employee who is older, depending on the situation. If the boss is required to act in terms of social relations, he will use the plain form.

In stores, the relationship between customers and sales personnel in Japan is a bit different from Europe. The basic principle is superior and inferior. Generally sales personnel are supposed to use the polite form or the formal language to customers. They are trying to fulfill all customers' wishes and requests. It is thought that the services in Japan are on the highest level.

Example 2

When you enter a shop or receive services in Europe, you may feel an attitude of indifference from the staff. Sales personnel do not care about their customers as much as they do in Japan.

Analysis

Social relations refer to such relationships as those between teachers and students, employers and employees, or customers and sales personnel. We can call them "professional relationships." The principle is similar in Japan and Europe but in Japan the relationships are far more ritualised and it is fully reflected in the usage of Japanese language forms. Generally speaking, those who have a higher status, such as teachers, employers and customers, will use either the plain form or the polite form, while those of lower status use the special polite form.

Tips

To Europeans:

In Japan it is very important to honour people of a higher status. You should always respect teachers and your employers.

When you are a customer in a shop, you are not even expected to acknowledge (greet) the sales staff, however, the salesclerk is supposed to welcome you politely and help you with whatever you wish.

To Japanese:

In Europe, service may not be on such a high level as it is in Japan. Do not be surprised when you go to a shop and the staff is not as kind to you as you may expect.

Gender:

Example 1

In Japan there are differences between male and female language forms. In polite conversation with acquaintances, women tend to speak more politely than men. Women also use some feminine sentence endings. In public, both women and men speak with the same level of politeness. Both sexes use an appropriate language towards the opposite sex.

Example 2

In Japan during school trips and other similar collective events, boys and girls are officially separated from each other in some aspects. For accommodation, different floors may be provided to allocate boys and girls separately. Participants may not be allowed at all to visit the room of someone of the opposite sex but this does not mean

that boys and girls are not spending their time together. They do a lot of collective activities together during such events.

Example 3

In Europe it is natural for both sexes to spend a lot of time together. During school trips, AFS orientations, and other similar events students can visit the room of someone of the opposite sex and join their activities. It is normal for staff at an orientation to share a room overnight with a member of staff of the opposite sex. You can sleep in the same room and even in the same bed with a friend of the opposite sex, without having sex.

Analysis

In Japan speech tends to be more informal between people of the same sex than between men and women. From a young age they spend a lot of time and do a lot of activities in the same gender groups. In Japan the gender aspect is much more important than in Europe. For example during a school trip the rooms and even the floors are absolutely separated. Students are not even allowed to visit the room of someone of the opposite sex. In Europe it is common that boys and girls, during free time, spend a lot of time together in the same room or place.

Tips

To Europeans:

It is important to distinguish men and women's role in Japanese society. Following an appropriate behaviour of members of your own sex is essential for cultivating harmony in the social life.

To Japanese:

Feel free to spend more time in various activities with members of the opposite sex.

Group membership:

Example

Japanese use different expressions and terms of respect when talking to others, depending on to whom. The distinction between the inner circle (family members, colleagues, friends, members of the same sport or other club) and outer circle is very strong in Japan. Japanese use the special honorific language called "keigo" toward members of their outer circle.

When speaking to outer circle members about members of their inner circle then humble words are used.

Analysis

In Japan there is a strong distinction between the inner and outer circle of a person's social network. The professional life in Japan is based on this factor. In Europe the level of speech is also different when speaking with outer circle members, however there does not exist any special honorific language like "keigo" as in the Japanese language. This part of the Japanese communication and culture is absolutely unique.

4. Listening to Each Other

By Hirokata Sugawara

Communication requires senders and recipients. The sender is the one who expresses his/her message to others and the recipient is the one who listens and reacts toward the sender's message. Communication involves more than one person and thus people influence each other when communicating. In this part, we focus on how people react in communication. The "*Non-verbal communication*" section may also have detailed discussion.

Analyses are based on our personal experiences. Please remember that we are not trying to generalise about any cultures.

Portugal

Example

In Portugal one of the Japanese participants had to find a good excuse to stop the conversation with her host grandfather. She behaved as if she was not interested in the issue but her host grandfather kept on talking. She felt tired and thought that the Portuguese do not really care about the listener's feelings, however the Japanese often care about the reaction or the attitude of their listeners.

Analysis

Portuguese tend to be talkative. They like to have the opportunity to talk about their interests. At the same time, they do not seem to care too much about the listener's reactions, especially the older people. This sometimes leads to one-way communication and the listeners have to be patient. However the Portuguese are passionate about answering your questions. You have to speak up if you want them listen to you.

Tips

Portuguese love their family and are eager to tell you about the things they cherish. Students from Asian countries, which have a Buddhist or Confucian ethnic backgrounds, also believe in maintaining family harmony, however, they are usually taught to be quiet and good listeners. This might explain why Asian students (including Japanese) are often welcomed to Portuguese families.

Slovakia

Example

Slovaks are said to have a culture of listening to others, just like Japanese. They never interrupt other people in a conversation and try to listen till the end. They seldom make a strong personal statement.

Analysis

It can be said that they are patient listeners. One of the reasons may come from their historical background. Like many other Eastern European countries, Slovakia was under control from foreign domination for long time and many people still remember that Slovakia used to belong to the Communist block. That may be one of the reasons as to why the Slovaks are able to listen to others with endurance.

Tips

In Slovakia, group harmony and cooperativeness are considered to be important as an ex-Communist country.

Germany

Example

When I had a breakfast with my German colleagues, a lady asked me if I wanted a cup of coffee. I declined her kind offer since I saw some water on the table. I was thirsty but I did not want her to prepare coffee just for me and I thought water was enough for me, even though I would have preferred coffee. In the next moment, a German boy asked her some coffee. I was surprised to his directness and thought he was a little rude to the lady. The result was that the lady accepted his request, making the coffee and everyone was happy.

Analysis

Germans are used to expressing their opinions. They feel comfortable to hear others talking openly and directly. They criticise what they assume to be wrong since they think it best to solve the problem immediately. They openly express their complaints, so that they can be discussed and solved, leading to a better situation. This might be due to the school system and the teachers, who give good grades to the students who participate and express their clear opinions. They are used to expressing their opinions openly and directly because they frequently hold debates in classes at school. Germany is a multiethnic nation that includes guest labourers from Turkey, Russia and Eastern Europe. There are also Viet Kieus from the communist period. These emigrants were not always good at speaking German but it was essential to communicate with each other as long as they lived in same society. This might explain the reason why Germans express their personal opinions directly.

Tips

Germans are said to be close to the Japanese in their way of communication. Germans are punctual and usually do not feel resistance toward listening to others. They do not usually interrupt others. However, unlike Japanese, Germans express their opinions directly. Just remind yourself that they express their personal demands directly and then I am sure you will easily get along with them.

France

Example 1

It is said that the French are unable to express their emotions and opinions when they are in a group because they are afraid to lose their position. If a discussion starts during lunchtime, they would choose to finish the discussion instead of going back to work on time it and therefore arriving late.

Analysis

French share the feeling that they all want to be cool together. Therefore, they would treat you in the same way as they do to the others even if they hate you, saying “Bonjour!” with hugs and kisses. Did you know the main reason why French people do not like to speak English is *not* because they hate America but they feel embarrassed to speak such bad English.

