

Chapter Seven - Communication Patterns

I. Reading

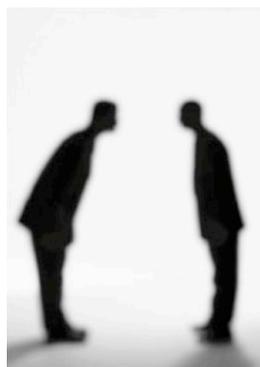
How does it mean?

Language is, of course, more than just words. It's more than grammar. In fact, it's so complex that it's amazing that we can communicate at all, even in our native languages. When one attempts to communicate with someone from another culture, the number of things that can go wrong multiplies exponentially.

Beyond the meanings of individual words, basic sentence structure and grammar, expressions and idioms, standard usage, contextual cues and register, communication also depends on certain assumptions and expectations about *patterns* in our spoken language. A westerner watching two Japanese speak with each other might not have any idea that one of them disagrees completely with the other. When we watch two Poles or Italians speaking, it's easy to mistakenly assume that there is a serious argument underway. In these cases, it's because the conversation patterns, as well as intonation and body language, are so different from our own. What we need to keep in mind is that the content, context, and pattern of our language all contain meaning beyond the meaning of the actual words that come out of our mouths.

Introductions

One example that illustrates the differences is introductions or first conversations. To a Westerner, a Japanese 挨拶 (*aisatsu*) seems scripted, forced, unnatural, and unnecessarily formal. To a Japanese, a conversation between two westerners seems chaotic and unpredictable. What's going on?



Well, Japanese introductions reflect the culture's value of harmony, so the conversation follows fairly standard patterns, and there is little variation on the basic script, and very little chance of surprise. However, it is exactly in those variations on the standard script where the speakers express and comprehend meaning. The Westerner doesn't know the script, and so, misses the variations. It is in these variations where the real communication lies. Japanese speakers know the script, and understand any variation immediately; the Westerner doesn't know (or expect) the script, so the variation is completely missed.

Western conversations between people meeting for the first time also follow certain "rules," but, in general, their conversations are much less formal than similar conversations between Japanese. As we have discussed, certain topics (religion, politics, salary, etc.) are avoided, as are reminders of differences in social status. Otherwise, the conversation is pretty much free to go wherever the speakers want to take it. Since two Westerners speaking for the first time know and expect this, things go smoothly. A Japanese listening to the conversation, or trying to participate in it, is confounded by (によって混乱) the unexpected twists and turns, and is often paralyzed by the surprise and effort to try to find the hidden "script." Unfortunately for him, there is no script.

Speeches: Jokes and apologies

The patterns in each language help speakers understand others because they have some idea of what to expect. The problem is that each language has its own unique patterns. A good example is speeches. Japanese speeches begin with a thank you to the audience, and invariably,

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an apology—for one's poor speaking ability, lack of expertise, or other shortcoming of the speaker. This is what the Japanese audience expects, but a Westerner might be confused by an apology that seems at odds with the reality of the situation. If a world-renowned scholar begins his speech with an apology for making everyone listen to the ramblings of a doddering old fool, a Westerner would certainly be confused; worse, he might think the speaker was being insincerely humble, or even hypocritical. Not only is the apology what the Japanese audience expects, it also fits the cultural pattern of humbling oneself in front of others as a sign of respect. (See Chapter Three.)

Westerners, on the other hand, will often thank the audience at the beginning of a speech, and then just as often, follow those thanks with a joke. The joke serves several functions. It gets the audience's attention, for one. Second, it's what the audience expects. Third, it helps the audience relax and feel more casual, which is important for almost any task or activity, from a Western perspective. Finally, it helps bring the speaker and audience to the same level, creating a feeling of equality and friendliness. A Japanese audience will often miss the joke entirely because a joke is the last thing they expect and the lack of an apology might make the speaker seem aloof or arrogant.

Let's play



Different conversation patterns are even more important in regular day-to-day conversations. In some ways, the differences are like sports.¹ When engaged in a Japanese conversation, one needs to be constantly aware of the hierarchical structure of the group present, and one's place in the hierarchy. A 後輩 (*kobai*) needs to be very careful about contradicting a 先輩 (*sempai*), or even revealing that he may know more than a 先輩 (*sempai*). The 先輩 (*sempai*) has more freedom to dominate the conversation, to interrupt others, or even challenge others' ideas or opinions—another reason why 後輩 (*kobai*) often limit their input to bobbing heads and enthusiastic "はい-s" (*hai-s*). General etiquette in Japan tells us

to wait for the other person to finish what they are saying, then wait for others of higher rank to add information, ask a question, or change the subject. Japanese conversation is like bowling: one waits for the person ahead of you to finish, then takes one's turn.

Western conversation follows a very different pattern. As you would expect, much less attention is paid to rank or status. Ideas are challenged and contrary opinions expressed continually. Speakers are interrupted, and disagreement is not unusual. The pattern is a lot more like volleyball, with control of the conversation constantly getting bounced around aggressively. The problem when people from these different cultures try to communicate should be obvious—even though they may have a grasp of the vocabulary and grammar of the language, they are trying to play very different games.

¹ Many thanks to Nancy Sakamoto and Rie Natsuoka for this analogy.

II. Comprehension Questions

If you have a difficult time answering these questions, read the passage again. If you can't find the answer, make a note of your question and ask the teacher for an explanation in your next class.

1. Why are conversation patterns so important?
2. What is different about Japanese 挨拶 (*aisatsu*) and Western introductions?
3. Why do Westerners so often begin speeches with jokes? Why is this strange to a Japanese audience?
4. Compare and contrast Japanese and English conversations to various sports.
5. How is the concept of 先輩-後輩 (*senpai-kobai*) different in Western culture?

III. Thinking

New words and expressions

What are the main points in this chapter?

General summary of main points.

List some examples from your own life or observations that support these points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that do not support these points:

Your reactions and opinions: