Japanese Miscommunication with Foreigners

In Search for Valid Accounts and Effective Remedies

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Abstract: Numerous personal accounts, anecdotal stories, and surveys suggest that for many Japanese communication with foreigners is a difficult and even unpleasant experience. This intercultural miscommunication, which seems to characterize Japanese more than their foreign counterparts, has attracted the attention of scholars, both in Japan and overseas. In fact, ever since the forced opening of Japan 150 years ago, scholars and laymen have advanced explicit and implicit theories to account for the presumed Japanese "foreigner complex" and its effect on Japanese intercultural communication. These theories focus on Japan's geographical and historical isolation, linguistic barriers, idiosyncratic communication style, and the interpersonal shyness of its people. While there is a certain kernel of truth in many of the hypotheses proposed, they tend to exaggerate cultural differences and stress marginal aspects. This article seeks to review critically the different views of Japanese communication difficulties with foreigners, and to advance complementary hypotheses based on recent studies. It also attempts to examine the implications of this miscommunication and to consider several options to alleviate it.

Introduction

Two meetings held in the last decade between Japan's leading politicians and the American president Bill Clinton highlight the issue of intercultural miscommunication – an important but somewhat neglected aspect of human communication. Like members of any culture, Americans have their share of intercultural miscommunication, yet this article concerns the Japanese side. Our first case in point is the former prime minister Mori Yoshirō, whose English proficiency was limited, to the say the least. Being the host of the summit of the G8 leaders held in Okinawa in 2000, Mori decided to prepare himself for the task by practicing some basic patterns of greetings, mainly "How are you?" and the appropriate response. Alas, when he met with Clinton, Mori's greetings sounded more like "Who are you?" The American president was not bewildered by the ostensibly strange question and replied with his characteristic wit, "I'm Hillary's husband." Mori, however, did not pay attention to the shifting discourse and quickly replied, "Me, too" (Asai 2000: 3).

While Mori's intercultural skills are not uncommon among Japanese politicians, some exceptions do exist. One of them is Miyazawa Kiichi, a fluent speaker of English and our second case in point, who served as prime minister a few years earlier and seemed very comfortable in dealing with foreigners. When Miyazawa met Clinton in 1993 he displayed the whole gamut of his intercultural skills and spoke fluent English. In Japan, however, Miyazawa's English proficiency became a source of criticism. Some officials reasoned that he should have employed interpreters to avoid misunderstanding. Other critics were more straightforward. Saitō Akira, for example, a commentator of the leading daily *Yomiuri Shinbun*, contended that "a country's leader should try to respect its language as well as it culture and tradition" (Saito 1993: 8).

These anecdotes elucidate two contradicting facets: Being inept in speaking the global *lingua franca* prevents one from communicating with non-Japanese, but speaking it too proficiently paradoxically brings about a backlash that endangers communication as well. Ultimately, both cases may end in misunderstanding and miscommunication, which carry grave consequences for the outcome of an intercultural encounter. Communication, a very broad concept, refers in this context to "social intercourse" (Pearsall and Trumble 2002: 293) or more specifically to "the imparting or interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs" (Webster 1989: 298). Miscommunication, therefore, refers to more than linguistic barriers and does not characterize the Japanese alone. To some extent it occurs in any intercultural encounter and it may happen even when people of the same culture communicate. As a concept, miscommunication encompasses several levels of interpersonal communication. Coupland, Giles, and Wiemann (1991: 13), for example, distinguished six levels of miscommunication. They range from language use (i.e., inherently flawed discourse and meaning transfer, minor misunderstandings), speaker characteristics (i.e., presumed personal deficiencies, group or cultural differences in linguistic or communication norms), to ideological framings of talks.

Although the analysis of the various levels of Japanese intercultural miscommunication has its merits, due to lack of space the present article focuses on the sources of this phenomenon. To this end, we may employ Banks, Ge and Baker's (1991: 106) definition of miscommunication: "a particular kind of misunderstanding, one that is unintended yet is recognized as a problem by one or more of the persons involved." Still, since we do not deal here with a particular kind of misunderstanding we may resort to an even more simplified but functional definition of miscommunication, namely *recognized general difficulties regarding communication with foreigners*.

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The term "foreigners," in this context, refers to non-Japanese in general and Westerners in particular (see Account II). In reality, however, miscommunication in Japan, like in any other culture, is not dichotomized to foreigners and non-foreigners but manifested itself along a continuum, ranging from familiar people; mere strangers who nonetheless belong to one's group; to people who do not belong to one's group and may be dissimilar in their look, language and culture. While there has been long debate about those entitled to be called "Japanese," we may here use a generalized and perhaps simplistic definition based on nationality (cf. Ishii 2001; Kidder 1992; Yoshida 1981). The issue of recognition is also of utmost importance, as we need to demonstrate that miscommunication actually exists in the Japanese-foreigner encounter before we embark in examining its sources. The burden of proof in this case is undemanding. Since the forced opening of Japan to the West in 1854, numerous Japanese have noted their difficulties when communicating with foreigners. An early example can be found in the autobiography of the prominent educator and entrepreneur Fukuzawa Yukichi. Upon his arrival in San Francisco in 1860 Fukuzawa noted:

> Before leaving Japan, I, the independent soul – a care-free student who could look the world in the face – had feared nothing. But on arriving in America, I was turned suddenly into a shy, self-conscious, blushing 'bride'. The contrast was indeed funny, even to myself. (Fukuzawa 1981: 114)

A little more than a century later the diplomat Kawasaki Ichirō confessed in a sensational book that Japanese communciation difficulties have lingered. "Excepting a very few Japanese whose command of English is good and who possess a cosmopolitan background," he argued, "foreigners generally find Japanese boring, especially on the first encounter. It is difficult for a foreigner to disarm the reserve and self-consciousness of the average Japanese" (Kawasaki 1969: 11). The main source of the difficulty, Kawasaki suggested, lay in the Japanese personality. The Japanese people

> are shy and self-effacing people. They do not cut a brilliant figure in the international field mainly because of their innate insularity […] Apart from the language difficulty, the Japanese usually find the work in such cosmopolitan groups a severe mental strain. A reticent and self-effacing Japanese official will soon be outwitted, ignored, and finally demoted by his more aggressive foreign colleagues […] (Kawasaki 1969: 58)

Even in the heyday of Japanese economic prowess, a little more than a decade ago, some observers could not ignore the communication gap. Ishi-

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hara Shintarō, for example, an outspoken critic of Japan's timid international conduct and the future governor of Tōkyō, censured Japanese communication with foreigners and reiterated Kawasaki's views. In a bold tract he coauthored with Sony chairman Morita Akio, Ishihara argued that in an era where Japan was taking a leading position in world economy and politics Japanese intercultural communication must change. In their contacts with Westerners, he pointed out, Japanese must not be overbearing, "but by the same token, should overcome their inferiority complex." If a Japanese can really relax only in his home and only with his family, Ishihara reasoned, he "can never truly be a cosmopolitan." This situation kept the Japanese people apart, and thus, he concluded, they "must move out of their current mental stagnation." This was especially relevant, he felt, for Japanese diplomats: "Except for the young and especially qualified, most Japanese diplomats suffer from a peculiar inferiority complex [and] as a result are spreading the seeds of misunderstanding throughout the world" (Morita and Ishihara 1989: 42–43).