Another aspect of French conversation is that whenever they meet friends on the street, they usually stop to make small talk. They look each other in the eye and they never ignore a friend if they unexpectedly meet.

Example 2

When in a meeting, the French always maintain their own opinion from beginning to end. They never change their opinion. They persist with their point of view and continue to justify themselves due to their pride, saying “but, but, but.”

Analysis

The French tend to have a serious look on their faces during a conversation, which may make you think that they are arguing or fighting with each other. Usually, they are just discussing and telling the other person what they are thinking. French have the tolerance and respect not to force others to follow their ways but they also want nobody to force them. If you hear “Common si tu veux”, this means, “If you want you can do it.” French social observance might be based on its history. France has experienced drastic political changes in the past 200 years. Its government has changed more than 20 times and this proves that French are used to arguing with their opponents. France has often fought against foreign enemies and this may also support their argumentative spirit.

Tips

When you communicate with the French, you may notice that they often use parables and metaphors. They do not criticise others nor complain in front of people. They tend to hide their true feelings and instead use metaphorical words. They are often polite when listening to other’s words.

You might think that the French are similar to Japanese on this point but the French actually share a different intention. Having a good image is their basic virtue. The French want people to assume that they are intellectual and important. They, especially women, try to avoid expressing their personal feelings by using irony or playing jokes.

Finland

Example

One of the Japanese participants was asked by a Finnish lady to make a presentation about Japan in public when he came to Finland. It was a few weeks before his departure and he was not told the actual date that he would have to make the presentation. Once he went to Finland, he waited for her to get back to him with details. He thought that the lady had forgotten about his task, until one day he was suddenly told to do the presentation.

Analysis

The Finnish are more like the Japanese, unlike other Europeans, in the sense that they consider silence as gold. However the difference between the Finnish and Japanese is that the Finnish say things only once while in AFS Japan they usually provide the participants with important information over and over again in order to avoid any mistakes or misunderstanding.

Finnish also give clear responses in conversation. They nod or shake their head, to respond “yes” or “no”. They always give straight and concise answers. Japanese also respond to each sentence to show their interest but not necessarily to express if they agree or not.

Tips

You may feel that the Finnish have forgotten their words or what you have said but they remember everything and mean every word they say. You have to be careful when you express your love to a Finnish or else you will have to love him/her till you retract what you have said!

Italy

Example

Italians often interrupted one of the female participants from Japan whenever she started to say something. It seemed to her that the one, who talks more, takes the lead in the conversation.

Analysis

Italians love to talk. They respond quickly, which usually results in them breaking into the conversation. They will continue to talk until they finish what they have to say but you have to remember that they are not being selfish. They love to speak but they are also happy to listen to interesting stories.

Tips

As long as you let Italians talk until they finish what they have to say, they will listen to you without interrupting but you talk with confidence and imposingly. This was how the participant handled the situation after experiencing the original discomfort. In addition, it is said that people from northern Italy tend to indicate less openness to strangers than people from southern Italy. However once you get to know them, all the Italians will always welcome you into the conversation. The body space that they need during communication is very close in comparison to that of the Japanese. This may make the Japanese feel pressurized. People from southern Italy may even wink at you.

Austria

Example 1

When one of the Japanese female participants was eating with some Austrians, she saw that they always stopped eating and listened carefully to the speaker. Others kept on eating but the listener always stopped. She felt comfortable to be with such polite listeners and she decided to behave in the same way. It took more time to eat, but at least everyone was happy. The same thing happened in bars, too.

Analysis

It can be considered that Austrians are sophisticated listeners. The recipient of the conversation pauses his/her actions and focuses on the speaker every time. It is well mannered for the listener to stop what they are doing, to look into speaker's eyes and to listen carefully. They always respect the speaker and show an eager attitude. Austrians even do this when they are eating.

Tips

In Japan you should be polite and listen but it is unnecessary to stop eating just for that. It can be said that Austrians are respecting others in the conversation.

Austrians also frequently ask questions. They sometimes ask a lot and the conversation can last for a very long time. However, it is not considered to be bad because asking questions shows that you are interested in the topic. It is considered rude if you do not ask many questions because they may think that you are not interested.

Example 2

In Japan, an Austrian lady asked so many questions during the meeting and the moderator had a hard time managing the remaining time of the meeting.

Analysis

Austria is used to dealing with many foreigners for geographical and historical reasons. Austria is bordered by countries, with no exit. Austrian history contains many conflicts from foreign countries like Turkey, Hungary, Germany, and so on. Therefore, they had to ask questions and listen to the speaker until they agree in order to avoid misunderstandings. These habits may have come about because of its social backgrounds.

Tips

This example shows that Austrians want to follow the conversation when listening. It is natural for people to forget what he/she wanted to ask, so they are willing to ask questions anytime. It is normal for Japanese to wait for other comments or presentations to be finished but if you wait until all the Austrian questions have been finished, you might not be able to remember any of your questions!

Sweden

Example

It seems that the Swedish are a little shy, especially the young. They always greet each other, but the conversation does not expand to broader topics. However older people tend to speak more.

Analysis

It is also typical that Swedish men are quieter than women. You might feel that women are stronger because they insist more, expressing their opinions. Swedish are good listeners and talk quietly. They do not laugh loudly like people in other countries. They appreciate the harmony that only one speaks while others listen. On the other hand, they do not ask many questions because they seem to be stubborn and make whimsical speculation. Maybe their hunting lifestyle has prevented them from having a talkative culture.

Tips

If you want to talk more with Swedish people, then go to a bar together. Soon, they will start talking.

Czech

Example

When two Japanese went to a small village in the Czech Republic, they were given a cordial welcome. Many people gathered to greet them with a lot of food and wine to

show them how to make traditional ginger bread. People of the village were very happy to hear the foreign stories and it was pleasant experience for the two Japanese.

Analysis

It is important for the Czechs to greet. They are often very talkative when greeting, especially when they meet someone new or when they say goodbye. They keep on talking for a long time at a very fast speed and it almost looks like they forget how to breathe. Normally, women are more likely to behave in this manner.

Like Japanese, Czechs respect harmony. First, they avoid interrupting others. They listen well and give response frequently saying “Yo yo yo” till the speaker finishes talking. This shows their respect of group harmony. Second, it is a unique institution that the Czechs have a polite way of speaking to their elders and betters. There are not strict rules like in Asian countries but this also shows their respect of group harmony. Czech is similar to Japanese in many ways, especially its principles of politeness. However, we find little difference in the talkativeness of Czechs when greeting and their tolerance to the foreigners. This may come from its unique background of Communist block period, when they had no personal freedom and no opportunities to have contact with foreigners.

Czechs are warm to the foreigner. They are happy to show their goodness. Czechs are interested in foreigners’ stories and their impression on Czech. Czechs also feel happy to see foreigners trying to speak Czech language. This also happens in Japan.

Japanese are very happy to see foreigners trying to know about our small islands and to see people making a great effort to speak such a minor language.

Belgium

Example

A Japanese participant found it strange that a Belgian man started to speak to her and her Belgium friend while they were waiting for the train. He was listening to their discussion about freedom and he asked politely if he could join the discussion. It took only a moment for the stranger to join the discussion.

She also found that Belgians listened to each other and if they did not understand, they asked questions without being rude. It was the Belgian way to have and express different points of view.

