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## **Relating Foreign Language Learning to Culture: Language AND Culture? or Language IN Culture?**

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The American penchant for speed, efficiency, and the new and unusual has had its effect on foreign language study. While the more traditional, broadly accepted methodologies have undergone change gradually and on the basis of linguistic research, at regular intervals we are introduced to dramatically different, innovative methods for mastering foreign languages. The claims are impressive: we will become fluent in record time and with reduced effort, if we just adopt some newly developed approach. In rapid succession we have proceeded through Sleep Learning (effortless language acquisition accomplished subliminally through recordings played while the learner sleeps), the Silent Way (with the teacher's direct involvement reduced almost to silence), Community Language Learning (with emphasis on ordering language instruction according to what the learners want to say), Suggestopedia (with emphasis on language learning in a relaxed home-like atmosphere, with musical accompaniment), and more. Currently, in widespread use throughout American academia, we are encountering the so-called Communicative Approach, which stresses fluency over accuracy and encouragement over correction, with the ordering of teaching materials determined by topic rather than linguistic considerations.

These new methods come and go, with no observable reduction in the time and effort required to gain meaningful competence in a foreign language. However, this is not to suggest that we have not made significant progress in the quality of our results. Improvement has been achieved, not through the adoption of radical methods that make exaggerated claims of ease and speed, but rather through a steady progression of gradual changes that retain what has been effective while modifying what needs improvement.

Japanese language study in the U.S. has had an interesting history. Traditionally the foreign languages studied by Americans have been those of Western Europe, particularly Spanish, French, and German, through which innovation has regularly been introduced initially. But like English, these languages all belong to the Indo-European family of languages: they share bundles of linguistic features that distinguish them from other languages of the world. With the increased availability of Japanese language courses in American colleges and universities during and following World War II, many American language learners, for the first time, were dealing with a language whose linguistic code was totally different from that of any language they had previously studied. In the Department of State's classification of languages according to the length of time native speakers of English required to achieve comparable, carefully defined levels of proficiency, Japanese was grouped with Arabic, Chinese, and Korean in Category IV, the most difficult.

An analysis of the Japanese linguistic code according to the principles of the linguistics of the period – in particular, its phonology, morphology and syntax – was undertaken, and as interest in the language grew, refinements in the analysis were added. At the same time, more linguistically sophisticated teaching materials became available. Recordings, the essential study aid for students learning to speak a foreign language, moved from platters to reels to cassettes, with constantly improved fidelity.

With the emergence of Japan as a major economic power, Japanese language enrollments soared, with a simultaneous proliferation of teaching materials. At the same time there was a growing awareness on many campuses that the linguistic code did not exist in a vacuum: members of a society interact within a set of cultural norms and those norms may be as foreign as the language itself. Gradually course offerings entitled “Japanese Language *and* Culture” became an integral part of many Japanese studies curricula.

“Culture” means different things in different contexts. In these “*and* Culture” courses, the cultural component was usually introduced in the form of explanation and discussion of factual information and of what we often refer to as “high culture” – i.e., literature, art, music, etc. It might include a description of such disparate topics as Japanese food, flower arranging, *haiku*, or *anime*, but there was little integration of these discussions with the language: the relationship was clearly one of “Language *and also* Culture”.

But more recently another development was taking shape in the field of Japanese pedagogy. It was becoming increasingly clear that the language itself, used within the society where it was native, represented more than a linguistic

code; it conformed as well to a cultural code, one that represented not the usual components of the “*and* culture” courses, but rather a kind of culture that had to do with interpersonal relations. Like one’s native language, this cultural code is acquired unconsciously in the course of socialization within one’s native society and it comprises what cultural natives consider normal behavior. Since this is what determines how members of a society interact, its influence on language is immeasurable. No longer can we speak of “language *and* culture”; our concern in the language classroom is best described as “language *in* culture”, i.e., acquired, behavioral culture. This variety of culture, which constitutes the native mindset, has in recent years come to be considered the major determinant of appropriate language use by many pedagogical specialists, who now view the study of a foreign language as learning performative culture. It is this increased stress on culture that most dramatically defines the most recent development in the history of Japanese language pedagogy in the U.S. From the mid-twentieth century, when the grammar/translation approach to learning Japanese was gradually abandoned and the development of oral as well as written competence became a matter of concern, there has been a constantly increasing recognition of the importance of behavioral culture in the learning of Japanese.