Also "foreigners," the other party in Japanese intercultural encounter, have recognized the existence of miscommunication. Commodore Matthew Perry, the commander of the American squadron that forced Japan to open its ports in 1854, was perhaps the first Westerner to complain about communication difficulties with the Japanese in modern times. In his journal he noted, "Notwithstanding that the Japanese are themselves so fond of indulging their curiosity, they are by no means communicative when information is required of them." Perry too attempted to account for the communication gap. Reflecting on the attitude of the common people, he concluded: "It was evident that nothing but fear of punishment deterred them from entering into free intercourse with us" (Perry 1968: 179–180).

The phenomenon Perry described has not escaped the eyes of scholars, both Japanese and foreigners. Over the years they have advanced, explicitly or implicitly, a number of explanations to account for this communication gap. In the following parts I attempt to sort the wide range of materials, hypotheses, and descriptions regarding the Japanese miscommunication with foreigners into ten thematic accounts and to examine critically their relevance to current communication difficulties Japanese experience. These accounts should be considered as tentative, a mere illustration of the nature and boundaries of the issue in question. For this purpose, they are clustered thematically into meaningful categories and disciplines (such as geography, history, psychology, etc.), based on labels used in the past or issues deemed most appropriate.

ACCOUNT I: GEOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL ISOLATION

Perhaps the most common explanation regarding Japanese miscommunication with foreigners concerns the fact that Japan is an "island country" (*shimaguni*). Life on an isolated archipelago 180 km distant from the closest continental shore has evidently affected the history of Japan by preventing extensive contacts with its neighbors. This geographical reality was enhanced by isolationist political regime, which virtually sealed Japan's borders. During the period of isolation (*sakoku*, 1640–1854) Japanese patterns of interpersonal behavior underwent an elaborate institutionalization.

The high degree of insularity of Japan, as well as it "racial and cultural homogeneity," contended Kitamura (1971: 29) in an oft-cited work on "the psychological dimensions of the U.S.-Japanese relations," have "inevitably fostered sensitivity toward even slight differences in race or culture." This attitude has affected communication with foreigners, he reasoned, since the Japanese "are inexperienced in their racial contacts, and therefore they become shy and look very reserved around foreigners." Bennett and McKnight (1956) maintained that the formalized rules and codes of communication developed at that time were further elevated, rather than diminished, in the years after the opening of Japan and disseminated to the rest of the population. Moreover, the majority of Japanese had neither been in contact with nor even seen non-speakers of Japanese until the end of the nineteenth century, and often until much later. During the formative premodern period, many of them had not been in contact even with their more remote Japanese-speaking compatriots due to travel restrictions.

The island country premise is often associated with the development of social mechanisms that are supposed to limit communication skills. The American Japanologist Edwin Reischauer stressed the role of traditional values and social dictums in impairing contemporary ability to communicate with foreigners (Reischauer 1978). In the past, he argued, it seemed adequate to import foreign knowledge through writings rather than through direct contact. Likewise, some saw an advantage in avoiding excessive communication with foreigners and thus keeping them from learning much about Japan.

Journalist Robert Christopher suggested in his book *The Japanese Mind* that the insular mentality leaves its stamp when Japanese learn a foreign language and especially when they attempt to communicate in a foreign language:

> You can't learn to speak a language really well unless you also acquire an understanding of the thought processes and value systems of the people who created that language. And so great is the basic insularity

and introversion of Japanese culture that it is almost impossible for a secretary in Osaka or a bank clerk in Sapporo to develop any real comprehension of the psychology of the English-speaking peoples. (Christopher 1983: 89)

Although this and similar explanations may account for part of the communication difficulty manifested by Japanese when interacting with foreigners, they do not touch, I argue, the core of the problem. First, populations of other island countries, some of them even more isolated than Japan, do not express such acute stress over contact with foreigners. Second, the "foreign complex" is not omnipresent. Japanese do not express such acute stress in communication with foreigners who are from other Asian countries, China and Korea in particular. Finally, the isolation policy ended about 150 years ago. The period since has been sufficiently long to transform Japan into an ultra-modern state and to alter almost any social custom. Those who resort to this account do not explain why the legacy of the isolation has lingered in this domain but not in others.

Account II: The "*Gaijin* Complex"

The partner for the Japanese intercultural communication is the foreigner – sometimes admired, sometimes despised, but never ignored. More than a century after the opening of Japan and decades after the end of the occupation era, foreign residents and visitors to Japan were still shocked by the excitement their presence could cause. "It is commonplace in virtually every Japanese city except Tokyo," Christopher noted in the early 1980s, "for giggling bands of schoolchildren to alert one another to the presence of an outlander with pointed fingers and muted cries 'Gaijin, gaijin' ('foreigner, foreigner')" (Christopher 1983: 164).

For all his proficiency in Japanese, Christopher perhaps did not distinguish between the term *gaijin* (literally "outside person"), which is used to refer to "Westerners" but regarded today as somewhat offensive, and the more general term *gaikokujin* (literally "foreigner"), which denotes any foreign person. Japanese may react strongly to any foreigners and display mixed feelings towards Asians, Africans, and even to foreigners of Japanese descent (Kowner 1999), but most of the communication difficulties they face are vis-à-vis Westerners (also referred to as *seiyōjin,* Western people, or *Ōbeijin,* people of Europe and the U.S.A.). Since the onset of Japanese modernization Western people have replaced the Chinese as the bearers of civilization. In contemporary Japan, Westerners have retained their role as the favorite outsiders (Kitahara 1989). There is, however, a negative

Fig. 1: **Japanese "*gaijin* complex" in communication**

Source: Hitoshi Tanaka's cover illustration of a bilingual brochure titled "Do's & Don'ts in Japanese Business" published by the *Daily Yomiuri* (1994).

side to this attitude, argues Japanese historian Yokoyama Toshio (1994: 177), an unconscious tendency to put Westerners "on a pedestal, almost to the point of thinking of them as supernatural beings, even gods." Gods in the Japanese tradition may cause havoc in certain situations, and Westerners accordingly are treated with suspicion and often avoided for fear they may cause embarrassment. This mixed attitude to Westerners of admiration, annoyance, and apprehension has often been referred to in Japan as the "*gaijin* complex" (*gaijin konpurekkusu*).