Analysis

People in Belgium are polite when they listen. They try to focus on the speaker without interrupting and this is considered as a good behavior. One of their manners is to raise a hand before talking in meetings. These manners are taught at home or educated at school.

Furthermore, Belgians like to have discussions because it is considered as a way to understand what you do not know and also the way to gather information. Normally they have discussions with close friends, not with strangers. Sometimes people talk to strangers in pubs and or at parties because they are drinking.

One interesting aspect about Walloon, the French speaking part of Belgium, is that they tend to avoid using English if they do not have to. This is because French, the language they use mainly, is one of the major and official languages. On the other hand, in the Dutch speaking part (Flanders) people study both English and French very hard because Dutch is a minor language in the world, although it is spoken more

than French in Belgium. However, it is obvious that there is not much difference between the two regions when focusing on how they listen to the others.

Tips

It is considered good for Belgians not to criticise the recipient but to contribute the argument. This way of discussion is usually held in a small group of people, and in most cases, the elderly and the people behave very well. On the other hand some people like to have a heated debate. One may criticise the recipient, which may make the recipient angry. As a consequence, the discussion gets heated up. This way of discussion is usually held by young people and people who like testing the limit of the other person. These people usually express clear opinions and seldom change their opinion.

Hungary

Example

A Japanese saw his two Hungarian family members talking loudly and within close distance of one another. At first, he thought they were fighting each other but it was just their style to talk in a loud voice. This Japanese was also confused with the polite form of Hungarian language. The young people frowned at him when he used the polite form to talk with them, as this form of the language is appropriate when talking to elders.

Analysis

Communication is essential in Hungarian life. You always notice people replying by saying “jo jo!” (which means “good.”) They are very talkative and are loud speakers when talking with their family but not in public. Hungarians also use the polite ways of talking, which depends on the age and sex of those who they talk to. These aspects are pretty much similar to those of Japanese.

Tips

It is very hard to say what is typical in Hungarian style of communicating. There are various types since there are Asian, Germans, Romans, and other Slav people in the society. Some are very talkative like southern Europeans and others may speak quietly. Some look unconfident and gloomy because they are said to be pessimists but not always. It really depends.

Maybe it is good for Japanese not to be surprised when Hungarians start talking about something terrible in their life. They often start the conversation with negative stories from their daily routine in the same way that Japanese choose to talk about the weather. You have to remember that the Hungarians are very friendly and have a great deal of hospitality toward guests.

Japan

Example

In Japan, European participants have learnt that it is important to be polite when having a conversation with Japanese. Japanese make quick replies, nodding to show their interest and trying one’s best not to be annoying. Their virtue and importance lies mostly in keeping a neutral balance in society.

Analysis

Japanese always listen to the speaker without interrupting and disturbing. This is to avoid being rude and this is both in family and in public. They consider it bad to leave the room (even to the bathroom!) while others are speaking. It is important for them to listen fully to the other opinions so they can reach the conclusion that covers everyone's opinion. In this way they tend to listen closely rather than giving opinions each time. Thus Japanese are said to be silent while having a conversation or a discussion. Nodding and saying "yes" briefly for others are important in the Japanese culture. If listeners do not show agreement during the conversation, Japanese may feel uncomfortable wondering what the listeners may be thinking. Japanese feel comfortable when people speak gently, in terms of its content and the tone of voice. They think that helps to avoid hurting someone's feelings and to hold them back from unnecessary conflicts. It is typical for Japanese to begin with a less important issue when starting a conversation such as "How unpleasant it is to have this rainy weather!" This would be a good cushion for people to prepare and get to know about the other's conditions before going straight into the main issue. This also helps people to buy some time to think about what to say.

Tips

Show respect and politeness to Japanese. It is true for many Japanese that they are not used to having contact with foreigners, so they may only know the Japanese style of communication. Therefore be sure that the Japanese will feel happy to see Europeans reacting in a Japanese style and that this will help Europeans join the Japanese society faster.

5. Expressing politeness

By Ai Noguchi

Politeness in Japan

Japanese communication is very polite. To name just one example, there are 3 different types of polite language that are used in different situations. During their stay in Japan, the EU volunteers heard the Japanese words meaning, "thank you" and "sorry/excuse me" many times a day. *Sumimasen* is a particularly important word. Its meaning can vary from "I'm sorry" to "thank you." By using this word you show respect and politeness and you can insure the harmony.

Being polite in Japan means that you try to avoid any confrontation and that you try to keep the harmony among the group. This means that Japanese use a lot of indirect communication. What you are saying may have less meaning than the way you say it, possibly with your body language. Also white lies are allowed. This is different for instance from Finland where the words you say are perceived as the most important, not the way you say it, meaning that lying is considered rude. In other parts of Europe words may have less significance like in Japan.

Example from Japan: Bow = more than 1000 words

In Japan, bowing is part of the everyday conversation. You can express various things with a bow, such as respect, greeting, agreement, politeness and apologizing. You bow not only when you greet others, but also when you ask to pass by someone, which means "thank you" and "excuse me," like how "*sumimasen*" is used.

Also, the way of sitting is important to show your politeness to others. When you talk

to someone, who is not your close friend or when you are invited to your friends' home, you should sit nicely; do not tumble into an armchair, and do not put your elbow on the table. If there is no chair, you are supposed to sit on the floor folding your legs under yourself and you should try to sit in this position until the host tells you that you can stretch your legs.

In most of European countries you also behave politely in someone's home but you can be more relaxed. As shown in the section of "having a meal at someone's home," there is no rule that guests have to be patient, which the hosts would prefer.

Honorific word

In many countries people normally talk more politely and formally to their elders than to their friends, but you can see the big differences in the way of talking according to age in Japanese society.

In Finland and the Czech Republic, people talk to every age level in the same way. However in Japan, they make a difference in the way of talking depending on the age of a person they talk to and according to the occasions to show their politeness. For example: At school, students' talk to teachers in a polite way called '*Keigo*' which expresses one's respect toward the other.

Keigo is normally classified into three types: *sonkeigo* (exalted terms), *kenjogo* (humble terms), and *teineigo* (polite terms). *Sonkeigo* is the word (especially verbs) to express to another person exalted while *kenjogo* is the expression to lower the speaker himself/herself toward the other. *Teineigo* expresses nouns, actions, and any circumstance politely. For example, putting "o" before a word makes it polite, therefore, "*ocha*" is the *teineigo* of "*cha* (tea in English)". To give you another example, you change the end of sentences putting "*desu*" or "*masu*" etc. to make it sound more polite. *Teinigo* can be used without reference to the speakers or the others, and be found in increasing numbers as the speech level goes up.

Example of greeting

When one person meets another for the first time in Portugal or Germany, they greet with very friendly smiles and start introducing themselves, asking personal things. By doing this, you are giving a good impression of yourself to others. If you do not ask anything, you can be seen as impolite in these countries.

In Italy, whenever they see or leave someone they know, they hug and kiss each other. If it is the first time that they meet someone, they shake hands strongly. So if they greet you that way, indirectly you can see that they are welcoming you.

The Japanese when they meet someone for the first time, they tend to put up a wall to keep a distance. This is because they are looking for the right pace to get started, what to talk about or how to talk.

Example from Italy

It is said that Italians love talking and stating their opinions. During the conversation, they interrupt others many times. The person, who can speak out and get people's attention usually, is the centre of the conversation. This may seem impolite for people from some other countries, but this is normal for Italians. They are good at listening and beginning to talk simultaneously which is different from the Japanese, Czechs, or Slovaks, who start talking after others finish talking and ponder about what to say.

Having meal at someone's home

In Italy, when invited for a meal at a friend's house, you are supposed to be served everything. You just sit there, have the meal, enjoy the conversation with the family, and you do not have to ask whether you can help cleaning up the table or not.

In Japan, the hosts let the guests relax and expect no help whatsoever, but the guests usually ask the hosts if there is something they can do. In this situation they do not actually mean to do so but they are being polite. It is usually considered very rude if hosts actually make guests help them.

Reaction for praise

In Japan, when being praised for your skills, one's personality or anything, people say "thank you" but in a modest manner. They hide their talent out of respect for the people who has praised them, using humble words to lower themselves.

On the other hand, in some European countries, when someone praises them, in a confident manner they take the credit for themselves. For example, when a person says to the other how good a school the other person goes to, he may respond like "Yeah, thank you. My school has the high level of education and is very historical, and.....!"

White lies

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, Finnish put a lot of weight on what they say. However in EU countries or Japan, you would not talk directly, if you know that you could hurt someone with your comments. We all use the indirect communication and sometimes hesitate to tell the truth but this is just a different way of communicating with others.

Expressing politeness is one of the most important ways of understanding a foreign culture and for maintaining a good relationship with others. If you have a doubt, ask the locals!!

6. Interpretation of words

By Alia Djait

Example 1:

a. Yes/no

Japanese always answer 'yes' or 'a little (chotto).' I almost never heard the word, 'no' which was very strange to me. In the beginning of my stay in Japan I said 'no' many times and it felt like I said something wrong/ bad. It was hard not using the word 'no' anymore but finally I learned to say 'a little.'

Example: If I say 'Are you free tomorrow?' She answers 'chotto' which means in this context "I have a little bit of time, but I am not free the whole day.

b. Analysing

Japanese people avoid the expression 'no' at any cost. They prefer smoother expressions. Instead of a negative answer, Japanese would try to look for excuses such as "I'm really sorry but I'm busy now."

The word 'chotto' (= a little) means in most cases 'no.' "Chotto" is like the way of

expressing disagreement. Not totally “no” but definitely not “yes.” It indirectly expresses “no.” The advantage of ‘chotto’ is that you do not have to give the immediate answer. You still got the time to think about it and maybe change your mind. In this case it does not mean hundred percent “no”.

In addition the word ‘yes’ cannot always be translated as yes. It does not always mean an agreement but can also mean the understanding of a topic. It is also widely used by the listener during conversations to show interest. This is why Japanese react often by nodding or saying, “Ah yes” or “You are right”.

Example: At the meeting the Japanese participants were nodding all the time. Also when we were having a discussion, Japanese were nodding. To Europeans it sounds like an agreement.

c. Tips

To Europeans:

Do not use the word ‘no’. Just say ‘yes’ or ‘a little (chotto.)’ Japanese will read your face and know what it means. Do not underestimate them because they are great in observing, listening and guessing.

To Japanese:

Do not be surprised to hear ‘no’ a lot of times or the straightforward reason without really thinking about the other’s emotions. Europeans like to express and talk about their feelings. Please, do not feel offended. It is just an expression.

Example 2:

a. Silence

In Japan I noticed a lot the use of silence. In a Japanese group, there were more silences than in a European group. Also when I asked a question to Japanese, there was a silent moment before they answered. In the beginning I did not understand and wondered ‘will they answer?’ or ‘what are they thinking about?’ or ‘is it a difficult question?’ or ‘maybe they don’t want to express their opinion?’ After a while I learnt just to be patient and wait for an answer.

b. Analysing

Japanese are silent after a question because they need to think about it. For Japanese it is important to say the right thing and to have good reasons. It is said that Japanese think twice before answering. First they think on their own and then they evaluate the others’ opinions and they may change the answer considering the others. They try to be flexible because it is important to have a happy end. Mostly, they try to settle the discussion in harmony. Sometimes Japanese are silent because they are just tired of talking and not everyone has something important to say. Furthermore Japanese tend to hate being different from others. In this sense they have a very closed society. On the contrary to Europeans, when someone who has been silent for a long time starts speaking, every Japanese will listen.

c. Tips

To Europeans:

Just be patient and respect the silence. Try to understand the expression ‘silence is golden’ unless you want to say something interesting. Japanese sometimes prefer silence rather than a talkative atmosphere.

To Japanese:

In Europe, it is better to say something. In this way you show that you have an opinion and the group will notice your presence. If you are quiet all the time, they will forget your existence. So just say something, it does not have to be important, just an expression, opinion or feeling would be fine.

Conclusion

Interpretation of words in a European way

- Saying things directly
- What they say is what they mean
- Words are more important than body language

Interpretation of words in a Japanese way

- Do not always mean what they say
- Not saying things in a direct manner, be more sensitive to words and body languages
- When you speak in public, you have to speak in a soft and gentle way because you need to respect the harmony of the group and also to sympathise with others’ feelings.
- Sometimes words are not needed to get answers because the body language or the attitude can give you the answer.
- Japanese have to be aware of the mood a person is in. Without saying anything, they sense what he/she is thinking
- Japanese do not like to express themselves in words. Words are not always true. Instead, the atmosphere of the person is telling the inside feeling.

7. Asking people to do something

By Akashi Emiko

Asking

Japan

In general, Japanese tend to ask someone to do something using very polite words and in an indirect way. They rarely ask what they want directly but they ask it step by step. Also, they sometimes ask questions in a negative way.

Examples

1. Japanese often say, “It would be good if you can do this.” instead of directly saying directly “ Why don’t you do this?”
2. “It’s hot in this room, isn’t it?” could imply “Can I open the window?” And a question like “You don’t have enough room in your car to take me there, do you.” could mean, “Can you give me a ride?” This is because Japanese needs some sort of agreement to start an action. Having an agreement beforehand, the harmony exists in Japanese culture will not be destroyed.

3. In Kyoto (an old and historic city located in the western part of Japan,) if you visit someone's home and the host/hostess thinks that it is time for you to go home, he/she may say, "Would you like to have Ochazuke? (Japanese light meal)". This is said to be mean, "It's time for you to go home." Kyoto people are known for not showing their personal feeling as much as other Japanese do. However, nowadays general Kyotoans are not like this.
4. Japanese expressing "I want to do this." could mean, "Could you help me doing this?" in some occasion. So if someone says, "I want to move this desk," this could mean, "Would you help me moving this desk?" This is more like expressing the inner demands than just asking someone to do something.

Analysis

There are some reasons for Japanese way of asking. First, keeping a certain distance means respect in Japanese culture. Second, keeping the atmosphere of the conversation and keeping a good relation with others is very important. Asking directly to someone could destroy the harmony. This is considered very impolite and it could destroy the good relations as a result. Therefore, Japanese may use this way of asking not to hurt your feelings or not to destroy the harmony of the atmosphere that they are sharing with you.

Also, to ask someone to do something can be assumed as something troublesome to the person who is asked. Therefore, Japanese choose the word and the way to ask very carefully in order to not destroy the harmony and not to make someone feel uncomfortable.

EU Countries

On the other hand, in EU countries, people ask someone to do something more directly. They say what they want directly and clearly, which could be considered to be rude in Japan.

Examples

1. In Germany, people said directly what they wanted me to do. However, they never asked in an authoritative tone. They always put "please" or say "will you?" whenever they asked me to do something. They showed respect and politeness by saying, "please" or "will you?" When they asked me some kind of daring questions, they would ask it very softly and in a gentle tone. They asked me the things they felt confident to ask and never asked me about other things that they would hesitate to ask. Also, when I said something I wanted to do and the people around me did not think that was a good idea, they always explained why I could not do it and offered an alternative.
2. In Italy, I was lining up to buy a bus ticket. A man behind me told me he was in hurry and the reason why he was, and asked me to let him buy a ticket before me. In Japan, doing this is considered kind of rude even though if you have a good excuse.
3. In Belgium, people ask things directly like "Can you pass me the sugar please?" or "Could you move the table?" The important thing in asking is to ask in a very friendly manner. You should ask with a smile and gentle tone.

Analysis and tips

In EU countries, people show politeness by putting "please" or using polite way of saying such as "would you?" They say directly, and they put politeness in their phrases. This is because the western culture has developed through discussion. It was

necessary for people in Europe to talk and state their opinions clearly and directly since they often confronted different cultures, as most of the European nations existed in one big continent. For Japanese, I advise you not to hesitate in stating your opinion and personal feelings directly because it is not impolite to do so in Europe.

Answering

Japan

In Japan, you could encounter a situation that Japanese answer “yes” even though they do not agree with your idea, or that they just do not answer clearly. Japanese tend to think it is rude to decline your offer, therefore, they say “yes” anyway or they just give you an ambiguous answer. Even though they answer vaguely or answer in an opposite way, they are trying to let you know their personal feeling indirectly. They try to let you know their inner feelings through the mood. In this type of situation, you are expected to read “the atmosphere,” in other words, reading between the lines.

Examples

1. I wanted to go out and come back home around 10:00PM. I asked my host mother if I could do so and she said, “Yes, you can.” However, actually she did not think it was a good idea to come back around that time. I could feel that she was not satisfied from her facial expression and body movements.
2. I asked my friend to go shopping this weekend and she said “I’ll think about it.” or “I will answer it later.” She sometimes answered in this way even though she knew she would not be able to go with me.
3. When one Kyotoan lady was going out and you asked her where she was going, she answered “Just to the neighbourhood,” and never answered where exactly she was going. This is the characteristic of old Kyotoans, especially old ladies. As it is mentioned as one of the “asking” examples, Kyoto people try to conceal their true feelings more than ordinary Japanese do. Another example from Kyoto is like this; One Kyotoan was asked to go out sometime. She answered, “I cannot do it this time, but maybe next time.” Even though she said next time, there would never be next time. This “next time” means a decline to the invitation.

Analysis and tips

The reason why these things happen is almost the same as the reason of “asking”. Japanese try not to hurt your feeling. Saying “No, I can’t” is too direct. For Europeans, it is important to observe people’s face and their tone of voice when asking a question. It is very important to read people’s feelings in Japan.

EU Countries

The way to answer is almost the same as the way to ask something in EU countries. They tend to answer in the direct way.

Examples

1. In Finland, when you have been asked to do something and you have said “yes,” then you have to do it. This is because in Finland, saying “yes” means that you have promised to do so and breaking a promise is very rude and is a serious matter. If you break a promise, people might not trust you anymore or they could get mad at you (depending on a situation.) Usually things are said only once, so you are expected to listen to people when they talk.

2. In Belgium, you usually answer things by saying “yes” or “no.” Sometimes, people do not answer at all or they give you an excuse when they mean “no.”

Analysis and tips

This is the way in Europe and the reason for this is just the same as “Asking.”

For Japanese

You may feel the way people ask and answer is impolite. However, saying things directly is the way it is in EU and they are not trying to be impolite. You also may feel uncomfortable to answer directly, but never hesitate to do so because it is the way in Europe and you are expected to do so as well.

8. The use of silence and vocal tone in intercultural communication

By Rie Yokozeki

Here, we shall consider how people employ silence and vocal tone in communication. They are used to send a message to other people.

Understanding the impact of silence and vocal tone in communication between Europeans and Japanese should encourage you to reflect on your own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

1 Silence

We had meetings in order to make a handbook on this project “*Japan – EU people to people exchange*” with European and Japanese members in Frankfurt in late September in 2005.

European participants talked a lot to share positive and constructive ideas. They expressed spontaneously their agreement or disagreement to the ideas brought up during the meeting.

On the other hand, most Japanese tended to be silent as they listened carefully to what was said during the discussion. Japanese like to observe the matter carefully at first, and then they give their own opinions.

The more heated the discussion became between the Europeans and a few Japanese participants, the more difficult it was for the rest of the participants (mostly Japanese) to find an opportunity to speak up. Some Japanese could not catch up with what they were talking about. They nodded as a sign of agreement many times, or were silent as a sign of disagreement.

After the meeting, I talked with some participants in the cafeteria. Japanese participants said they needed more time to think about their response. During the session, Europeans seemed to have the initiative. European participants said that the Japanese prefer to keep silent. It seemed to the Europeans that Japanese did not have their own opinion and they had not been educated for expressing themselves in public.

Analysis

In human relationships, the problem sometimes begins not only from misunderstandings of words, but also from misunderstandings of an attitude, being quiet in this case. Silence affects interpersonal communication by providing an interval in the on-going interaction. During the meeting in Frankfurt, when the

organisers asked a participant for a suggestion, it took a long time for him to answer. The duration of the silence influenced the entire group. The organiser, the participant himself, and the other participants were probably guessing the meaning of the silence. I suppose that he needed the time to think, check, suppress an emotion, operate a lengthy response, or begin another line of thought. Silence also gives a moment to clarify an idea or its significance for both sender and receiver of the communication. Europeans view of silence may be very different from that of Japanese. Now let us try to evaluate “silence” from the European and Japanese point of view.

Generally, most Europeans tend to think that it is better to describe all things, and that there is a word or a phrase to describe any feelings or objects. Therefore, silence may be regarded as the evidence of a lack of interest, feeling offended or contempt.

(Giulia Rosania: AFS hosting volunteer, Italian)

Finnish is an exception in Europe and similar to Japanese on this point.

(Outi Haatinen: Finn.)

Europeans evaluate the “silence” not so high. On the contrary; Japanese evaluate the profound “silence” highly. Japanese do not feel uncomfortable with having a silent moment when they talk, and they are not compelled to fill every silence.

Japanese seem to regard the duration of a silence as a considerable response to the speaker. They also use silence as the evidence of agreement. Or they use silence for avoiding hurting others.

(Ai Noguchi: Japanese)

In fact, many Japanese who share this concept of silence even believe that words can damage an experience. As the Japanese implications of silence are much more diverse than those of Europeans, it appears natural that Japanese should use silence in every aspect of daily life more often than Europeans. From my point of view, Japanese evaluate silence higher than Europeans do.

If we think more deeply about this matter, we can find the two reasons for the difference of evaluations on silence between Japanese and Europeans: one is the ethnic diversity, the other is the geographic factor.