The delineation of the features of this kind of culture, which is acquired totally outside of consciousness by natives of the culture, is much more challenging than that of the consciously learned culture of the “*and* Culture” courses. It is only when cultural natives have interacted with natives of another culture and observed different patterns of behavior that they begin to become aware that such patterns are culture-specific. A typical reaction to such differences, however, is that one’s own behavior is normal and sensible and represents common sense, while foreigners’ behavior often seems strange, unpredictable, at times appealing, but often annoying.

Every language classroom brings two languages and two cultures in contact: the native language and culture of the student (the base language/culture) and the language/culture being studied (the target language/culture). The challenge is to facilitate the development of competence in the linguistic code of the target language within the framework of target sociocultural patterns. The language that is taught must always be culturally appropriate, specifically for the non-native learners who will be using it. While these learners cannot expect to achieve a level of competence in Japanese equal to that of a native speaker, it is essential that they learn how to interact in the target language in a manner that makes target natives comfortable.

As we acknowledge the pervasiveness of the influence of culture and that “language *in* culture” is the norm, a pedagogical requirement immediately

becomes obvious. For the American studying Japanese, the analysis of the language should foster an awareness of significant cultural manifestations. Obviously this type of analysis differs significantly from the traditional Japanese grammar that is taught to Japanese students in Japanese schools.

How does the Japanese linguistic code reflect culture? Perhaps the most striking feature of the Japanese language is the fact that it includes no stylistically neutral utterances. Every occurrence of the language reflects a stylistic choice made by the speaker according to the situation, defined in terms of the participants, observers, occasion, subject matter, at al. For the American learner, the realization that as simple an utterance as 'Are you going?' cannot be translated into Japanese without making stylistic choices is a major hurdle.

Consider now the highly significant stylistic features occurring in verb/adjective/copula forms. For an American learner with an American mindset, accustomed to a Western style of linear analysis, a satisfactory breakdown of these forms calls for two axes -- one to distinguish plain from polite forms, and the second axis, direct from distancing forms. A single inflected form reflects both axes: for example, it might be both plain and distancing (for example, *ikimasu* [= plain stem *iki* 'go' + distance marker *-mas-* + imperfect marker *-u* ) or even polite and direct (for example , *irassiyaru* [= polite root *irassiyar* 'go', 'come', 'be (animate)' + zero distance marker (=direct) + imperfect marker *-u* ] Thus both *Ikimasu?* and *Irassiyaru?* are possible Japanese equivalents of English 'Are you going?', but the question as to who uses which, when, and where is extremely complicated. They are in no sense equivalent utterances in Japanese. The connection with Japanese culture is striking: the distinction between plain and polite forms reflects the hierarchical society of Japan and the direct/distancing distinction conforms to the Japanese concern for an in-group/out-group differentiation.

This analysis is markedly different from the traditional. The Japanese regularly refer to three levels of politeness that do not distinguish the hierarchical from the distancing signals or diagram in terms of two axes. In fact, they identify the distancing forms as *teineigo*, which is regularly glossed as 'polite language'. What is more, forms identified above as polite and direct (like *irassiyaru* ) cannot be unambiguously accommodated. in any of these traditional three levels since they include signals from both axes.

One does not have to go far to find other features of the Japanese linguistic code that give further evidence of the importance of hierarchy and the in-group/out-group dichotomy. The act of giving necessarily requires a giver and a receiver, a simple activity in American culture, where the verb 'give' can be

used regardless of the identity of the giver and the receiver. But in Japanese, one is immediately confronted by the question of hierarchy (the position of the giver vis-à-vis the receiver) as well as the question of the direction of the giving (from the in-group to the out-group, or vice versa). [See Diagram I.<sup>1</sup>]

Japanese family terms provide another example. Am I speaking respectfully to you (= out-group) about 'my mother' (= in-group) > *haha?* or to you (= out-group) about 'your mother' (= your in-group) > *okaasan?* or am I respectfully addressing 'my mother' (who is now my own out-group) > *okaasan?*

English self-reference is simple: the choice is 'I', 'me', 'my', or 'mine', depending on grammatical context. In Japanese, however, the identification of the self changes, depending not only on one's relationship to the addressee and the occasion but also on the gender of the speaker. The result is a long list of alternate forms, reflecting differences that may seem subtle to the learner but not to the target native.

Consider now the question of addressee-reference. What is the Japanese equivalent for English 'you'? The answer is as complex as for self-reference. One can only begin to imagine the reaction of the Japanese Prime Minister who, a few years back, was greeted by the official American interpreter upon his arrival in Washington as *anata*, a term totally lacking the deference required in addressing an official of such high rank.

For the American learner, no discussion of self- and addressee-reference is complete without a mention of the frequency with which English speakers use 'I' and 'you' and the comparative rarity of the occurrence of their multiple

equivalents in Japanese. Is there a cultural connection? Indeed! The emphasis in the West on the individual and independence is often contrasted with the Japanese emphasis on group dynamics. In the socialization of an American child, the ability to function as an individual and solve one's problems independently is extremely important, while the Japanese child is socialized to interact smoothly as a member of constantly changing in-groups. Americans foster the rule of the majority where each vote counts, even within small groups, while the Japanese prefer consensus.

In the Japanese linguistic code, this is reflected in the many utterances that do not overtly mention the performer of an action: it is as if an event is described simply in terms of its occurrence. Compare: English 'Do you understand?' ... 'Yes, I do.' with Japanese *Wakarimasu ka. ... Ee, wakarimasu.* 'Does understanding occur?' ... 'Yes, understanding occurs.' The individuals to whom this exchange refers are understood only through the context; no equivalent for 'you' or 'I' is included. It is only in cases of contextual ambiguity or special emphasis that we find overt reference to the subject of an utterance.

For the Japanese, there is an important distinction between occurrences that happen and those that can be brought about by human volition. Using this distinction as the deciding factor, we can divide Japanese predicates into two classes: affective and operational. This distinction can be extremely helpful in explaining syntactic differences that may otherwise be extremely perplexing to the American learner. For example, it is the affective predicates that traditionally do not occur in request or desiderative or potential patterns. And it is this distinction that explains the difference in particle usage between *Dare ga zisyo ga irimasu ka.* 'Who will need a dictionary?' [affective] and *Dare ga zisyo o tukaimasu ka.* 'Who will use a dictionary?' [operational]. Thus 'needing' is an affective event, and the needer and the needed are seen as reflecting a similar relationship with this event (indicated by particle *ga*); 'using', on the other hand, is an operational event that occurs volitionally and the distinction between its relationship to the user and the used is reflected in a difference in particles (i.e., *ga* vs. *o*).

Explaining the linguistic code of Japanese within the cultural framework impresses on the learner the pervasiveness of that framework. It affects not only how we talk but what we say. Accepting, refusing, inviting, requesting, complimenting, disagreeing, reprimanding – these are all speech acts that are framed according to the culture. The American student who believes that speaking Japanese involves no more than the translation into Japanese of the English appropriate to a given situation ends up speaking English by means of Japanese. When the target is as different from English, both linguistically and

culturally, as Japanese is, the result can be disastrous. It is significant that in discussions of foreign languages according to the degree of difficulty encountered by Americans in learning them, Japanese is included among the 'TFLs' (the 'truly foreign languages').