Christopher contended that the fingers pointed at the *gaijin* carry a message that "at bottom, the majority of Japanese don't feel comfortable with foreigners and don't really approve of them" (Christopher 1983: 164). A case in point is a short story titled "Amerikan sukūru" (English: "The American School") by Kojima Nobuo and published in 1954. Kojima depicted a group of Japanese English-language schoolteachers who visit an American school in Japan during the occupation era (1945–1952). For Isa, Kojima's protagonist, the most harrowing experience is the encounter with the American hosts, their physical presence in particular. As an English teacher who harbors fierce hatred for the language he teaches and is unable to communicate in it, Isa acutely feels the sentiment Christopher mentioned above. Upon arrival to the school an American teacher approaches him:

> [...] he was all but blinded by the look of abundance on her face: features that spoke of an ample diet, material well-being, and pride of race. She was for all that human, and a fellow schoolteacher as well. So he tried to tell himself, but he could not quite believe it. Next to her – she stood at least a head taller than he – Isa felt weak around the knees, and in reply to her questions he only nodded and bowed. In the end, like a timid servant with his mistress, he allowed himself to be led off toward the school. (Kojima 1977: 133)

The *gaijin* complex does not stem from the depth of the Japanese psyche alone. Some of the annoyance and inconvenience Japanese feel at the presence of foreigners is unquestionably the fault of the latter. In the past foreigners often behaved rudely to Japanese and exhibited an unmistakable air of racial and cultural superiority (cf. Dower 1999). Misbehavior by foreigners and their abuse of Japanese docile behavior have remained an issue in the Japanese media to this day, and not without reason (e.g., Yamanoue 1994; Friman 1996). At the same time, Japanese have not been as helpless and meek with foreigners as certain Japanese writers attempt to present them. Early accounts of the contact between Japanese and foreigners reveal some characteristics of the process. E. K. Laird, an English traveler who visited Japan in 1872, noted that most of the quarrels between the Japanese and foreigners were the result of the misbehavior of the latter toward the former (Laird 1875: I: 225). William Gray Dixon, another Englishman who taught in Tōkyō in the 1870s, felt that contact with foreigners caused the Japanese to shed their politeness, and replace their simplicity with boldness (Dixon 1882).

Account III: Japanese National Character

The presumably idiosyncratic features of the Japanese national character are a source for additional accounts. Never a precise concept, national character may offer several parameters to explain Japanese communication patterns that affect intercultural communication. From a Japanese (emic) viewpoint, certain characteristics of the Japanese personality, such as taciturnity, group orientation, and sensitivity to hierarchy, affect communication with foreigners. The noted literary and culture critic Etō Jun, for example, focused on the shyness (*hazukashisa*) Japanese feel when approached by foreigners speaking a foreign language as a major barrier to their communication (Eto 1977). This shyness is the result of the fear of failing in a mode of communication one believes one must master but in fact has not, and it is experienced most acutely when one has to adopt that

mode in the presence of other Japanese. Etō's view is shared by many of his compatriots. A group of Japanese upper/middle-level managers rated their Japanese employees as far more shy than their American employees. In fact, the managers perceived shyness (versus assertiveness) as the most distinguishing feature between the two cultures out of thirteen bipolar semantic-differential items they were asked to rate (Omens, Jenner and Beatty 1987).

Indeed, from a comparative (etic) viewpoint as well Japanese personality seems to affect intercultural communication. In their cultural comparisons researchers tend to use a limited set of dimensions, among which the continuum of individualism-collectivism has gained predominance for its cultural variability. Whereas individualistic cultures favor individual goals over group goals, collectivistic cultures emphasize community, shared interest, and maintaining face (Hofstede 1980, 1983; Triandis 1995). This dimension is relevant to communication since people of collectivistic cultures, such as Japan, tend to work, play, and even sleep in closer proximity, and consequently their kinesic behavior tends to be more synchronized (Hecht, Andersen and Ribeau 1990). Compared with individualists, collectivists also tend to suppress their emotional displays when these run counter to the mood of the group.

The Japanese culture is considered also as masculine and thus tends to behave within the narrow range of a gender-related set of behaviors (Hofstede 1983). Another relevant continuum is tightness-looseness, which depicts the extent to which a culture allows deviation from behavioral norms. Tight cultures, such as the Japanese, do not permit their members much deviation from what constitutes correct action, whereas loose cultures do not encourage such a consensus (Pelto 1968). It is presumed that tightness amplifies the behavioral pattern of people of different status since they are more likely to obey the behavior prescribed by their social position. One more important dimension for communication is the high-low context continuum, which describes the amount of information available in communication (Hall 1976, 1983). In high-context communication, such as that found in Japan, most of the information exists in the context, is internalized in the people communicating, or is found in the physical context; but in low-context communication most of the information lies in explicit codes. Therefore, high-context communication implies greater emphasis on non-verbal communication than through the verbal content of the discourse.

Both the emic and etic standpoints provide a supplementary explanation for our subject as they place Japan on one side of several cultural continuums, and Western countries, particularly the United States, on the other. These differences in a selected set of dimensions notwithstanding, they

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do not account for the acute discomfort Japanese feel when communicating with foreigners. There is no evidence that shyness, for example, is unique to Japanese, or that people of other collectivistic/high-context cultures suffer from acute intercultural miscommunication. Further, there is nothing unique in the amalgam of national characteristics mentioned above that make the Japanese especially vulnerable to intercultural miscommunication, and certainly not more than their Korean neighbors, to mention only one example.

ACCOUNT IV: SENSITIVITY TO STATUS VIOLATION

A close look at the complaints Japanese and Americans make about each other's way of communication reveals that many, if not most, of the complaints concern status-related behavior. Listing ten archetypal complaints, Condon (1984: 36–37) suggested, for instance, that in Japanese eyes "Americans talk too much […] interrupt other people […] don't listen enough […] seem to think that if they don't tell you something you won't know it […] are too direct in asking questions, giving opinions, and poking fun." In American eyes, by contrast, Japanese are "so polite and so cautious that you never know what they are thinking […] conformists […] forever expressing thanks and appreciation for this or that […] always apologizing, even when there is nothing to apologize for" (Condon 1984: 38–39). Simply rephrased, Japanese feel that Americans violate their status whereas Americans feel Japanese are over-shy and socially incompetent.

Concern for social status, of course, is not unique to Japanese. Status reflects one's relative position in any social hierarchy, and "within all modern societies the order or structure of response is the same, following the typical status ladders of occupation, income, and education" (Inkeles 1960: 1). Nevertheless, that societies are structured along status lines does not mean that status plays the same role in determining social relations. Cultures may differ significantly on the conversational patterns, non-verbal behavior, and verbal choices considered appropriate in a given interaction. Indeed, to compare societies it is necessary to grasp the concept and practice of hierarchy that exists in different cultures (Dumont 1986).

Status has special relevance to Japanese society, where hierarchy prevails; as sociologist Nakane Chie (1970: 26) noted, "an amazingly delicate and intricate system of ranking takes shape." Numerous studies have investigated the differences between non-verbal rules observed by Japanese and non-Japanese, usually Americans, when communicating within the culture. Such studies found some surprising cultural differences in a wide array of topics, such as ways of self-presentation (Morsbach 1973), sitting

distance (Taylor 1974), apology style (Barnlund and Yoshioka 1990; Sugimoto 1998), embarrassment remediation (Sueda and Wiseman 1992), and turn-taking system (Furo 2002), as well as the extent of physical contact (Barnlund 1975; for a review of comparative studies of Japanese vs. Americans communication see Gudykunst and Nishida 1993).

Still, verbal and non-verbal differences in communication between Japanese may lie in perception rather than reality. In the most extensive study on this topic hitherto, Kowner and Wiseman (2003) used 105 scales representing behavior and verbal modes of communication to investigate differences in perception of status-related behavior in Japan and the U.S.A. They found Japanese to perceive greater differences between the behaviors of lower- and higher-status people in their own culture than American respondents perceived in the United States. By and large, people of low status in Japan were perceived as behaving more meekly than Americans of similar status, whereas Japanese of high status were perceived as behaving more boldly than their American counterparts of similar status.