With regard to ethnic diversity, Europe is complex with multiethnic nations. Of course, these nations have different languages and different ideas. As a result of racial migrations and wars, they had to change their positions, opinions and feelings so often. If they were unable to reach agreement, they had to fight to protect their own country. Considering the historical background of Europeans, they have been trained to express their opinion clearly even if a conflict might happen. They needed “words” (and arms) to survive, so they assume “silence” means to “lose.” With regard to the geographic factor, most of Europe (except for the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and Ireland) is a continent and consists of various countries. By winning a conflict among nations, they may grow larger than the island nation. Due to these two reasons, it seems that everyone has a definite opinion about one’s own position, which is a positive virtue, however, ambiguity or silence is a negative virtue for Europeans.

(Giulia Rosania; AFS hosting volunteer: Italian)

European evaluation on silence has been evolved like this. On the other hand, Japan is simple, almost a mono-racial society. However, Japanese also have the historical facts of fighting for the border of domestic territories within a small island.

With regard to the geographic factor, Japanese experienced the limitation of living on a small island. So Japanese have learned to attach much more value to cooperation than dissention. Silence is essential for keeping harmony, not having a violent clash of opinions in a group or in the society. Silence is, so to speak, a collective defence.

(Mami Kitagawa: teacher in a public elementary school, Asahikawa in Hokkaido)

Japanese are educated by “receiving information.” Discussions tend to be short; speaking too much might be a sign of vanity and not modesty. It is not desirable to be considered as an individualist in the collectivistic Japanese culture. It is rude to directly express an opposing opinion. This emphasis upon silence and minimal participation comes from the Buddhist tradition, which values meditation and silence. (Of course, we think a quiet mood in a classroom is not always good but there are few moments when Japanese students are given opportunities to express themselves, they often result in holding their tongue.)

(Rie Yokozeki, Japanese)

Tips

To Europeans:

Japanese are more adept at reading nonverbal behavior (silence) and the situation. At the same time, Japanese expect others also to be able to understand the unarticulated communication. (Tuzumi Sakurai; living in Tokyo, Japanese)

Therefore, they do not speak as much as Europeans. You may experience confusion with Japanese who remain silent. You may regard Japanese as cold, defiant, not being interested, however Japanese see the silence as calming, excusing, defending and keeping harmony.

Pay attention to the body language, especially the expression of face and eyes.

Sometimes they talk more than words. Like facial expressions, silence transcends the verbal channel, often revealing what speech conceals. (Outi Haatainen : Finn)

And it is also better to remember that Japanese remain silent because they are educated not to say negative things directly, as it is considered impolite.

There is the fact that there are very few Japanese, who are trained at school to state their own opinion clearly in public. Respect the silence and encourage Japanese to speak up. (Rie Yokozeki:Japanese)

Or you can ask questions to Japanese when you cannot figure out what their silence means because of its ambiguity. (Alia Dait: Belgian)

For Japanese:

Europeans prefer to use the verbal communication politely and clearly. Silence isn't always respected because it creates confusion among Europeans. As shown in the beginning, a person who remains silent may weaken his/her argument in Europe. You should remember that being patient and silent does not always help. Sometimes it makes your position weak even if you think that silence is golden. To survive in the

world, you need to give your opinion. (Gulia Rosania, AFS hosting volunteer in Italy)
And another comment from an Italian: “Actually, I found out it is just a kind of Japanese politeness. They tend to listen instead of actively participating in the conversation, even among friends. Sometimes it is nice but sometimes it can be a little annoying. Too polite! I have learned not to care too much about it. I just try not to speak too much. On the other hand, for a typical Italian, silence may result in impoliteness.”(Giorgio Agugiaro: Italian)

So, try to be open and accept questions and worries of Europeans. Do not be surprised by many questions. Try to break down the wall between the two cultures. Try to welcome the European questions. (Alia Dait: Belgian)

2 Vocal tone

During the program we gave out a brief questionnaire about the vocal tone to Europeans and Japanese. The question and the answers are shown below.

Question:

How do you feel when you talk with European/Japanese (loud or quiet)?

European answers

Generally speaking, I am louder (not that much, but yes,) I often have the impression that the Japanese are quiet and shy. (Giorgio Agugiaro: Italian)

It depends on the kind of conversation, however, usually, I'm quiet and if I'm angry, I speak louder. When I'm phoning, sometimes, I shout without realising (my son says I do.) When I speak with Japanese, my voice is quieter because when I speak with somebody quiet, I speak quieter. (Claudine Covo :French)

Actually French sometimes talk very loud, I feel them being aggressive. I 'm a lot louder when speaking with Japanese and also make a lot more jokes (and act a lot more funny), but it is not always the case, I tend to be louder with Japanese than talking with Europeans.(Olivier Boin: French)

Belgians prefer to talk quietly or at a normal level. They do not like people speaking aloud or screaming in public. Comparing with Japan, Japanese respect the speaking tone, which is a little bit too weak for me. Actually sometimes I cannot hear them. (Alia Dait :Belgian)

Japanese answers

Of course, it depends on situation, but I do not usually speak loudly and aggressively with Japanese. If I shout, raising my voice in the discussion, people might think that there is little room in my mind to accept different opinions. Japanese are educated to respect “modesty” for their conversation partners. I found similarities and differences in the voice tone among different parts of Europe: when I talked with someone from northern Europe, I felt the voice tone was similar to that of Japanese as it is quiet and soft. In slight contrast with other parts of Europe (mostly the southern parts), I found the voices loud and strong. (Rie Yokozeki: Japanese)

Analysis:

What we noticed about how we react to weak or strong voice. When analysing the tone of voice, we found that you should consider the emotional state and modesty. Let us look at those two impacts on intercultural communication.

1. Emotional use of voice

We use the high and strong voice to express our emotional state. This usage of tone is the same in all countries in Europe and Japan. Here is an interesting story from a European.

The European use of tone as a form of communication has a wide variety in expressing their emotions. For Italians, conversation is an important part of life that brings enormous joy. Italians will tell you that their greatest pleasure is not expensive, it is to “talk” with clear (strong and weak) vocal tones like a song full of melody. They believe that talking with the variety of voice tones is the sign of a good life. (Giulia Rosania, AFS hosting volunteer, Italian)

We do not like people speaking loud or screaming in public. Respecting the public silence is very important. For example, when people get on a public bus or train, they usually keep quiet, speaking in a soft tone. If they talk noisily to each other in public, they will get a lot of angry faces because they disturb the atmosphere. (Alia Diait: Belgian)

It may seem that Japanese keep the same vocal tone all the time, but they, especially the young also show their emotions changing voice tone, laughing, and singing sometimes screaming with friends.

2. The influence of “modesty” upon the voice

When we had the presentations during the project, Europeans did not need a microphone for public speech but it was hard to hear the Japanese speaking even with the microphone. (Giorgio Agugiaro: Italian)

Most Europeans (there are differences among the countries) feel like their voice tends to be clear and easy to hear. Of course Japanese will speak up in meetings if given the opportunity. (Alia Diait: Belgian)

Why is Japanese vocal tone so weak for Europeans? The point is that the Japanese concept of “modesty” affects the voice to make it weak and soft. Japanese regard “modesty” as a virtue. As you know, “modesty” is behaving or talking about your achievements or your opinions in a way that is not proud.

