

Misunderstandings in Intercultural Communication: Different Strategies in Making the Point in a Story Between Japanese and Americans

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異文化間コミュニケーションにおける誤解の構造： 話の伝え方は日本人とアメリカ人ではどう違うのか

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Abstract

This paper examines misunderstandings triggered by communication style differences between Japanese and Americans. Specifically, this paper explores how a Japanese wife makes the point of her story to her American husband and examines how she reaches to her point and why he has difficulty understanding it. The way people express the main point of their conversation can differ dramatically depending on cultural backgrounds. Japanese prefer the main point being understood within the context instead of the speaker explicitly stating it, which often makes the main point of Japanese speakers' story unclear and difficult to understand for non-Japanese. Careful analysis of the data in this study shows that the Japanese wife states the point of her story at the end and her American husband has difficulty following to her story and misunderstands her point a couple of times through the interaction. This evidence supports the previous research findings.

Key words : intercultural communication, intercultural marriage, point of a story, misunderstanding

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抄 録

本稿では異文化間コミュニケーションにおいて、国際結婚カップルの日本語会話データを用い、日本人の妻がアメリカ人の夫に話をする時、話の重要な点をどう伝えそれを夫は理解できるのか分析する。文化の違いにより話の伝え方も全く異なる。たとえば、アメリカ人は話の重要点をはっきり表現するが、日本人は聞き手自身が文脈から理解する手法をとる。従ってそのスタイルに慣れていない外国人は、話し手である日本人が伝えたいことを理解できないことがある。本研究でも、妻と夫の話の伝え方の違いが誤解を生む結果となることが分かった。

キーワード：異文化間コミュニケーション、国際結婚カップル、話の伝え方、誤解

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Introduction

The way people express the main point of their conversation can differ dramatically depending on cultural backgrounds. The evaluation of the main point when communicating in narratives has been generally described by Labov (1972) as being either internal or external. A story teller steps aside from what he or she is saying and makes the point explicitly in external evaluation. On the other hand, in internal evaluation, the point is presented and thus should be understood within the context instead of the speaker explicitly stating it. Japanese prefer internal evaluation (Okazaki, 1993), which often makes the main point of Japanese speakers' story unclear and difficult to understand for non-Japanese (e.g., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994; Naotsuka & Sakamoto, 1981). For those who are familiar with external evaluation style of communication, e.g., Americans, it is not always effortless to comprehend the point without it being stated detached from the context.

Okazaki (1993) suggests that the Japanese way of stating opinions and communicating their points can cause misunderstandings in intercultural communication since the point is often not clear for non-Japanese participants in interaction. This paper explores how a Japanese wife makes the point of her story to her American husband in the collected data and examines his reaction to the story and her treatment of it. More specifically, I will discuss how she reached her point and examine why her husband had difficulty understanding it through data analysis.

Literature Review

People with different cultural backgrounds have different communication styles. Regarding Japanese and English communication styles, a number of researchers (e.g., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994; Ikegami, 1991; Kashima & Kashima, 1998; Kitayama & Ishii, 2002) have suggested that information is conveyed more by verbal content in English whereas Japanese speakers use contextual information more. Thus, native English listeners rely on explicitly stated content information but Japanese conversation participants successfully communicate via implicit information cues.

For example, Kitayama and Ishii (2002) examined how Japanese and Americans are influenced in evaluating an emotionally spoken word by vocal emotion (how it is said) or word evaluation (what is said). Participants from Japan and North American listened to a series of words spoken in a variety of vocal tones (i.e. positive, negative, and neutral words spoken in positive, negative, and neutral tones). They were asked to rate either the value of the word (while ignoring the tone) or the value of the tone (while ignoring the word). Kitayama and Ishii discovered that Americans had more difficulty ignoring content

meanings but the Japanese had more trouble ignoring the vocal tones. These results indicate that English speakers rely more on the content value of words and Japanese speakers are more attuned to the emotional value in the way the word is expressed.

In interactional sociolinguistics, Gumperz (1982; 1992) systematically examined miscommunication in intercultural communication and illustrated how missing contextualization cues can trigger MUs in interaction. He discusses how conversation participants depend not only on the verbal contents, but also on details of such contextualization cues as intonation, rhythm, tempo, pausing, non-verbal signs, phonetic, lexical, and syntactic choices. While everybody relies partly on contextualization cues in conversation, research suggests that Japanese tend to do so more in their communication.

Looking at how a topic is introduced in conversation and how it is developed as a story, Okazaki (1993) found that Japanese do not state the main point at the initial position of their talk, but first provide background information to build up shared information between a speaker and a hearer. Japanese rely on listeners to understand the main point in their inductive speech with such various cues as discourse markers, sentence particles, and phonological features in conversation. Other researches (Ishii, 1984 in Japanese communication strategies; Hinds, 1987 in cross-cultural comparison of writing strategies) suggest similar findings.

Okazaki (1993) claims that speakers learn discourse strategies through face-to-face interaction in their speech communities. As she and other researchers (e.g., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994) describe, Japanese speakers acquire Japanese ways of talking in Japanese society and can use these without any conscious effort. As the same token, Americans have their own ways of communication that they have acquired in their society and conduct it unconsciously. Thus, when two people from different cultures, e.g., Japanese and Americans, communicate, they may have conflicts in conversation by not recognizing the differences in communication styles which could cause MU.

The Study

Participants and the Data

Natural conversation data was collected from an American male and a Japanese female married couple, George and Ritsuko, who currently live in Tokyo, Japan. A roughly 30-minute conversation between them was tape-recorded while they were having lunch at home.

The husband, George (appears as G in the data), is from the U.S. and the wife, Ritsuko (R in the data), is Japanese from Tokyo. They are both in their 30's and have been married for five years. George has been living in Japan for 13 years and is teaching at a Japanese university. He has no problem having daily conversation in Japanese as well as

participating in university meetings conducted in Japanese. Ritsuko has received her master's degree from an American university in the U.S. and is fluent in English. She is currently a researcher at a Japanese university. George and Ritsuko have conversations in Japanese as the dominant language in their relationships. Although Ritsuko is fluent in English, both Ritsuko and George feel more natural to speak in Japanese since they live in Japan and thus prefer to have conversations in Japanese at home.

Analysis

Below is the conversation between a Japanese wife, Ritsuko (R) and her American husband, George (G). Starting on line 26, Ritsuko tells George what she did the previous day. Thus, consider the following data:

24 G: a: ano: (...) san? ano: jyuuniji: han to [yu: (...)]

“Oh, ah, Mr/Ms. (...)? Well, s/he said that (we meet at) 12:30.”

25 R: [un un]

26 Watashi ano kinoo, kinoo Kichijooji ni tsuita

27 toki wa saa, nanka huu tte yuu kanji de moo chotto

28 a, kaimono tte yuu [kimochi mo] nakatta no too

“When I arrived at Kichijooji yesterday, I felt ‘huu’ (tired) and didn’t really feel like shopping, and”

29 G: [(laugh)]

30 osokatta desho? demo:

“But you came home late, didn’t you?”

31 R: un demo Kunitachi no Seeyuu hajimete datta kara saa=

“But it was my first time to go to the Seeyuu store in Kunitachi.”

32 G: =Aa

“Oh”

33 R: =Chotto tanoshikutte [soko ni kekoo jikan tsukatta

34 G: [(laugh)]

35 R: ke [do.

“It was a bit fun, and I spent some time there.”

36 G: [Hai.] =

37 R: =Soo so so anoo ano hausu oka-ano hausu manii toru no

38 wasurechatta kara anoo...dakara Kichijooji de

39 kawanakattan da. Dee asokono=

“I forgot to get the house money/budget from a bank, so”

40 G: =Seeyuu de

“At Seeyuu”

