

# Characteristics of Rhetorical Use by Japanese Learners of English

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## Abstract

Japanese indirectness and a lack of logic in communication have been often pointed out. Many have tried to explain the causes, and attributed them to the Japanese characteristics such as our unsociability and exclusiveness. However, these points of view often originated from the basis of Western rhetoric. A purpose of this paper is to recognize the differences between Japanese and English as one of the languages in Western culture, and review the present status of English classes in Japan. To explain each communication style, the literature and essays of communication and rhetoric were referenced. An actual classroom example was reported. Results indicated that the rhetorical use in each language is closely related to its history and culture, and explanations on rhetoric based on one culture would not be sufficient. In pedagogical perspective, explicit instruction on rhetoric to students would be preferable in the course of learning a language.

## 1. Introduction

Since the time we started to be exposed to information from different cultures, we have been aware of something different in the way of communication between our culture and others. When interacting with people from different cultures, the differences in communication style not only intrigue us but also lead to misunderstandings among the people concerned. There are too many cases of this nature to mention. A businessman notes Japanese indirectness, saying "The more important the communication from a Japanese is, the more indirect it will be". Then, why does Japanese sound indirect to foreigners, and where does the impression originate? One of the reasons

for this gap in understanding may lie in the difference of text organization between languages in different cultures. The purpose of this paper is to search the characteristics of Japanese communication style from the cross-cultural point of view in order for Japanese EFL students to know rhetorical use in English.

The characteristics of Japanese communication styles are to be explored from the literature of intercultural communication in the following section in order to know one of the factors, which can cause misunderstandings in terms of rhetoric.

## 2. Comparison of Japanese and English communication style

As recently as decades ago, only a limited number of people were exposed directly to foreigners, but now people of all walks of life have had chances to encounter people from other cultures. Under these circumstances many have realized that the Japanese way of communication often does not function well. Tohyama (1993) mentioned that one of the biggest communication characteristics of Japanese people is that many Japanese people have a conscious vulnerability toward foreigners, saying, "Quite many Japanese have experienced fatigue from foreigners' different communication ethics. Those Japanese are stunned at Westerner's overly persistent attitudes and Arab's stubbornness and feel tired from the long speeches of over-confident Indians" (Translation by Sato). Then what makes Japanese people feel that way? And if Japanese are uncomfortable when communicating with foreigners, the latter must perceive something awkward, if not upsetting themselves. To describe the characteristics of Japanese communication style, researchers in the field of intercultural communication often uses the terms, a high-context culture and collectivism. It is true that typologies do not apply to every case in the group or category. A member of a group or category often has multiple characteristics over groups and categories. Still, certain categorization can help explain some possible comparison.

### 2-1. A high-context culture

In his book, "Beyond Culture", Edward T. Hall (1976) explained the high-context communication or message, saying that most of information is contained in a physical context or inherited in the individual, and that the encoded message has a very little information. Under these circumstances, people tend to be skillful in understanding non-verbal cues more than in developing logical negotiation through words. Similar to other Asian nations, Japan has a high-context culture. In this culture, we learn the importance of groupings from early childhood. Within the group we grow, we learn to consider the environment, situation, gestures, and mood when interacting each other. As a

member of a group we have the perception that other members think and act in a similar manner as us. In this homogeneous society we do not have less need to persuade others by words. We depend on a tacit agreement. When trying to reach an agreement, we don't place much weight on words. Rather, we have even regarded eloquence as the skill to be looked down upon. We have tended to think that the truth exists under surface of spoken words. This leads to the Westerners' perception of Japanese as a language in which "words sometimes take a mere superficial role in undergoing communication, and substantial facts tend to be gained by means of other factors such as relationships and backgrounds between communicators, namely the context in which the interaction goes on (Fujita, 1991)." (Translation by Sato)

In low-context communication on the other hand, most of information is contained in an explicitly encoded message. People in a low-context culture tend to depend on clearly formed messages and elaborate in detail.

Although the term of high - context not only defines contexts of communication but also mentions group-orientation of Japanese, this is not sufficient to explain Japanese indirectness in interactions.

## **2-2. Collectivism and individualism**

The word collectivism is one of a pair. The opposite is individualism. Because Japan falls into the collectivistic culture and Western culture into an individualistic one, Japanese communication naturally closely relates to collectivism, which leads to the different communication style observed by English speaking people who are from an individualistic culture.

### **2-2-1 Collectivism and Japanese communication**

Japanese indirectness (from the Western viewpoint) has been rationalized by the concept of collectivism vs. individualism. Hofstede (1984) stipulated that individualism-collectivism is one of the main dimensions that differentiate cultures. Klopff (1998) delineates their characteristics by sorting out four main different concepts between collectivism and individualism — the perception of self, group, status and nonverbal behavior. Many have pointed out that these perceptions relate to the Japanese communicative behavior. One of the most important is the way of dealing with "I" and "you", or self-perception, in the Japanese language. Another is the attitude toward the group. These have been mentioned frequently whenever a misunderstanding between Japanese and foreigners occurs in the international scenes.

