

BILINGUAL

Mastering the gentle art of arguing in Japanese

By MICHAEL GAKURAN
Special to The Japan Times

"I'd like to have an argument, please."

"Certainly, sir. Have you been here before?"

Many people are familiar with comedy group Monty Python's famous "Argument Clinic" sketch. A man walks in looking for an argument and receives a series of petty yes-no contradictions. "In order to argue, one must take up a contrary position," explains a clinic worker to the visitor.

Not so in Japan. Taking up an opposing position risks alienating your friends and ruining relationships, as I have learned the hard way.

As a case in point, I recently broached the controversial issue of whaling with a Japanese friend. It soon became clear that our opinions were far apart. This unshackled the philosopher in me and I let loose a logical argument intending to reveal the inconsistencies in my friend's position. This did not have the effect I had intended, however, and my friend only grew more and more irritated at my stubborn effort at persuasion.

It was only after I'd calmed down that I realized that I'd committed one of the most serious mistakes in arguing with Japanese people. It wasn't due to lack of respect or outright rudeness. It was a communication failure that amounted to fundamental cultural differences.

So what went wrong and how can concerned non-Japanese avoid making the same mistake?

To begin with, it's important to understand that arguing with Japanese people requires a special sort of empathy. No matter how factually incorrect or logically unsound you feel

your opponent's views are, simply exposing the flaws in their arguments will not allow the conversation to proceed. You might find that the discussion ends prematurely and the other person never speaks to you again. What is missing for the Japanese is a desire to compromise and find common ground. This extra step of repeatedly searching for mutual points to agree on, and avoiding outright criticism of one another's views, is often absent from many Western-style arguments.

There are no easy ways to show this, however. The correct etiquette requires a combination of good body language, 相づち (*aizuchi*, verbal responses) and softening expressions.

The right body language generally comes down to common sense — try not to give off negative signals by slouching, staring into space or crossing your arms and legs defensively. Instead, lean forward, make eye contact and look interested.

Verbal responses are trickier, and they don't always come naturally. Slipping in a well-placed 「うん」 ("un," "uh huh") or 「はい」 ("hai," "yes") or a 「なるほど」 ("naruhodo," "ahh") can really convey that you are listening carefully to the other person. Avoid the careless utterance of 「うんうん」 ("un un," "yeah," yeah), 「ふーん」 ("fūn," "hmm ...") and 「はあ . . .」 ("haa," "ehh ...") or you may give the impression of not caring. The notorious 「はっ」 ("ha") is also best avoided. It sounds very similar to casually saying "huh?" in English, but it actually signals anger in Japanese.

Finally, we have softening expressions. Affirmative words such as 「そうですね」 (*sō desu ne*, I think so, too) are a good start. The expression is used to acknowledge that you are listening to and appreciating the other person's views, rather than the literal meaning of actually agreeing with them.

Questioning sentences (疑問文, *gimonbun*) are also helpful. By asking your opponent their opinion after giving your own, you can soften the blow. For example: 「こうしたほうがいいんじゃないかと思えますけど、どうですか」 ("Kō shita hō ga iin jyanai ka to omoimasu kedo, dō desu ka?" "I think that it should be done like this, but what about you?") or 「この方法もあるみたいですが、どうでしょうか」 ("Kono hō>hō mo aru mitai desu kedo, dō deshō ka?" "What do you think about this way of doing things?") Another method is to compliment your opponent's idea before suggesting a different one. For example: 「確かにそれもいいかもしれませんが、これはどうでしょう」 ("Tashika ni sore mo ii kamo shiremasen ga, kore

wa dō deshō?" "That sounds good as well, but what about this?") Finally, you'll want to avoid using 「でも」 (*demo*, "but") or 「だから」 (*dakara*, "like I already said") too often, because they can suggest you are being condescending.

These expressions aren't foolproof, however. You should always be 空気を読んでいる (*kūki wo yondeiru*, reading the situation) to pick the most opportune moments to raise new ideas and adapt your way of speaking to suit the other person. So long as you don't try to force your own views, with a little patience and understanding you should be well on your way to having successful arguments in Japanese.

A well-placed 「うん」 (*un*, 'uh huh') or 「なるほど」 (*naruhodo*, 'ahh') can communicate that you are listening carefully.

For more on this topic, check the video by Youtube vlogger Hikosaemon at www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR8-Z2RWYHY. Michael Gakuran blogs at www.gakuranman.com

The Japan Times: Wednesday, June 30, 2010
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)