- 41R: =Asokono. A, so, Kunitachi no Mizuho ginkoo wa nee,
“There. Oh, Mizuho bank in Kunitachi is”
- 42G: Un.
“Yes.”
- 43R: anoo, kuji made yatteru no.
“Open till 9:00.”
- 44G: Hontoo
“Really.”
- 45R: Un.
“Yes.”
- 46G: Osoi ne.
“They open till late, don’t they?”
- 47R: Un. Tesuuryoo kakaru kedo, demo un, benrida..
48 tte yuu koto ga wakat/te
“Yeah. They charge an extra fee, but I found it’s convenient, so.”
- 49G: (...) Mizuho ginkoo kara (...)
“(...) Mizuho bank (...)”
- 50R: Un, >maa soo da kedo<. De ano de chotto Kunitachi no
51 Seeyuu it/tee\, /huu\, sugoi hiroi yo.
“Yeah, it’s right. Anyway, then I went to Seeyuu in Kunitachi. It’s really big.”
- 52G: Mm?
“Mm?”
- 53R: Nikai de
“At the second floor”
- 54G: Mm?
“Mm?”
- 55R: (I) nikai made [atte.]
“They have 2nd floor as well.”
- 56G: [Nikai made aru.]
- 57R: Un. De ne watashi itta no daaibu kujihan kurai da,
58 kuji sonna koto nai ka kuji sugiteta ne
- 59G: Un.
“Yes.”
- 60R: Sugoi hito ga ippai.
“There were amazingly many people.”
- 61G: Asoo.
“I see.”
- 62R: Un.
“Yes.”

In the above conversation, as the point of the story, Ritsuko wanted to tell George about the Seeyuu store in Kunitachi that she went to for the first time. The point is stated at the end of the segment of conversation as we can see in lines 50 to 62: she was amazed how big the store was and how crowded it was even though it was already after 9:00 p.m. when she got there. But to get to her point of the story, i.e., description of the store, she had to start the story with reasons that she did not shop at Kichijooji through lines 26 to 28 and 37 to 39. Then she had to describe why she was able to shop at Kunitachi after all in lines 41, 43, 47, and 48. Finally, she comes to the point of her story in line 50. She needed 24 lines to give background information (line 26 to start the story and line 50 to get to the point) which, as shown above, can be divided into two parts before telling her husband the point of her story.

Looking at the data more in detail, there were two reasons for her not being able to shop in Kichijooji: she did not feel like shopping when she arrived at Kichijooji since she was tired (lines 26-28) and she did not have money for shopping since she forgot to take out some house budget money from a bank (lines 37-39). However, when she went to Kunitachi from Kichijooji, she found that the ATM machine at Mizuho bank (line 41) was open until 9:00 (line 43). It is not common in Japan for ATM machines to be available until this late at night; they often shut down after 7:00 p.m. She could take some money out although some handling fee was charged (lines 47-48) and she went shopping at the Seeyuu for the first time. She enjoyed shopping there and ended up coming home late.

Although she could finish her story and successfully made her point at the end, there were several MUs observed in the data. First of all, although Ritsuko came home late on the previous day, she started her story in line 26 describing that she was tired and did not feel like shopping when she arrived at Kichijooji through line 28.

This utterance did not lead George to realize the point of the story as being the description of the store she went to the previous night. Rather, it made him think that the point was something related to her coming home late. Thus, he points out in line 30 that she came home late regardless of her being tired and not up for shopping.

Notice here, though, that in line 28, she uses a high pitched accent and emphasizes too 'and' to indicate that more reason(s) are coming for not having shopped in Kichijooji. Although she indicated with prosodic cues that her turn is not over yet, George jumps in the conversation and made the comment in line 30, which messed up Ritsuko's order of the story telling and she had to mention that she went to the Seeyuu store in Kunitachi in line 31 although she did not prefer to.

In line 31, George was informed implicitly that Ritsuko went shopping at the Seeyuu store in Kunitachi and that since it was her first time going there (line 33 to 35), she described that she had fun exploring the store and spent some time there. At this point,

George received a satisfactory account for her coming home late and he can reasonably assume that the point of the story was that her going to the store caused her coming home late.

However, she did not complete her sentence in line 35, and used *kedo* 'but' to indicate her turn is not over yet. Then in line 36 after he responded to her, she quickly took the turn back again and continued her story in line 37. She starts the utterance with *soo soo so* 'yes, yes, yes'. This is a typical way to return the conversation to status quo in Japanese. In Ritsuko's mind, she was not reaching to her point of the story at all and needed to move on to the second reason why she could not shop in Kichijooji.

In lines 37 through 39, Ritsuko gives the second reason. She explains that she forgot to take out some money (house budget) from a bank and therefore she could not go shopping. Now that she finished the first part of her story, she moves on to the second part, the reason for her being able to shop in Kunitachi. She indicates the introduction of new phase in line 39 by *Dee* 'then'. This word is often used as a discourse marker at the opening of a new topic in Japanese conversation. Ritsuko used the word not only as the simple discourse marker to indicate the opening of the second part but with rhythmic intonation, i.e., raising then falling pitch, elongated, and emphasis to phonologically show that she still has things to tell, and is eager to move on to the next phase of the story.