### **2-2-2 Individualism**

As mentioned in the section above, English is a language formed in an individualistic culture, and the underlying perception in this culture may be said to be the self. Klopff indicates that "the self is

independent, an entity autonomous from groups... Our dominant self, visible in the form of individualism, pervades our relationships and is part of all of our activities... We are distinct from others." In this vein, the idea of self is naturally clarified in people's interactions with each other. In other words, their communication may include a purpose to distinct individuals, "I" to "you". As group members, confrontation, not harmony, is perceived as advantageous. He continues "Disagreement help clear the air, and winning a verbal battle is a measure of personal worth. Completing a task is highly prized." When comparing this to collectivism, the start of communication in individualistic society seems to be the difference (confrontation) between "I" and "you" and the speakers are more comfortable when being different.

This communication behavior can be understood more clearly when looking over the history of communication. Preoccupations underling Japanese and English will be explored in the following.

### **2-3 The background of communication in Japanese and English**

Yum (1996) argues that "The individualism - collectivism dichotomy, however, is not identical to the difference between the East Asian emphasis on social relationships and North American emphasis on individualism... This East Asian preoccupation with social relationships stems from the doctrines of Confucianism. The center of the moral content sought by Confucius can be referred to as "*Jen*". *Jen* is translated into English as "benevolence" or "love". The core of *Jen* is the warm harmonious relationship between humans. To make *Jen* possible in human relations, Confucius taught how to live. For example, to oneself, *Jen* is self-restraint and self discipline; to others, benevolence — "*onore ni kachite rei ni kaeru*"(Japanese translation). This self-restraint and benevolence toward others along with other Confucian teachings have influenced Japanese behavior. One example is "The Japanese who can say no". It was originally a title of a book collaborated on by two famous Japanese, a politician and a businessman, warning Japanese politicians and business people for their poor performances in the international arena — where they seemingly can not say no. As the book was on the best-seller list, the title of the book was parodied. "Japanese can't say no" was once a kind of popular phrase as an indicator of Japanese communicating style within the field of mass communication. However, Japanese are not unable to say "no", rather Japanese unconsciously consider that "yes" or "no" is to be expressed by the listener and that extending decisions or opinions should be left to the interlocutor as a token of *Li* or propriety while interacting. Confucius's idea affects not only Japanese values but also directly on the communication style. "*Kogen reisyoku sukunasi Jin*" — "the admonition for being with those who employ artful speeches and insinuating looks (Chung, 1994) " may be said to be one of the teachings that a smart, eloquent speech is regarded inappropriate in human relations. "One of characteristics in the way of expression in Japanese is through the deep consideration towards others. Vagueness is preferable because decision

making should be left to others. Too direct expressions are avoided as imprudent behavior. (Toyama)" (Translation by Sato)

Japanese language has rested on the above tendencies, and has not developed a logical way of talking (in terms of Western language) as a method through words to make oneself understood to others.

McCroskey (1994), with acknowledging two major classifications of communication type — rhetorical (individualism) and relational (collectivism), maintains "...the impact of rhetorical tradition has been the strongest and longest" in the Western culture.

In Athens, during the 5th century B.C., there was a large group of itinerant teachers, known as sophists, who established small schools and charged students for attending their lectures on rhetoric, literature, and science, and philosophy. Protagoras of Abdara, sometimes called the "Father of Debate"...contended that there were two sides of every proposition (a dialectic) and that speakers should be able to argue either side of proposition equally well. This view, commonly accepted by today's teachers of argumentation and debate, provides the foundation in the U.S. for communication in today's legal and legislative systems...(McCroskey)

Meantime, McCroskey also pointed out that "Aristotle is generally the foremost theorist in the history of the study of the human communication from the rhetorical perspective", quoting Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering in a particular case what are the available means of persuasion". Aristotle's theory was partially applied in the Roman period and spread to the Middle Ages though the emphasis was more on the style during the period of Renaissance. Consequently, Hatano (1973) considers Aristotle to be the scholar who contributed the most to the development of rhetoric.

As mentioned above, the start of Western rhetoric was arguments at the court or the public places, and was developed in the Western countries. For example, when passed on to America, this Aristotelian perspective was extended in the early 20th century, to develop into the field of "Speech".

Reflecting on the nature of rhetorical approach to the study of human communication, the word "Speech" has been shrinking in the field of communication. The focus of researchers seems to have been diversified further. However, it is difficult to deny that the rhetorical tradition has influenced on communication in the present Western culture, similarly Confucianism in East Asian culture.

#### **2-4. Rhetorical characteristics**

Above mentioned cultural backgrounds can help understand Japanese and English rhetorical characteristics. English, as well as other languages in Western culture, has been developed as a mean to make a distinction between "you" and "I". The underlying idea is two different sides, namely "I" and "you", a sender and a receiver, and sometimes a persuading person and a persuaded person.

Under these circumstances, in organizing sentences to express oneself, one's own standpoint is naturally predominant. This tendency is seen clearly in the structure of texts. *Exordium*, *narratio*, *probatio*, *refutatio*, and *peroratio* as *dispositio* in the subjects of rhetoric are said to be established 2500 years ago, and had been taught at school until the 19th century (Hatano). Though this original concept may not entirely fit with the present time rhetoric, it has been the core of Western rhetoric.

This view is often contrasted with "*ki-syo-ten-ketsu*" which has been developed as a rhetorical order in Japanese. They are often translated into English as "introduction-development-turn-conclusion". However, the content of each part is very different from that of English. "*ki-syo-ten-ketsu*" originated from the four-part structure of Chinese poetry, and has been used for the organization of Japanese sentences. Compared with the logical order in English, it has been said to be an order of casual conversation among companions and fellows. A precondition here is being a member of a group. Unlike the introduction stated in the Western rhetorical order, "*ki*" or introduction only takes the role of the beginning of a poem, like a starter in dinner. Points or main ideas are not expressed in the introduction part and there are even some cases when they are not referred to until the end of the conclusion. *Ten*, or turn in which the point is turned, takes an important role to attract the listeners. It is one of the methods in the literature such as novels and poems. By doing this, the listeners identify themselves strongly with the speaker's (poet's) mentality. It does not resemble the refutation which is presented as opposing arguments to the other party's statement. These facts fit the way of communication by people in a high-context culture. Toyama illustrates this rhetorical difference by using the two triangles,  $\nabla$  for the Western rhetoric and  $\triangle$  for Japanese. He points out that the difference between two triangles is an issue in the field of comparative rhetoric. Little attention has been paid to the fact that such phenomenon exists between English and ours, and he states that without knowing this rhetorical difference, efficient communication is difficult to build up. Based on his suggestion, this rhetorical difference is a broader issue which has something to do with linguistic culture though the research of rhetoric is mainly dealt within the sphere of composition and the public communication in the present communication and linguistics field. Learners of English should earmark on the issue to know the characteristics of the target language.

### 3. Rhetorical education in Japan

#### 3-1 Present status of rhetoric instruction in Japan

Sawada (1983) enumerates the reasons that logical rhetoric is still immature in today's Japan: 1) Japanese orientation to lyric literature, 2) a lack of parliamentary discussion, and 3) ignorance of logical rhetoric in education. Partial explanations for 1) and 2) have been already attempted in

previous sections in this paper. As for 3), he deplores an absence of dialogues based on a dialectic rhetoric even in the field of language education that would be difficult to stand up without them.

Those items that are likely to relate to rhetorical instruction will be excerpted from The Ministry of Education's Course of Study for senior high school (1998) as follows:

### **Oral Communication II**

- Instruction of language activities

Study the basic rules and way of group communication such as discussion and debate, and apply them.

### **Reading**

- Instruction of language activities

When reading, attention should be paid to the key word, phrase and sentence and the organization and development of a paragraph.

(Translation by Sato)

As far as looking over the Course of Study, the phrase "the basic rules and way of group communication such as discussion and debate" is likely to include the way of logical presentation. And an explicit indication towards rhetoric is made only in a section referring to Reading through using the term, a paragraph. However, in actual high school classrooms, the phrase of "paragraph reading" seems to be used as a method of English reading comprehension. For a few able students, the paragraph reading is a useful way of comprehension which requires only reading the first few sentences. In reality, most of the students do not fully understand the content of a paragraph. What is worse, some students are even unfamiliar with the word, paragraph.

For the purpose of efficient understanding of English, it seems to be necessary for EFL students to be instructed specifically about the organization of English texts in the course of learning English, which will then develop into rhetoric and let them notice the thinking process of English speaking people.

### **3-2 Report from an actual classroom**

Examples of speech draft made up by two Japanese EFL students of second grade at junior college will be presented here as an example in an actual classroom. The detail of these small speeches and the way of instructions were referred to "An Essay: Rhetorical Instruction from the Viewpoint of Cross-Cultural Communication (Sato 2000)" presented in the Communication Association of Japan Chugoku-Shikoku Chapter 2000 meeting.

### **Example of students' speech**

The first speeches were made by the students before the instructions on sentence organization, and the second after the instruction. Before the instructions, they had known the word, "paragraph" as "*danraku*" in Japanese, but had had almost no knowledge of what is paragraph nor the way of organizing English sentences in terms of rhetoric. The second speeches were presented after the instructions and the actual practices on the sentence organization. Five class hours in the second semester were used for the instructions and practices.