Japanese do not generally appreciate a person who talks assertively in public. They think it is safe to deliver a low-key speech in a soft voice in order to keep the harmony and to avoid the listener’s antipathy. Japanese feel that a soft and weak voice shows the modesty and give a polite impression to the listener. (Tuzumi Sakurai; Japanese living in Tokyo)

There is an interesting proverb to show the importance of “modesty”: “A protruding nail will be hammered down. (derukugi ha utareru)” (Genius English Dictionary). It means that the person, who is distinguished is generally the source of envy and will suffer for it. If a person speaks with loud and strong tone (except when excited or extremely pleased,) he/she may suffer for it.

Tips

To Europeans:

Be flexible and open to the different ways of using the voice tone. To overcome the dilemma created by a complex use of different tone of voices, I suggest listening carefully to the voice of the Japanese Emperor, who is the symbol of Japan. He always talks with a soft voice and a smile. We Japanese have never heard him speak aloud. It explains that a soft voice shows modesty and politeness.

To Japanese:

If you speak loud and clearly, I think that the people around you will be pleased with the fact that they can understand easily what you say. Otherwise, people may not listen to you. If they cannot hear you, they may not pay attention to what you are saying. I hesitate to say but it is the same situation as being ignored in conversation. I understand “modesty “ is important for Japanese, but speak clearly. (Alia Diait; Belgian)

Conclusion

Silence and vocal tone are deeply connected and are very important for communicating effectively, both for Europeans and for Japanese. From our brief discussion of cultural differences between Europeans and Japanese in the use of silence and vocal tone, it is easy to see how they present problems. Knowing about differences can assist you to overcome anxiety about cultural differences anywhere in the world.

9. Expressing feelings and opinions in conversation

By Outi Haatainen

For the people involved in this project this was not the first time to be in an intercultural situation. Still, when having a group discussion we faced the challenge to understand each other. During these discussions it became clearer than ever that people have very different ways of expressing themselves, their opinions and feelings. It also became clear that one has to take these differences into account if one wants to have a meaningful and successful conversation in the intercultural settings.

Under this topic I am going to give examples of experiences about the differences in expressing ones opinions and feelings from the Japanese participants as well as the European participants. I will also go into motivating and giving feedback, which were quite a big part of the conversations we had during this project. In every subtopic, after the examples, there are also a couple of useful tips to consider if one faces a similar situation as in the given examples.

Expressing opinions (linked to silence and vocal tone)

Example 1 (Japanese participant)

In France when people are having a conversation, people express their opinion strongly, talking over each other and they do not seem to listen to each other. I felt like I did not have a chance to talk. This is very different in Japan, where you listen to the others and when the other person has finished you express your own opinion if yours is different.

Even though from the Japanese point of view, it seemed the French were stubborn and holding onto their own opinion without considering the others’ opinions, it is not intended so. The truth is that they do respect the others or the different opinions; they do not have to agree with others just because they are friends or they belong to the same group.

Example 2 (European participant)

When I went to Japan I did not really know how to use the chopsticks. I could eat with them, but I did not know the correct way to use them (like in Europe, holding the

fork in the left and the knife in the right hand). One day I left my chopsticks in my food and my host mother told me that she did not mind me doing this, but some people might be offended, because leaving your sticks in your food is not considered polite. She also suggested that next time I should do it differently and then she explained the correct way of how to use the chopsticks. I felt as if I had done something wrong. I apologised and did not do it again.

In Japan the indirect way is the correct way to express opinions. They are very aware of the other persons feelings and do not want to hurt them. So just to avoid any embarrassment of the other person or any other negative feelings Japanese tend to use indirect and polite speech.

Example 3 (European participant)

A Japanese friend told me that Japanese would only speak their mind if they believe that their opinion is essential to the discussion. When having a group discussion the Japanese were mostly silent, which means they somewhat agreed. You have to be careful that they are just silent because they choose to be and not because they are not offered a chance to talk (LINK: politeness and listening to each others in this subtopic)

Another aspect that was pointed out by several exchange students was the way Japanese answer to direct questions. No is avoided at any cost and smoother expressions are preferred. Instead of a negative answer Japanese will try to look for excuses such as “I’m really sorry but I’m busy now...”

Tips

When in Japan the Europeans should keep in mind that if Japanese suggest trying some other ways of doing things, it is good to follow the suggestion and maybe even to apologise. You might hear the Japanese say “this is a better way,” but you never hear that you have done wrong. In Japan, there are polite ways and less polite ways of doing things (and these less polite ways you should avoid).

When having a discussion the parties involved should bear in mind that the others may have different ways to express themselves. The more talkative ones should remember to give room for the quieter ones and the quieter ones should somehow try to make themselves heard (raise your hand for example if you do not want to interrupt the others.)

Expressing feelings (link to non verbal communication)

Example 1 (European participant)

In the beginning of our stay in Japan, some Europeans found it hard to understand what the Japanese were feeling. You do not find them bursting into laughter, you only see them smiling with their hand covering their mouth. You do not see them hugging each other or kissing in public. Very rarely you might see a couple holding hands in public, but this is the furthest it goes. You do not hear them shouting to each other nor do you see them expressing themselves with clear and big gestures.

Japanese are not expressive with their feelings, but this does not mean they do not feel. The Japanese expressions are mild and one needs to be sensitive and observe carefully to read the emotions when communicating.

Example 2 (Japanese participant)

In France, when they want to express their feelings, they always use their eyes and mouth's movement. When people are sad, they have sad eyes and when they are really confused about something, they have their mouth in strange shapes with their eyes opened. Also making a sound by clicking tongue is very common in France. Hands are very talkative; French always use not only a gesture but also the movement of hands. For example, sometimes they make a sound with their fingers.

Example 3 (Japanese participant)

During my stay in Europe, my host family celebrated my birthday. My host sister gave me a necklace I really wanted as a present. I was so pleased and said, "thank you very much" politely with smiling. She was standing next to me for a while, but I left for the table and I put her present on, to have the dinner with my host family. After the dinner, the host mother said, "I am sorry, my daughter gave a childish necklace to you. Maybe you don't like it," I was shocked to hear her words because that was totally unexpected. I asked the host daughter why she thought I was not pleased with her present. She told me that I did not hug her as the sign of a great pleasure. I learned from her about the way of expressing feelings, which required not only words but also the physical contact in European style. For Japanese, they prefer to keep a certain space between persons in order to express their politeness, and hugging or kissing regarded as over-familiar, childish. That is why Japanese hesitate to express the feeling with physical contact. I learned a lot from her lesson to express my feeling. After the party at home, I went to the bar, Europeans and Japanese who are friends of mine, gave a cookbook as my birthday present. I expressed my gratitude with an excited smile, and I tried to express my feeling by hugging using physical contact, but I still hesitated to do so even though I understood the European style for expressing my own emotion.

Tips

There is a big difference in the amount of feelings being shown between Japan and Europe and also inside of Europe. It is always good to look at how the natives do things and follow their ways.

Generally the Northern parts of Europe are less expressive than the Southern parts. Japan is according to our experiences even less expressive than the Northern parts of Europe. So if you are in Japan you should try to avoid physical contact and expressing your feelings very openly and loudly. And vice versa in Europe, depending where in Europe you are.