But what happens when Japanese interact with people from a culture extremely different on dimensions related to interpersonal communication, for example, individualism and contextuality? We may expect members of the relatively more strict culture, such as Japan, to perceive their status boundaries as being violated by members of the culture that has looser codes of status-related behavior. Many Japanese have indeed noted that communication with foreigners, Westerners in particular, tends to violate their expectation. This is reflected in numerous guidebooks and academic literature published in Japan that elucidate the "negative" or at least "different" foreign manners during communication (i.e., Brosnahan 1990; Condon and Saito 1974; Inamura 1980; Naotsuka 1980; Nishida and Gudykunst 1982). "It is this pattern of mutual self-recognition, depending upon the other party," admitted linguist Suzuki Takao,

> that makes it possible to explain the psychological unrest of Japanese confronted with Europeans and Americans. For us to be able to make the necessary decision concerning our own slot in human relations, we must first know who the other party is and whether he is of higher or lower status than ourselves. The trouble is that foreigners do not give us a single clue that would permit us to carry out this kind of ranking. The result is that since we are unable to evaluate the other party, we end up in an unstable psychological situation in which we are also unable to rank ourselves […] I really do not think it is any exaggeration to say that when Japanese are faced with a second party who they cannot completely understand or categorize, they are un-

able to carry on normal human intercourse with that party. (Suzuki 1975: 186–187, cited in Miller 1982: 260)

Kowner (2002a) suggested that the code for communicating status in Japan differs from the codes common in foreign countries, Western in particular, to the extent that many Japanese perceive foreigners as violating their social status. Based on real or imaginary behavior, this perception causes Japanese to dislike communication with foreigners, and to perpetuate the feeling of inconvenience to other Japanese who have never experienced an intercultural encounter. In two studies Kowner (2002a) conducted using large samples, Japanese adults perceived their communication style during an intercultural encounter as greatly different from the communication style of their foreign counterparts, whose status was defined as equal. The participants also perceived their own communication style as similar to that of low-status Japanese in an intracultural encounter, whereas the communication style of the foreigners was perceived as similar to that of high-status Japanese in an intracultural encounter. Moreover, the participants perceived the communication with foreigners as unpleasant compared with communication with fellow Japanese, and interestingly they hardly distinguished between Westerners and Asians.

Although these findings support the notion regarding the link between status violation and miscommunication, they are based on perception rather than real behavior. Still, it is possible that perceptions of one's interlocutor and his and her behavior are at least as crucial for interpersonal communication as is the latter's actual behavior. In other words, it is not that actual communication style is unimportant, but the feeling of status violation is caused by (subjective) perceptions of communication styles rather than by an objective examination of them. Although perceptions of communication styles are undoubtedly related to actual communication styles, they are also affected by earlier impressions, attitudes, and stereotypes, which are promulgated culturally. Since many Japanese have experienced only few intercultural encounters, if any, the role of these culturally shaped perceptions is magnified even further, and slight experience tends to confirm them rather than challenge them.

ACCOUNT V: USE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Sharing the use of one common language is the main medium of intercultural communication. Members of any culture may prefer to speak in their native language, yet in intercultural encounters people tend to use the con-

temporary *lingua franca*, which is English at present. Japanese too have conducted most of their intercultural communication in modern times in English, a language genetically and typologically remote from Japanese. For many Japanese English is not only difficult to learn but its use is burdened by complex connotations. For these reasons English has been viewed as another major source of Japanese miscommunication with foreigners. By international standards, the performance of Japanese students on various language tests seems to corroborate this notion. In 1989–1991 Japanese students taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) ranked only 149th among students from 162 nations taking the test, and second from the bottom in a list of twenty-seven Asian nations (*Daily Yomiuri* 1993). Toward the end of the 1990s Japan's rank sank to 180th among 189 nations taking the test (Inoguchi 1999), although some suggest that the low Japanese score may reflect also the wide spectrum of people taking the test as a benchmark for their personal progress rather than from the desire to be accepted at a foreign university.

The Japanese attitude to the *lingua franca* of the modern age has become mixed with the attitude towards the English-speaking nations, the United States and England in particular. At the onset of Japanese modernization these two nations were a source of admiration for their culture and technology, but also of hostility for their military might and racial arrogance. In certain periods, such as during the Russo-Japanese war, English was hailed as the language of Japan's allies. Yet, only a few decades later, with the rise of Japanese ultranationalism, English came to represent the nation's arch-foes and English loanwords were purged from daily use. Since Japan's surrender English has acquired an ambivalent place in the Japanese psyche. It sustains Japan's inferiority vis-à-vis its conquerors, but has regained its previous position as a medium through which Japanese can emulate the technology of the West and bask in its culture. For the latter reason, English loanwords have permeated Japanese at an accelerated pace during the postwar era and now comprise more than 10% of the Japanese vocabulary (Kowner and Rosenhouse 2001). The contradictory character of the ambivalence, however, erupts occasionally, especially when one has had to use the foreign language in public. Isa, Kojima's protagonist, may serve as an extreme though not especially rare example of his generation's attitude to the victor's language:

> […] he had never had a single conversation in English; occasional attempts at practical application of the language in the classroom had left him tingling with embarrassment; and when word came that the Americans would soon be visiting his school he had feigned illness […] Listening to these mellifluous English voices, he could not ac-

count for the fear and horror which the language had always inspired in him. At the same time his own inner voice whispered: It is foolish for Japanese to speak this language like foreigners. If they do, it makes them foreigners, too. And that is a real disgrace. (Kojima 1977: 121, 132)

Toward the end of the visit, Isa wonders why he has to "go through this humiliating ordeal" and reasons it is because he is "a so-called English teacher." Michiko, his colleague, glances at Isa's frightened eyes and realizes he does not like to speak English. Isa confirms her insinuation: "I d-d-detest it!" Michiko is not surprised: "There were a lot of men like that [.. .] and Isa must be one of them" (Kojima 1977: 139).

Isa probably represents bygone attitudes, but with teachers like him, English education in Japan has not produced fluent students. Two decades later, American linguist Roy Andrew Miller noted, the general impression was still grim: "Most Japanese study English for half of their lives without ever once coming face to face with a competent speaker of the language" (Miller 1982: 232). The school years, he maintained, are "totally wasted in the course of hour after dreary hour in the English classroom with Japanese teachers, most of whom drone away in Japanese explaining the grammar and pronunciation of a language that they themselves have rarely even heard and certainly cannot speak" (Miller 1982: 233). Another source for the incompetence of the English education system in Japan is its heavy leaning toward the entrance examinations for university at the end of high school. These tests, Miller asserted,

could not possibly be answered successfully by anyone who is simply a native speaker of English, no matter how literate or experienced in using the language he or she may happen to be. Only someone who has "studied English" throughout the manifold mazes of the Japanese academic jungle can even begin to pass the tests successfully. (Miller 1982: 240)

A decade later, Jonn Foley, the English studies officer and deputy director of the British Council, wrote a paper with the rather provocative title "What's wrong with English teaching in Japan." Foley argued that the biggest obstacle is the motivation of students, who in general do not feel the need to learn English. He also pointed to national characteristics, such as self-consciousness and determination "to get things right," as preventing English learners from freely practicing the language. As for the education system, Foley criticized the large class size and the lack of a training system for teachers, who often end up with a "line to line translation" teaching method. A final obstacle, he contended, is the English language text-

books published in Japan. Many of them are neither "interesting" nor "exciting," but filled with "moral tales." They also tend to use katakana transliteration to indicate how to pronounce English words, which divert students from real English (Ishida 1992: 7).

In another critical article published in 1999, Inoguchi Takashi, a political-science professor at the University of Tokyo, warned against "Japan failing grade in English." Inoguchi defined Japan as one of the countries where English is least understood. He mentioned most of the factors listed above, from the "Nagasaki Dejima mentality" [i.e., the legacy of the seclusion era] to the lack of teachers who are native speakers of the language (Inoguchi 1999). In reality, however, not all students fall behind. Some of them may benefit from a good teacher, personal talent, or a long sojourn abroad. Furthermore, in the last two decades the Japanese government have made evident efforts to improve the standards of teaching by revising high school syllabus, offering teachers opportunities to study in English speaking countries, and employing native English speakers as assistants in English classes.

Nevertheless, proficiency in English does not always solve the problem of communication, and at times it is even considered detrimental as we saw in the case of Prime Minister Miyazawa. The fact that most foreigners cannot speak Japanese, Etō Jun argued, means that Japanese have to speak in a language they have poor command of but they may be exposed to a situation where they would be regarded as different from the people around them (Eto 1977). Reischauer (1978) even suggested the existence of unspoken fears that massive learning of foreign language may impair people's command of their own language and lead to an identity loss. For the same reasons, Christopher suggested, at the highest levels of Japanese industry and politics "an intimate acquaintance with foreign ways and extensive contacts with foreigners can actually be a handicap" (1983: 166). This attitude does not seem to be undergoing rapid change, as only recently Inoguchi (1999) argued that civil servants who attain fluency in foreign languages are accorded low social status. In such a milieu it is no wonder that many top-ranking bureaucrats, and certainly the vast majority of Japanese politicians, rely on those below them to take care of interpretation and translation.

Very few would deny that the use of English poses a formidable obstacle in Japanese intercultural communication. Nevertheless, the significance of this factor should be viewed with mild skepticism simply on account of the observation that Japanese face communication difficulties with foreigners even when using their mother tongue. That is, if the competence of foreign language is the issue, one may be puzzled by the tendency of many Japanese to resort to English even when the foreign speaker's Japanese is

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better than the Japanese speaker's English. The tendency to speak English with foreigners may account for McCroskey, Gudykunst and Nishida's (1985) findings of no significant difference in the level of communication apprehension Japanese report when speaking Japanese and when speaking English (see also Gudykunst et al. 1986). In fact, one study found even the opposite reaction. When speaking English, Japanese sit closer to each other than when speaking their native language (Sussman and Rosenfeld 1982).

ACCOUNT VI: THE PARADOX OF USING JAPANESE LANGUAGE

The Japanese preference for English over Japanese as the language of choice during intercultural encounters seems to involve more than lack of apprehension. Numerous foreigners, both laypersons and specialists, who had contact with Japanese noted that speaking Japanese well not only shocked their Japanese interlocutors but occasionally even deterred them from communication. This experience deserves elaboration since one may expect that individuals with limited proficiency in the foreign language would show preference for communicating in their mother tongue.

Nearly a century ago one of the foremost early interpreters of Japanese culture and language, Basil Hall Chamberlain, remarked on this phenomenon that "seeing that you speak Japanese, they will wag their heads and smile condescendingly, and admit to each other that you are really quite intelligent, – much as we might do in the presence of the learned pig or an ape of somewhat unusual attainments" (Chamberlain 1904: 382). Eighty years later Donald Keene, an American scholar and translator of Japanese literature, reiterated Chamberlain, observing that "In Japan the traditional attitude has been that foreigners do not speak Japanese, will never speak Japanese, and should not speak Japanese, at least not too well" (Keene 1981: 79). While that may have been the traditional attitude, echoes of it can still be heard in the observation of Australian linguist Jirí Neustupný: "one asks a question in (reasonably fluent) Japanese but the reply comes back in (broken) English" (Neustupný 1987: 87).

This pattern of response is not aimed only at occasional tourists but also at foreigners with long experience in Japan. The disbelief that foreigners can master Japanese encroaches the realm of the written language as well, as the personal experience of Donald Keene suggests:

> The assumption that foreigners can never learn Japanese is so strong that even people who are aware that I have been studying Japanese for forty years do not believe I can read or write the language. People

> who are about to give me their calling cards sometimes search in their
> wallets for one in roman letters, even if they have extremely common
> names which even a beginning student of Japanese could read.
> (Keene 1996: 274)

The fiercest critic, however, of this alleged negative attitude to the use of
Japanese in contact with foreigners, is Roy Andrew Miller. In most societ-
ies, he argued, "foreigners are appreciated for their efforts to master the
language of the local culture. In Japan, however, governs the 'law of in-
verse returns', namely the better one speaks the lesser is the desire to com-
municate with him or her" (Miller 1977: 78). This "law," if we follow Mill-
er's account, has unequivocal repercussions on the communication
between Japanese and foreigners:

> It always comes as a particularly rude awakening when the foreigner
> who is resident in Japan for any length of time finally realizes that Jap-
> anese society behaves in a fashion that is directly contrary to this gen-
> eral rule. Japanese society usually distrusts and dislikes any attempts
> by a foreigner to learn and use the Japanese language. The distrust
> and dislike grow stronger, and show themselves more and more stri-
> dently, the more the foreigner gains fluency in understanding and us-
> ing the language. (Miller 1982: 154)

The diminished attraction Japanese feel for Japanese-speaking foreigners,
Miller asserted, is the result of the "thoroughgoing confusion between lan-
guage and race." That is, the desire of a foreigner to learn Japanese "can
only be interpreted as an attempt by that same foreigner to acquire Japa-
nese racial identity and enter Japanese society" (Miller 1982: 154). Miller
further contended that his "law" applies only to Europeans and Ameri-
cans, while people of other nationalities who live and work in Japan are
expected to master Japanese. It is no accident, he concluded, that for sev-
eral decades after Japan surrendered in 1945 the Japanese government did
not encourage the study of Japanese, and the single governmental lan-
guage school specialized exclusively in teaching the language to "South-
east Asians and other nonwhites" (Miller 1982: 156).

   Miller's observation that his "law" applies only to Americans and Eu-
ropeans is incongruent with his argument that the law originates from
fears of racial and social transgression. If indeed, as Miller argued, the Jap-
anese care about their racial purity why do they have different expecta-
tions from people of Southeast Asia or the Indian sub-continent? An alter-
native explanation for the Japanese reluctance to speak in Japanese with
foreigners might be simply a generalized expectation. Most foreigners, in-
deed, do not speak Japanese, but those who do are categorized as "foreign-

ers" and consequently receive the same treatment as those who do not. In a culture that lays emphasis on relatively rigid patterns of behavior, individuals are not expected to identify rare "species" of Japanese-speaking foreigners and to respond to them specifically. Foreigners critical of Japanese isolationist attitudes may not accept this explanation. It may account for the attitude Japanese show to unfamiliar foreigners but not to those they have been long acquainted with. Thus, while many admit that much of the "special" treatment and consideration given to them in Japan stems from a desire to please and to show respect, they feel it often borders on a need for insularity and segregation.

   Still, such complaints seem to be losing ground rapidly. Studies conducted since the early 1980s suggest that the alleged reluctance of Japanese to speak in their language with foreigners is fading. Saint-Jacques (1983) found that among 150 foreign students surveyed in Japan about their experience 97% did not confirm Miller's "law of reverse return." Japanese students gave a similar impression in this survey, and out of 500 respondents 94% claimed that they usually reply in Japanese when addressed in that language by a foreigner. Ohta (1993) conducted in-depth interviews with five advanced learners of Japanese and none of their experiences supported Miller's hypothesis. Finally, in a recent survey of seventy native Japanese speakers the majority rejected Miller's hypothesis and held only mild convictions about the uniqueness of the Japanese language and foreigners' inability of to master it (Haugh 1998).

ACCOUNT VII: NATIONAL IDEOLOGY AND CULTURAL DICTUMS

National ideology tends to affect intercultural communication by shaping the nation's self-image, defining the "Other," and dictating the features of and expectations from the intercultural encounter. Japan has its share of national ideology, and during the last two decades there has been an abundance of writing on this issue and even on its effect on intercultural communication. The current vast discourse that seeks to account for the particular characteristics of Japanese society, culture, and national character is called *Nihonjinron*, literally "theories of the Japanese (people)."[1] *Nihonjinron* serves as broadly based ideological support for Japan's nationalism through its ethnocentric emphasis on the nation as the preeminent collective identity of the people. As a reflection of the concern for Japan's cultural and ethnic identity, contemporary *Nihonjinron* discourse can be traced back to prewar writings, and even earlier texts, but only in the last

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[1] Editor's note: See the article by Klaus Vollmer in this issue.

three decades has *Nihonjinron* emerged as a hegemonic ideology, an "industry" whose consumers are the masses (for a historical review see Minami 1994). Overall it has become a societal force that attempts to shape the way Japanese regard themselves. The normative overtones of *Nihonjinron* writings are rather explicit, and tell the Japanese, in John Davis's words, "who they *ought* to be and how they *ought* to behave" (Davis 1983: 216).

Nihonjinron writings seek to shape communication with foreigners as well. They are based on several premises about the nature of Japanese society that have relevance to intercultural communication (for analysis of this discourse see Befu 1987, 1993, 2001; Dale 1986; Mouer and Sugimoto 1986). The first premise is that the Japanese are a homogeneous people and that Japan as a nation is culturally homogeneous. The second premise asserts a strong nexus between the land of Japan, the people, the language, and the culture. *Nihonjinron* writers maintain that only Japanese people can carry Japanese culture, as manifested by the Japanese language and social customs. The third premise treats Japanese society as a vertically constructed group and regards the Japanese as group-oriented. It posits that the Japanese prefer to act within the framework of hierarchically organized groups in which relations are based on warm dependency and trust (e.g., Ben Dasan 1970; Doi 1971; Nakane 1967; Yoneyama 1976).

The ethnocentric character of *Nihonjinron* is intensified by its reliance on comparisons between Japanese culture and other referent cultures, predominantly Western. The comparisons with other cultures lead to a fourth premise, focusing on uniqueness. Japan, and consequently the Japanese people, are perceived as "unique," and as a rule superior to other cultures. At the same time, due to its emphasis on the "we" versus "them" dichotomy, *Nihonjinron* has a special place for foreigners, Westerners in particular. They are used as an antithetical representation of the essence of Japaneseness, and only through comparison with them and through the construction of their (foreign) image can Japanese identity be defined and affirmed (Kowner, Befu, and Manabe 1999; Kowner 2002b; Yoshino 1992).

Given these premises, *Nihonjinron* has a strong effect on the way Japanese perceive communication with foreigners and the way they actually communicate with them. The premise of homogeneity, for example, has been a prime choice for those linking the unique characteristics of the Japanese with their communication difficulties. Etō Jun, a much cited *Nihonjinron* producer, contended that because the Japanese are one of the most homogeneous peoples a tacit assumption is present in their lives that other individuals are an extension of one's self, whereas Westerners base their lives on the premise that others naturally feel differently about things. Because of this homogeneity, he added, there is limited need for explanations

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during conversations, to the extent that Japanese "are able to guess at each other's feelings from facial expression, movements of the eyes and the slightest gestures, and their conjectures are not mistaken." At the same time when Japanese face a "completely different person" (namely a Westerner) they are unable to use their nonverbal mode of communication and their first reaction is "one of shock" (Eto 1977: 75).

The uniqueness of the Japanese language has been another major issue for *Nihonjinron* writers, since they consider it a pure language and exceptionally difficult to master (e.g., Kindaichi 1957; Watanabe 1974). Many Japanese writers compared Japanese with English, using extreme dichotomies such as vague versus clear and intuitive versus logical (e.g., Araki 1986; Tobioka 1999). These comparisons often set English as a superior language but remote, cold, and inappropriate for use by Japanese (cf. Dale 1986). Tsunoda (1978) went further by suggesting that Japanese process their language in a unique manner due to a shift in brain lateralization. In his pseudo-biological theory, Tsunoda also attempted to account for the notorious Japanese incompetence at mastering foreign languages, English in particular.

These and other views may have affected the readiness to use Japanese in intercultural encounters. Critics of *Nihonjinron* ideology, such as Miller, regard the reluctance to use Japanese as a means to amplify differences between Japanese and Westerners in particular. Fears of foreigners, as reflected in *Nihonjinron* writings, are mainly cultural rather than racial but they do provide a clear-cut definition of what is Japanese, and consequently hamper intercultural communication. Miller's views are extreme and deserve the criticism they drew but they should not be dismissed totally. Linguist Suzuki Takao is one of the few Japanese who acknowledged the Japanese reluctance to speak with foreigners in Japanese:

> We firmly believe that foreigners cannot be expected to speak Japanese perfectly, and therefore when we encounter foreigners who speak Japanese well, we feel very uncomfortable. (Suzuki 1975: 170)

Suzuki's account for the Japanese reluctance to speak in their native language with foreigners focuses on the low probability that foreigners speak Japanese, on xenophobia, and on the "corruption" of the Japanese language spoken by Japanese themselves when communicating with a pidgin-Japanese-speaking foreigner. These reasonable explanations notwithstanding, Suzuki did not clarify the cause-and-effect relations between these factors. Could it be that the underlying factor, he suggested in a later passage, is the prevailing belief that "foreigners need not understand (and speak) Japanese" (Suzuki 1975: 176–177)?

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ACCOUNT VIII: DISTINCT PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION AND THEIR
COGNITIVE CONSEQUENCES

Several Japanese writers have emphasized the idiosyncratic characteristics of Japanese interpersonal communication. The telepathic qualities of communication among fellow Japanese have been a source of much discussion by Japanese scholars. T. Nishida (1977) developed the concept of *sasshi* as an indication of the Japanese tendency to imagine, empathize with, and mainly guess others' intentions without much verbal communication. Matsumoto (1984) went further by calling this supposed Japanese ability for non-verbal communication *haragei* (belly talk). Tsujimura (1987) employed the old expression *ishin denshin* (tacit understanding, telepathy) as one of his first characteristic of Japanese communication. Silence and intuitive understanding are not the only distinct features that characterize Japanese communication: they were amply used to explain foreigners' inability to understand Japanese communication.

Still, systematic cross-cultural studies show in fact that differences in Japanese within-culture communication do exist in almost any domain. Compared with Americans, for instance, Japanese tend to limit their verbal communication with their compatriots, avoid interrogating strangers, conduct less self-disclosure with unfamiliar persons, and sit farther apart (e.g., Barnlund 1975, 1989; Johnson and Johnson 1975; Nakanishi 1986). The differing patterns also affect intercultural communciation, as can be seen in the way apology styles used in Japanese tend to be employed when Japanese speak English also (Sugimoto 2002).

Each side, communication expert Haru Yamada suggests, follows somewhat different rules: "The American goal is to make messages negotiated between individuals explicit, while the Japanese goal is to keep messages implicit and assumed in the group" (Yamada 1997: vi). Culture undoubtedly affects patterns of behavior and communication but people may exacerbate the situation by developing a cognitive schema that amplifies cultural differences and consequently hinders intercultural communication. Whereas the Japanese seem to be fascinated by the differences in communication from Americans (and vice versa), there has been very scant research on the difference from Chinese, or any other Asians. This indicates not only the importance accorded to the West, and the United States in particular, but the sense that miscommunication occurs mainly with Westerners. Yamada (1997: vii) maintains that Japanese, like people of any other culture perhaps, tend to overstate the differences:

> By idealizing different aspects of language and relationship, and assigning contrastive weight to them [...] [Japanese] use and interpret

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communication in ways that are effective and make sense in their own group, but often get miscommunicated and confused across groups.

Nancy Sakamoto and Reiko Naotsuka presented a set of six major misbeliefs, which presumably hamper Japanese communication with Americans (Sakamoto and Naotsuka 1982). They argued that these beliefs, rather than being a true reflection of behavioral or psychological differences, represent "polite fictions," namely social ideals that affect communication. First, Japanese initially accept the view that "you are my superior," whereas Americans assume that "you and I are equal." This means that Japanese express much more deference to others, especially if they do not belong to their ingroup. A similar distinction is between the Japanese view that "I am in awe of you" and the American assumption that "you and I are close friends." An additional difference concerns the expression of relaxation during communication. Japanese assume the position "I am busy on your behalf" while Americans maintain that "you and I are relaxed." Nothing can be more embarrassing to a Japanese visitor than saying to him or her "Feel at home!" or "Help yourself!" since at least in the initial contact Japanese feel that they should stand to attention to make sure that no one loses face.

Japanese and Americans also differ in the perception of independence. Japanese believe that "I depend on you," whereas Americans believe that "you and I are independent." Saying "no" in these circumstances, is much more difficult for Japanese, who are apprehensive not to break the bond between the two parties (Ueda 1972). Another difference concerns individualism. Japanese may emphasize that "you and I are members of groups," while Americans maintain that "you and I are independent." The final barrier is uniqueness. Japanese tend to take the position that "you and I feel/think alike," whereas Americans believe that "you and I are unique." Americans may look for original argument just to keep the discussion alive, while the Japanese counterpart may sound out the American merely not to break the dialogue (Sakamoto and Naotsuka 1982).

Cognitive misbeliefs may indeed affect intercultural communication, but Sakamoto and Naotsuka do not provide an explicit account of why the misbeliefs listed hamper Japanese communication but barely affect Americans. In fact, these misbeliefs are mostly a reflection of collectivist Confucian heritage, which can be found in neighboring nations (e.g., China, Korea) as well. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that people in these cultures experience communication difficulties to the extent Japanese do.

Account IX: Difficulties in Intracultural Communication

Japanese people experience difficulties when communicating with their compatriots also, and therefore the problem of communication with foreigners is an extension of a general problem of communication. Several cross-cultural studies have supported this notion, showing that Japanese exhibited a relatively high level of communication apprehension within their own culture. Klopf (1984) administered McCroskey's (1970) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) to students from Japan, China, Korea, Micronesia, the Philippines, Australia, and the United States. Among these seven national samples, the Japanese students displayed the highest level of apprehension. Earlier, Klopf, Cambra and Ishii (1981) had found similar results in a review of eight years' research on communication apprehension involving about 4500 Japanese. They noted that Japanese, of whatever age and profession, showed a higher level of apprehension than any other cultural group they compared (for similar findings see also McCroskey, Gudykunst and Nishida 1985).

Evidently, Japanese exhibit strong preference for communicating with ingroup members, probably a phenomenon typical of all collectivist cultures (Triandis, Bontempo, and Villareal 1988). Gudykunst and Nishida (1986) found that Japanese students manifested greater attributional confidence toward their classmates than Americans did, while the reverse pattern was manifested toward compatriot strangers. The difference in communication may stem from communication difficulties that members of all collectivist societies tend to share. Collectivists seem to have fewer skills than individualists in dealing with new groups and strangers (Cohen 1991), although they tend to have more long-lasting and intimate relationships once they are established (Verma 1992). Still, the tendency to social conformism, the consequent shyness, and the elaborate use of language to indicate status – all these may cause the Japanese to be more apprehensive than members of other collectivist societies examined.

Account X: Integrative Reflections

The diversity of the accounts listed above suggest that Japanese miscommunication with foreigners is a genuine, profound, and multi-facet phenomenon. While previous writings tended to exaggerate the importance of single factors, this review has invalidated none of them completely although it is certain that neither of them alone can account for the problem. It is also difficult to identify cause-and-effect relations between the various factors as often they enhance each other and create vicious circles that ex-

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acerbate the difficulties. The miscommunication between Japanese and foreigners began in the past but it is sustained by current factors. It concerns actual differences between Japanese and foreigners in thought, language, and non-verbal behavior, but it also thrives on false images and misperceptions.

All and all, the review above indicates that only a wide-ranging perspective, which encompasses all the sources above, may account for the Japanese miscommunication with foreigners. Such an account ought to contain a historical perspective and begin with the Edo era (1600–1868). At the start of this period the country was sealed due to fears by the Tokugawa shogunal dynasty for its own throne, and the Japanese nation entered prolonged seclusion. Much of the current patterns of Japanese interpersonal communciation, conformism, and fear of strangers were shaped in that era. The American forced opening of Japan was a traumatic act that did not lead to a drastic shift in the attitudes Japanese held toward foreigners, but on the contrary it intensified fear of them. During the first few decades of Meiji era (1868–1912) the Japanese embarked in an intensive process of modernization. Yet this process took place not for the sake of modernization per se but to prevent imminent Western conquest and the risk of identity loss.

The Japanese attitude to the West, an almost monolithic unit at first, was ambivalent. The West jeopardized the sovereignty of Japan but it held the technological and cultural keys to its modernization and to its escape from subjugation. A case in point is the partial adoption of Western racial and corporal ideals in Japan since the late nineteenth century. Emulating these ideals was inevitable if one adopts Western *Weltanschauung* but so was the emergence of inferiority feelings and frustration (Kowner, 2002c, 2003; Kowner and Ogawa 1993). For this reason, the attraction was mixed with fear and resentment, which surfaced in times of conflict. Direct communication with Westerners was rare and stressful. Whereas Western languages and modes of communication were greatly different and mastering them was considered as tainting one's identity, speaking Japanese with foreigners did not become an alternative either. Only a few foreigners were drawn by the spell of the Japanese language, and except for a few cases Japanese society did not embrace them because of deep-rooted anxiety about the misuse of such knowledge.

The conflicting attitudes to communicating with the foreigners were the prime reason why the Japanese did not embark in forming social mechanisms and an educational infrastructure to master foreign languages and modes of communication. Worse still, over the years information on the distinctive facets of behavior and communication in the West was disseminated throughout Japanese society, following the premises of a national

ideology. The mere emphasis on Japanese differences from other peoples was used to redefine Japanese identity and to promote a strong feeling of "unique us." Many Japanese do not expect foreigners to comprehend their "unique" mode of thinking and behavior, and further, the inherent comparison with foreigners makes many Japanese see the latter in a schematic and stereotypic way. Actual differences in communication style are often exaggerated and much attention is given to the emotional consequences of the asymmetric and unpleasant encounter with foreigners. The ultimate outcome is the development of cultural apprehension of communication with foreigners. This apprehension affects future encounters with foreigners, and the negative nature of intercultural communication is promulgated by various social mechanisms. Eventually, the prophecy regarding foreigners' behavior tends to fulfill itself, as non-Japanese are either unaware of the Japanese style of communication or are unwilling to adapt themselves to what they see as overemphasis on unique characteristics (on self-fulfilling prophecies in interracial interaction see Word, Zanna and Cooper 1974).

The Japanese attitude to foreigners brings to mind White aversive racism in the U.S.A. (cf. Kovel 1970). This type of ethnocentrism is characterized by reluctance to engage in any kind of intimacy with the "Other," namely foreigners. When threatened by foreigners, the typical aversive racist walls himself off and turns away, in contrast to the typical dominative racist who turns to aggression. Many Japanese do not hold such attitudes but still feel threatened by intercultural encounters. No doubt, certain national characteristics related to communication, such as stress on hierarchy and status, as well as excessive politeness and shyness, have made the encounter with Westerners even more stressful. As a result, Japanese enter an encounter with a non-Japanese, as with fellow Japanese whose status is not established, assuming a cautious, respectful, modest, and perhaps introverted manner. Non-Japanese, however, enter, or at least are perceived by Japanese as entering, such an encounter in a much less cautious manner. Japanese perceived this forceful and extrovert manner as resembling the manners of high-status people in Japan, and, thus, it violates their initial expectations.

This violation of expectation causes alarm and distress. It heightens attention to the characteristics of the foreigner and the meaning of his or her violating act (cf. Burgoon 1993). This state of alert is distressing and followed by feelings of discomfort if the violation is interpreted as a threat to one's status. So strong are stereotypes of foreigners' distinct communication styles in contemporary Japan that for many Japanese foreign behavior may in fact no longer be perceived as a violation. This is because they know about it and expect it to violate their space, speech, and occasionally

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even pride. Knowing about it does not mean that they expect it to be pleasant. For many Japanese the need to behave in a modest, "lower-status"-like manner without the reciprocation of the other side is distressing enough. For others the mere sense of expected discomfort makes them nervous before the encounter and affects their communication style during it.

<center>REMEDIES FOR INTERCULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION:
POSSIBLE PRESCRIPTIONS</center>

The analysis above suggests that the problem of miscommunication is complex and cannot be solved at a single stroke or by approaching a single factor. Nevertheless, it implies several lines of action that might alleviate miscommunication. We may alter the actual differences or deal with the perceptions of them. We may also attempt to transform the behavior of either side of the dyad. At any rate, even a slight shift might break a vicious circle of fears and stereotypes that affect behavior, and vice versa. Japan is changing rapidly and old premises regarding its society are losing ground. The growing interest in Japan and the spread of Japanese-language education has resulted in an exponential rise in the number of foreigners who are able to communicate in Japanese. At the same time, thousands of Japanese youth who have returned from a sojourn abroad with their parents ("returnees") suffer from imperfect proficiency in their mother tongue while having an edge in intercultural communication. Both of these groups are living proof of the invalidity of the premises *Nihonjinron* holds regarding language.

One line of action seems to involve greater awareness by both sides as to the mutual aspects of cognition, affect, and behavior that determine communication in each. On the non-Japanese side, learning and understanding the essence of Japanese distinct patterns of communication may produce clear benefits (cf. Brislin 1990). Foreigners should especially learn how to attenuate acts perceived to violate the status of their Japanese counterparts. In doing so, they may in fact violate positively the Japanese initial expectancies. Such consciously "proper" behavior may cause Japanese to be positively disposed to them for their unexpected "humble" comportment. Japanese organizations, but also academic institutions abroad are advised to prepare and support programs that promote awareness of Japanese communication among foreigners.

On the Japanese side as well, greater awareness of foreign behavior, combined with real-life experience with foreigners, may reduce the sense of status violation. Many Japanese believe that merely learning a foreign

language can alleviate the problematic aspects of intercultural communication. Being proficient at a foreign language is undoubtedly an advantage, and seems to be the most important aspect of Japanese intercultural competence (H. Nishida 1985). Nonetheless, beyond a certain level of linguistic proficiency non-verbal variables and to a lesser extent semantic factors are the main causes for the communication gap. One can master a foreign language by self-study, yet communication skills necessitate long contact and experience with people of the other linguistic community, and such experiences have to be actively engaged in.

Many Japanese seem to have reached this conclusion. The number of Japanese traveling abroad has multiplied enormously in the last two decades, and at present close to twenty million go abroad annually. It is still true that many of them travel in groups for only a few days, and, as Christopher (1983: 165) noted, "often confine their patronage to resorts and establishments that cater specially to Japanese – which means that the only locals their members have to deal with are shop clerks and waiters; and even then, Japanese-speaking clerks and waiters are preferred." Nevertheless, an increasing number of them do travel alone, for longer periods, and gain some profound insights to other cultures and modes of communication.

Others join English conversation classes – privately-owned ventures, where foreign teachers help them to overcome fears of communication with non-Japanese. This English trend in Japan coincides with a broader movement termed *kokusaika* (internationalization) that has swept Japanese society since the early 1980s. Although it is equated often with Westernization, *kokusaika* is meant to accommodate the West by contributing to the international community. Its main medium has been English and "international understanding" but its content consists in part of the traditional Japanese spirit (Kubota 2002). *Kokusaika* endorses not only the use of English but also the change of communication modes in Japan itself to more expressive and logical, as reflected in the revised curriculum for schools (Ministry of Education 1998, Internet). Since 1987 the Japanese Ministry of Education (Monbushō, now Monbukagakushō) has also run the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, which each year admits thousands of young foreigners (mainly from English-speaking countries) to assist middle and high school teachers of English.

While these and other programs have alleviated some of the anxiety for intercultural communication, there are some indications to suggest that more effort is needed to transform Japan into a truly international community. The ultimate question is whether Japanese society indeed wants to shed its isolationist mentality and depart from its chosen position as a unique but marginal culture. Japan's course is not so evident. The writer

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and Nobel prize laureate Ōe Kenzaburō (2001), for example, recently expressed some fears that Japan may turn again to nationalism and the ideology of *sakoku* (seclusion). This choice, as made explicit in this article, has a greater effect on intercultural miscommunication than any single account, and it would determine the course of Japanese communication with foreigners in the coming decades.

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