The followings are from students' drafts. Mistakes in grammar and usage are not corrected. Spelling is checked. No indentation is made.

1) The case of Student A

The first speech

Title: Driving a car

I often drive a car with my friends. But I drive a car very slowly. Because the police sometimes chase the car that the driver break the speed limit. And the police is cracking down on drunken driver on weekend. Too much speeding invite traffic accident. Careless drive is causing disaster. It is not anyone's fault. We should keep traffic rules.

The second speech

Title: Driving a car

I often drive a car with my friend. For example I go to the sea, the mountains, department stores and so on. Sometimes I see a car running over speed limit. I think we should follow the traffic rule. We have to keep speed limit.

First, driving too fast is dangerous. Almost all the accidents are caused by speed. The police is chasing the car that break the rule. Second, we don't have to drive fast. If you want to go fast, the more important thing is quick and right judgement. It's not speed. If you see cars driving quickly and rightly, you can expect the next movements. And you can go fast.

For these reasons it is important to keep speed limit.

Her speech became easier to understand after the lessons. In addition, according to her comments after lessons, she had not known how to organize the sentences before the lesson though she had wanted to add the matter of drivers' skills to her first speech. In her case, the lessons seemed to help her idea-gathering.

2) The case of Student B

The first speech

Title: TV

I like TV. But sometimes I hate TV.

I often have a sense of guilt after watching TV. Because I don't have any purpose when I watch TV, and if I watched TV like this, I couldn't get anything.

Actually, TV gives us some information.

For example, we get experience by watching TV as if we traveled somewhere and we can have a laugh by listening a funny story on TV. But we don't need to think when we watch TV. We forget to think. I usually ask myself "What did you get anything by watching TV?" My answer is "nothing". I just get eyestrain and have a headache.

So, I choose program in newspaper. I watch TV program that I can get knowledge. I watch a movie because I can use a movie to study listening English.

The second speech

Title: TV

I like TV. But we just receive information without thinking. I think we should choose the program when we watch TV, and we should receive information not to put ourselves in passive position. I believe this is important for us.

As you know, there are too many stupid programs. Funny programs are very popular among children. Some these programs include violence as funny things. They try to get fun by using violence. People particularly children are influenced by TV, so we should choose the right program to see.

And there are too much information. Even if mass media gives us information as the truth, we can't say everything is right. Sometimes misinformation hurts people. we should judge whether information is right or not.

We can say that it's important for us to have our own opinion.

Her first speech was more vivid than the second, and seemed to be received with sympathetically by the listening students. The possible reason is that she made the first draft through her own words, namely with the most natural way for her. Her first speech followed the order of "*ki-syo-ten-ketsu*" rather than Western logical order. She mentioned her main idea in the end of the speech. And she tried to appeal to listeners' reactions, not to their logic. In her second speech, she tried to follow the rhetorical order indicated during the lessons. As a result, her points were stated more clearly than in the first speech. Her points were more direct and thus easily comprehended by the listeners.

The purpose of this instruction was to let the Japanese students notice that there are some differences between English speaking people and themselves in constructing texts. The instruction did not intend to judge which is preferable. In the meantime, it is not clear whether or not

comparing two speeches (before the lessons and after) is valid because generally speaking, the more times a speech draft has been polished, the better it can be presented. However, some possible explanations may be allowed as follows:

Japanese ESL students at junior college level may tend to organize English sentences with following the norm of the Japanese language if anything related to the sentence order is not instructed. Explicit instruction and practices can help students be aware of a difference in the sentence organization, and may help prevent them from using the avoidance strategy called silence. Five-time lessons might be insufficient to let them acquire the Western logic. They will have to learn to know what communication scenes require the logical rhetorical order, and how much this difference affects on mutual understandings in communication.

#### 4. Conclusion

The present paper firstly tried to explain one of the differences of Japanese and English in terms of the rhetorical use, aiming to acknowledge the difference as it is. In order to prevent from criticism that the language use by learners is not in accordance with the norm of the target language, the explanations were based on intercultural and historical perspectives, not only on the linguistic factors. As a result, the history and background of each rhetorical use were seen clearly and rhetoric is related to the basic concept of the language and culture. Secondly, the instructions to Japanese EFL students were reported. Although this was a very minor trial of rhetorical instructions, the aim was to let them know that there were differences between two languages not only in vocabulary and grammar, and that it is closely related to the communication process.

The present paper argues that before lamenting that Western logic has not taken root in Japan, rhetorical difference in two cultures should be acknowledged as they are. Some researchers, as mentioned before, have already started to explore the two major communication types, rhetorical and relational. Still further research along this line would be necessary for full understandings. It is the writer's hope that the explanations and studies reported on this paper will lead to new important findings about the communication and the process of foreign language acquisition.

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