

Japanese Attitudes towards Foreigners as Reflected by Talking to Children in Public

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公の場における子供との対話から考察できる日本人の外国人に対する態度

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Abstract

In this ethnographic study, I observe the attitudes of Japanese people in public toward families with a non-Japanese parent and explore how the attitudes differ toward the families with two Japanese parents. This study attempts to account for the behavior through observation and interviews with the participants. I hope the findings would be useful to further enhance teaching of culture in foreign language education.

Key words: ethnographic study, children with non-Japanese parents, stranger, observation, interview

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抄 録

この研究では日本人の公の場での態度を調査する。日本人は普通、電車の中などで見知らぬ他人と会話を交わすことはあまりないが小さい子供には話しかけるケースが多いという。特に外国人の親を持つ子供にたいしては積極的に話しかけることが多いらしい。この研究では外国人家族を観察し、彼らに対し面接を行い、日本人の態度が本当に外国人の子供を持つ家族に対しては違うのか、そうだとすればなぜなのかを考える。

キーワード: 民俗学的研究、外国人の親を持つ子供、見知らぬ他人、観察、面接

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Introduction

The population of foreigners in Japan has been increasing. According to the Statistic Bureau in Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2004), they observed 14.9% increase of foreigners living in Japan from 1995 to 2000 (1,310,545 foreigners in 2000 and 1,140,336 in 1995). Along with the increase, there are more and more children in Japan with non-Japanese parents.

Japanese are often not comfortable communicating with strangers if they do not know their background information, e.g., social status, occupation, and age, since they often construct conversation content and language use according to a conversation partner's background (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994). Thus, Japanese people do not usually socialize with strangers in public, for example, in a train or an airplane. It is, thus, unlikely to carry a conversation between two people sitting side by side in a train. However, anecdotes indicate that Japanese are often very talkative to a parent of a non-Japanese child even in a short ride of a train. In this ethnographic study, I observe the attitudes of Japanese people in public toward families with a non-Japanese parent and explore how the attitudes differ toward the families with two Japanese parents.

Two observations of a family with an Italian father, a Japanese-American mother, and their 1-year old son were conducted to explore how Japanese people react to the family in public and to consider if people's attitudes towards them differ from those towards Japanese families. I interviewed the husband and the wife to discuss how they felt about some of the incidents in the observed scenes. After a preliminary analysis of the observations and the interviews, a follow-up interview was conducted with the wife.

Research Framework

Many researchers have discussed different aspects of sociocultural behavior among the Japanese in connection to their culture, tradition, customs, and different generations, among others (e.g., Benedict, 1946; Kondo, 1990; Sugimoto, 1997; White, 1993). Non-Japanese residents in Japan experience some of these behaviors in their daily lives and draw their own conclusions about Japanese people and their culture. Through casual conversations with some American mothers who live in Japan, one of the common conclusions that they made was that they strongly feel that Japanese people are much more generous to foreign children than to Japanese children.

In this study, I will attempt to explore if the behaviors of Japanese people suggested by this anecdotal evidence are in fact observable and to reasonably account for the behavior. The next section first describes the participants. Following that, detailed observation reports at two sites are shown. Interviews with the wife and the husband are

illustrated discussing the observations I made. I hope the findings are useful to further enhance the teaching of culture in foreign language education.

The Study

Participants

The participants in the study are a married couple (labeled as “the husband” and “the wife”) and their 1-year-old son (“their/the son”) from the U.S. who were living in Kyoto, Japan for a year. Below, I describe the participants in detail but without any specific information that may reveal their identities.

The husband is from Italy. He came to Japan for his graduate work and received a Ph.D. in Japanese literature. He is currently a tenured professor at a university in the U.S. where he teaches Japanese language and literature courses. He received an exchange scholar position at a Japanese university in Kyoto for seven months when the current study was conducted.

His wife is a Japanese American. Her father was a second generation Japanese born in the U.S.; her mother is from the southern part of Japan. The wife was born and grew up in Japan and went to a university in the U.S. for her undergraduate study. After she finished college, she came back to Japan to teach English at junior high and high schools.

The husband is a native speaker of Italian and has native-fluency in both spoken and written Japanese and English. The wife is a native speaker of English but also has native-fluency in spoken Japanese. She can also speak basic Italian. Their son has been brought up in a bilingual environment. The husband talks to him mainly in Italian and the wife mainly in English. They rarely speak to him in Japanese.