Small talk

Example 1 (European participant)

We were driving to a sightseeing place with another European participant and her Japanese host family. We stopped at a rest area, where they had a small market selling vegetables, fruits and also blueberries. I had just told the Japanese that in Finland we pick berries from the forest this time of the year and that I like to do it because I like the berries very much. When I saw the very big blueberries at the market I said to the family that "look these are the same berries I told you, but only bigger than the ones in Finland". They came and looked and then they bought them! I felt a bit embarrassed because the berries were expensive and I realized they had interpreted my sentence indirectly and thought that I wanted to have the berries now. I was just

making conversation. I understand that they wanted to please me so I thanked them a lot and we enjoyed the berries.

In Japan most of the time the things you say should have a meaning. Small talk that has little meaning exists even less than Finland, which also is a country where you usually speak if you have something to say, not just for keeping the conversation going. The big difference is that in Finland we do not interpret the sentences in an indirect way like Japanese do. We use a lot of direct speech so the words said have the biggest meaning. Thus when I talked about the berries it did not even occur to me that the sentence could be interpreted that way. (link to interpretation of words)

Example 2 (Japanese participant)

In Germany, when I went to the cashier in a store, the lady at the counter always said "hello", and said "choos" when I left. Also the eye contact was different compared to Japan. The lady at the counter looked in to my face, said something and also smiled. It gave me a good impression of the service and felt people were related closely.

In the Japanese shop there is a clear difference between sales personnel and customers. There is a complete manual for the sales personnel on how to react to each situation with the customers. This makes the service better, but the customer-relationships more businesslike.

Tips

When in Japan one has to be careful of the potential underlying meanings of one's words. Do not feel uncomfortable if no one talks and there is silence. In Japan there is a saying; "Silence is golden," so do not just talk to fill the silence. You should thus have something to say and you should think of what you are saying (directly and indirectly).

When in Europe if a cashier asks you "hi, how are you" he or she usually is not really interested to hear everything about your life at the moment. It is just something to say to be polite and the answer should not be longer than "fine, thanks". Thus depending on the situation one should not interpret a lot from the words said. It might be the case that the person speaking is just keeping up the conversations because in many countries in Europe the silence is felt uncomfortable in a group.

Giving feedback and motivating others

Example 1 (European participant)

In Japan we went to a meeting, where people were evaluating their earlier activities. The feedback given was very positive to my ear; I didn't hear any negative feedback, only a suggestion like "maybe it would be even better this way..." I found that saying things neutrally is giving negative feedback in Japan. I asked why they do not just point out what was not done well like we might do in Finland and I got an answer that one could get upset and feel offended by saying negative things too directly and this could also affect the group spirit.

Example 2 (European participant)

Gambatte is a word all of the EU volunteers in our group learned. It is very hard to translate correctly, but it means something like "do it well" or "do your best." It is not ordering or forcing anyone, but it is more like assisting others mentally. In Europe saying and repeating something like this might sound like putting pressure and not so motivating, but in Japan it really is a positive thing and it is intended to motivate

others.

Japanese support each other and motivate each other a lot compared with conversations and communications in Europe. They motivate others by saying positive words to each other, showing appreciation, expressing positive feelings, clapping hands after speaking in the front of a group. It gives people self-confidence and is constructive.

This difference between Japanese and European could have something to do with the fact that Japanese culture is more group oriented than many cultures in Europe, that are very individualistic. In Japan, when you are a part of a group, you need to keep the harmony inside the group in order to make it work and you need to motivate others to keep the group functioning well. The Japanese also feel like supporting each as a whole, not acting individually as if feeling like, “we are on your side so don’t be afraid”. (LINK: social settings)

Example 3 (Japanese participant)

In Italy, I had a chance to visit the local orientation for AFS volunteers. In the group of 5 Europeans and 1 Japanese (myself), we had a topic to discuss: how to promote AFS to schools. One volunteer presented her idea on the way of advertising AFS to schools that she just came up with. After her presentation, we were supposed to give her our **feedback**.

As soon as she finished, the Europeans started to discuss spontaneously looking for the drawbacks and the advantages of her presentation. One said frankly, “The point is the way to speak. Your drawback is that you had no eye contact, so you seem to have no confidence. But the good point is that you speak so slowly reasoning step by step.” The demonstrator said “*okay*,” and did not appear to be disappointed.

I felt Europeans could work on maximizing the outcome, better than the Japanese.

The one reason is that Europeans welcome to give or receive the negative comments as well as the positives. The other aspect is related to how they argue. They talk about only one issue at one time; each remark is short, and shows “yes” or “no” clearly. On the contrary, Japanese usually mention several points at one time, so their remarks are usually too long. And what makes it worse, each one argues with pros and cons. They hardly finish, simply giving a negative comment. This is said to avoid breaking the harmony in the group.

Example 4 (Japanese participants)

In Europe, I felt the mood in a discussion is more relaxing than Japan. One time, the leader sat in the middle, and some were leaning on the wall, the others were sitting on the desks. A leader asked one of the members, “Antonio, what’s your opinion about this issue?” At first, the leader motivated each member to speak up frankly and promoted highly substantial discussion until there were no more comments. At last, the leader put everything said together as the outcome of meeting. When someone disagreed with this outcome, the leader explained the reason why we reached this outcome, and then all members agreed.

In contrast, in Japanese style discussion, the leader usually sits in front of the other member and he/she talks more than the others. The other members’ answer when he/she asks questions, the leader is not likely to motivate the members to speak their own opinions. Every member is expected to cooperate to reach the conclusion not to get into the leader’s bad temper. After the leader leaves, one member may complain, “I am too tired!”

Tips

Japanese should not get offended if the Europeans give them direct (honest) and also negative feedback. They are not meant to criticise one's personality or to hurt him/her. It is just a different way to express oneself.

Europeans should keep in mind not to express themselves too directly or give very negative feedback in Japan. A more subtle (delicate) and indirect approach will work better to them. Remember to motivate them by saying "gambatte".

Conclusion

Most of the differences found in expressing opinions and feelings can be seen as a result of the fundamental difference of the social structure in the western cultures (individualist) and Japanese culture (group orientated).

Keeping harmony is very important in Japan. It is a group orientated country and not an individual-orientated like most countries in Europe. Japanese are mostly homogenous and their behaviour is very consistent with others also when communicating. They express feelings and opinions mildly and indirectly, partly because you can avoid possible confrontations, arguments and breaking up the group harmony. Another point of view to this is that understanding each other is easier among same kind / same minded people. You do not need long verbal explanations to tell what you want; giving a hint is enough.

In the individualistic cultures in Europe the group itself and the intension to preserve the group harmony does not play that big roles. People express themselves openly and differently. So Europe is a lot more heterogeneous and countries inside Europe have been a lot more connected to each other throughout their history than Japan, which had been very isolated at times. Thus understanding each other was once more critical in Europe and that was why direct and clear communication was needed.

In Japan they also are not taught to disagree or to be critical or to argue like in Europe (where arguing is a skill taught from the days of Socrates.) It is not considered to be good to argue and quarrel in Japan, actually people only say their opinion if they think it is necessary for the conversation. Japanese just do not like to have a definite answer, especially if the answer could be negative or a "no." Japanese are said to prefer grey to black and white. Contrary to this in most of Europe you are expected to think critically, express your own opinions and ask questions.

Motivating others is more important and done more in conversations in Japan than in Europe. In Europe, as already stated the group spirit has less meaning, and so the acts for motivating others are done less, but it is also in Europe considered to be constructive and good way to build a good group atmosphere when needed.