However, when she said *asoko* 'there', George jumped in on line 40 and tried to confirm that *asoko* refers to the Seeyuu store. In line 41, Ritsuko rephrased *asoko* by saying *Kunitachi no Miauho ginkoo* and indicated that she is not talking about the store any more. George shows his understanding of the story by allignment in line 42. Ritsuko and George talk about the ATM machine at the bank through line 48. He tried to continue talking about something about the bank as we can see in the line 49; Ritsuko, however, needs to move on to finish her story and get to the point.

In line 50, she indicates that it is still her turn in telling the story by saying *maa soo da kedo*, which is often used in Japanese conversation to tell others 'that's not what I'm talking about here' or 'can you just listen to me?'. In Japanese conversation, speakers try to maintain a non-confrontational situation by showing agreement (*soo da* 'that's right') to the conversation partner but yet indicating that he or she is not fully right by showing hesitation (*maa* 'well') and ending the sentence with *kedo* 'but'. Although Ritsuko maintained the friendly atmosphere by using a softened phrase to tell George that she has not finished yet, she said it with increased speed to indicate that she does not want to be bothered in finishing the story. After she said it, she again uses the discourse marker *De* in emphatic way to show that what she will talk about is different from what George thinks, i. e., about the bank.

When Ritsuko reached the main point of her story, i.e., description of the store, she

seems relieved as shown by *huu* in line 51 when finally telling all about the store. She describes that the store was very big (line 51), having two stories (lines 53 and 55), and being full of people even though it was after 9:00 p.m. when she got there (lines 57 to 60). George, on the other hand, gives the minimum alignments by saying *un* in line 59 or *asoo* in line 61.

George's lack of active participation in the interaction does not suggest that he did not get the point of Ritsuko's story and there are at least two points of interest here. First, it is clear that Ritsuko stated her point of the story in a Japanese culture-specific style; she provided relevant background information first and then covered the point at the end. Even as she was explaining the main ideas behind her story (that she had newly visited the store and was surprised at what she found), she did not explicitly provide this synopsis and expressed the idea implicitly through the description of her experience.

Interestingly, George was not as attentive at this point as at the beginning of the interaction. He may have given up trying to understand the point of the story or lost interest in the story toward the end. He may even have been slightly offended at Ritsuko's dismissal of his attempts to engage her and contribute to the conversation. He did not realize the point that Ritsuko was making and tried to offer his contribution to the conversation but the timing was off. She was slightly perturbed (Yeah, yeah, that's true but...) at the distraction caused by his failure to wait for her to finish telling her story. Most tellingly, the conversation ended entirely after Ritsuko finished making her point and there was no further discussion about the store or her experience.

While it is difficult to say for sure what Ritsuko and George felt following this exchange without direct discussion with them about it, it appears that neither was fulfilled by the end of the conversation. Ritsuko had to repeatedly wrest control of the conversation back from George. In turn, his contributions to the dialogue were rebuffed and sidelined and he was not engaged or interested by the end. Both participants' natural flow of discourse was interrupted when engaged with the others' and the conversation endured diversions and required repeated efforts to come to completion. While this misunderstanding was not a major malfunction in communication, the additional effort by both parties is indicative of the energy that intercultural couples must exert in order to communicate. The simple subject matter of this conversation also accentuates the ubiquity of friction in communication between intercultural couples.

Conclusion

This paper examined misunderstandings triggered by communication style differences between Japanese and Americans. Specifically, this paper explored how Ritsuko, the Japanese wife, made the point of her story to her American husband, George, and

examined how she reached to her point and why he had difficulty understanding it. We saw in the data that Ritsuko stated the point of her story at the end and George had difficulty following to her story and misunderstood her point a couple of times through the interaction. This evidence supports the previous research findings (e. g., Okazaki, 1993).

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Transcription conventions:

...	pause less than a second
(1)	timed pause in seconds
=	latching of utterance segments
[]	overlapping talk
.hh	in-breath
:	elongated sound
-	cut-off
,	continuing intonation
?	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
CAPITALS	much louder volume

<u>Under</u>	emphasis
< >	decreased speed
> <	increased speed
(())	transcriber comment
(...)	incomprehensible speech