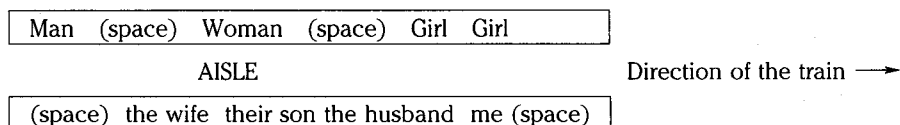
Observation

This ethnographic research is primarily based on thick description (Geertz, 1973) which involves two methods: observation and note taking. Following some standard rules for taking field notes (e.g., Neuman & Wiegand, 2000), two observations were conducted. Each observed scene is illustrated below. The first observation was made on the subway in Kyoto in September, 2001 and the second observation at an Italian restaurant in Kyoto the following month.

First Observation: On the subway

This was the first time the family had ridden the Kyoto subway together. They rode it for 20 minutes. The subway was not crowded and everybody could sit down. The husband and the wife sat down with their son between them; I was sitting next to the husband. The seat on the left of the wife was empty, as was the area next to me on my right. Across from us, one middle-aged Japanese woman was sitting; on her right was a middle-aged man. On her left sat two college-aged girls. The two girls seemed to be friends: they talked about

their classes at school. A seating chart is shown below. "Space" indicates that there was at least enough space for one person to sit down.



The first 4 or 5 minutes of the ride, the husband and I were talking in Japanese and the wife was playing with the son, talking to him in English. The man across from us was reading a newspaper and did not pay attention to the foreigners in front of him, but the woman and the girls were staring at the son. They were amused by him; he was walking around and smiling at them and saying some words in English and Italian. The girls were whispering to each other how cute he was and when he smiled at them, they always waved to him, then giggled and said, "*kawaii!* (how cute!)."

It was obvious from the woman's attitude that she wanted to get closer to the son and talk to his parents. After 6 minutes or so (3 stations passed), she finally stood up and came close to the husband. She stood in front of him and initiated the conversation by talking to the son sitting between the wife and the husband. She said to the son, "*Boku, ikutsu?* (How old are you?)." Of course, he did not understand the question and the husband answered it. By asking the question, she was able to start a conversation with the husband.

Until the train stopped at her station, about 6 minutes or so, she kept standing in front of the husband and talking to him in Japanese. The husband seemed to enjoy her company and responded to her in Japanese. He was, in fact, not only answering her questions but also actively participating in the interaction. She asked him such questions as "*Okuni wa dochira?* (where are you from?)" and made comments such as "*Sorede Nihongo ga chotto chigau n ya nee. Itaria wa eigo ya mon ne.* (No wonder you have an accent in Japanese. You speak English in Italy, right?)." She gave the husband a reason why she was talking to him throughout the conversation. She first described herself as very different from other "*shufu* (house wife)," and said "*Watashi shufu tte daikirai* (I hate house wives)." She then said that she likes very much to talk to foreigners since they are definitely different from her and she feels that she can learn something new from them.

The woman looked at me a few times, but did not talk to me. Interestingly, she never talked to the wife either, hardly ever even looking at her. The wife never tried to be involved in the conversation, but rather, sat quietly, smiled, and listened to the conversation between the woman and the husband while watching the son.

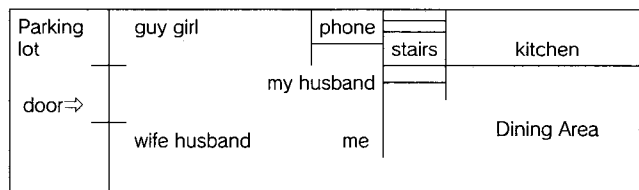
Second Observation: At the restaurant

This was the first time the family had been to this restaurant. It was a Saturday night and the restaurant was crowded, so we had to wait for a table for about 15 minutes. We

stayed at the restaurant for about 2 hours. We were a party of 5; the husband, the wife, their son, me, and my husband, an American.

While we waited for the table in the small waiting area, we were taking turns playing with the son. He was walking around the waiting room smiling and talking to us. The wife and the husband were sitting on chairs near the entrance door. I was standing near the entrance to the dining area facing my husband and my husband was standing against the wall near the phone facing the husband and the wife.

Below is a diagram of the waiting area. There was also a young couple in their early twenties waiting for their table with us. The boyfriend of this couple was sitting in front of the wife ("guy" in the chart) and his girlfriend ("girl") was in front of the husband. They were talking to each other, occasionally holding hands.



While waiting, the girl was watching the son play and asked the husband how old the son was using honorific expression, "Oikutsu nan desu ka?" The way she talked to him was very different from the woman in the first observation who was rather casual and direct. The conversation was over when the husband answered her question since the table was ready for us.

While we were waiting for our food to come at the table, I took the son to play by the stairs. The restaurant had many young female customers. Whenever the son walked around, the girls were always smiled and watched him, and in many cases, told their company how cute he was. Nobody talked to me directly.

Interviews

Several interesting incidents were found in my observations of this family in public. Among these, I decided to focus on two atypical behaviors among Japanese people and discuss them with the wife and the husband. The interviews were conducted in Japanese at their house on November, 2001. I conducted a 40-minute interview with the wife, a 30-minute interview with the husband, and a 20-minute follow-up interview with the wife again. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere although the wife mentioned after the first interview that she was a little nervous having the conversation recorded.

Two main interview questions were designed in order to explore how the husband and wife felt about the behaviors among Japanese people that they experienced during my

observations:

- (1) Why do people come and talk to your family?
- (2) Why do people approach the husband, not the wife?

First question is important since some Japanese people who are complete strangers approached us to talk, which is a rare incident in Japan. Due to a strong notion of *uchi* (in-group) and *soto* (out-group) (e.g., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994), Japanese people generally do not speak to strangers unless they have a very pressing reason to do so. Even though many Japanese people may be attracted to very young, cute children, their cultural norms prevent them from having small talk with the parents and they limit themselves to just a few words to a child.

The second interesting occurrence was that people always approached the husband and talked only to him. It is usually culturally assumed in Japan that the mothers are the caretakers of the family and thus would have answers to questions related to children. When Japanese people start talking to Japanese strangers regarding their child, they usually choose to talk to the mother, not the father.

However, these assumptions were not correct for this couple. Thus, I asked them the questions to examine if they felt strange about people's unusual behavior and if they were comfortable with the situations. Below, I illustrate the answers from both the husband and the wife to each question.

(1) Why do people come and talk to your family?

The husband believed that it was simply because they are foreigners and Japanese people want to talk to them. He mentioned that Japanese "worshipping westerners" still exists and that is definitely one reason that they come to talk to his family. He added that another reason that people are attracted to foreign children may be that a child of mixed race, Caucasian and Asian in his family's case, or non-Japanese children look different and thus are considered more cute than a child of a single race, e.g., a child of two Japanese parents.

The wife provided very thoughtful analysis regarding this issue:
"*Gaijin dakara hanashi shitai shi. Nihonjin wa jibun no nanika na kara kara dete futsuu yaranai koto o yareru n jya nai? Gaikoku-jin dakara.* (Because (we are) foreigners, (people) want to talk to us. Japanese people can break their shells being Japanese and do something they would never do (to Japanese) to us because we are foreigners, right?)"

The foreigners would be categorized as an out-group in Japanese society. Japanese people may assume that the same cultural norms could be applied to the in-group members but not to the out-group. Thus they feel that they can break from their norm of

not talking to strangers when dealing with foreigners. We can reasonably assume that Japanese people are just as attracted to Japanese kids as to the children of foreign parents but they do not talk to the Japanese parents because of the in-group norms. With foreigners, however, they are not restricted by the same norms and feel that it is easy and acceptable to approach the parents.

(2) Why do people approach the husband, not the wife?

Regarding question (2), the husband again mentioned that it was because he is a foreigner and Japanese people want to talk to him. He added that people may not talk to the wife because they think she is not a foreigner, but Japanese. Although the wife has been raised in American cultural settings and she is more American than Japanese, she looks “perfectly Japanese” in her appearance and people usually do not recognize her as an American.

The wife did not think it was because the husband looks more “foreign” than she. She felt that her husband had a friendly ‘aura’ that was approachable. Furthermore, even in instances where questions may be directed at the couple in general (i.e. not specifically at either her or him), the husband is very talkative and would often answer for them.

“Demo sooiu oora mo aru kamo ne. (the husband) wa yooku hanashi kake rareru mon. Yooku hanashi kake rareru mon. Doko ni itte mo yoku hanashi kake rareru mon. (But he might have that kind of aura (to attract people). He is very often talked to by strangers. He is really often talked to by strangers. Wherever he goes, he is often talked to by strangers.)”

I believe that when people want to talk about someone’s children, they usually talk to the mother. The wife agreed with this since mothers are the ones who usually know the most about the kids. If a woman wants to ask about a stranger’s child, they direct their questions to the mother; it is odd to talk to the father.

However, these general tendencies did not apply to this couple’s case because the husband is a foreigner and has a foreign appearance. The wife said that she did not want to be involved in the conversation because as a Japanese(-American), she feels uncomfortable talking to Japanese strangers and is not comfortable in casual conversation with them.

Conclusion

In this study, I observed a family from the U.S. living in Kyoto and examined two atypical behaviors among Japanese people toward the family: 1) strangers approached the family in public to talk to them about their child and 2) people approached the husband, not the wife. After the observations, I interviewed the parent couple and was able to get

their opinions regarding the issues I was interested in.

To fully understand the differences in attitudes among Japanese people towards Japanese and foreign families, however, formal observations and interviews with some Japanese parents are necessary to obtain their opinions and perspectives toward the issues for comparison. Interviews with the people who talk to stranger families would also bring added depth and needed dimension to future studies of this phenomenon.

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