Our cultural mindset also affects how we teach and how we learn. The subject matter of a course in Japanese-as-a-foreign-language is obvious: it must be the language as it is spoken and written by linguistic/cultural natives. For this reason the requirement for the linguistic/cultural native as a provider of authentic Japanese is unquestionable. There can be no argument on this point. However, when we turn to pedagogy, we are faced with the inescapable fact that there is a disconnect between the cultural mindset of a Japanese instructor who isn't culturally attuned to interacting with American learners and the American learner. In the hierarchical culture of Japan, the teacher obviously outranks the student: how teachers teach is assumed to be paramount. But in the culture of the American academy, the focus is on the learners and how they learn. In fact, it is the students who measure the effectiveness of their instructors each year, as they prepare evaluations that become an important indication of an instructor's competence.

The typical, well-educated linguistic/cultural natives of Japan who teach Japanese in America without having undergone specific training for that role have had two kinds of previous language study experience: they have had instruction in *kokugo*, their native Japanese, and foreign language instruction in English. In both of these endeavors, there is heavy emphasis on the written language. Given the unusual complexity of Japanese orthography, it is not surprising that most instructional hours devoted to *kokugo* are spent in learning to read and write. After all, Japanese children are already fluent in the spoken language when they enter school and it is literacy that is the most basic competence that distinguishes an educated person. The mastery of the 1945 *zyooyoo-kanzi* ('standard usage Chinese characters'), including their multiple readings and occurrence in compounds, is a time-consuming task that extends over many years of schooling. Analysis directed toward students who are native speakers is also primarily concerned with the written language and follows traditional taxonomies.

English instruction in Japan, in contrast, involves the conscious study of a foreign language, but once again we find a traditional emphasis on the written word, with a preference for the grammar/translation approach to language study. Most Japanese learners concentrate on reading and writing, translating from one language to the other, and memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules. While there have been recent attempts to increase instruction in spoken English, the

all-important English language college entrance exams, which traditionally have exerted a tremendous influence on high school curricula, place heavy emphasis on reading and writing ability. The general level of spoken competence is higher now than in the past, but there continues to be considerable room for improvement.

It is not surprising that many Japanese teachers of Japanese-as-a-foreign-language are preoccupied with teaching the orthography, from the first day of instruction. But the American learner, unlike the Japanese first-grader, has no knowledge of the spoken language. Recognizing that the written language is an orthographic representation of the spoken, one might argue that it is more sensible to learn what is being symbolized before the symbolization of it. What is more, unless an American plans to specialize in Japanese studies, s/he will probably pursue Japanese studies for only a year or two, with little chance of ever being able to read any authentic Japanese language material at his/her cognitive level, even with maximal emphasis on the orthography during such a limited time period. On the other hand, even within only two years of part-time study, an American learner can achieve sufficient oral competence in Japanese to make a visit to Japan considerably more meaningful and enjoyable and can begin to learn the importance of intercultural communication.

There is no question that even American students who plan to devote only a limited amount of time to Japanese language study should of course be provided an introduction to the orthography that makes it possible for them to continue their study effectively, if they so desire. However, to concentrate on the memorization of Chinese characters, to a degree that results in a significant reduction of concentration on spoken Japanese but nonetheless is insufficient to enable the learner to read substantive, authentic written material, seems of questionable value. Learners who have emerged from two years in a Japanese program of this kind rarely have a functional competence in either the written or the spoken language.

Spoken language pedagogy is very different from the teaching of learners to read and write. It involves performance of both a productive type (i.e., speaking) and a receptive type (i.e., listening/hearing). Questions of pronunciation, intonation, delivery, fluency, and body language become important. All these components of competence, which linguistic/cultural natives have acquired unconsciously, must be taught to foreigners as conscious skills, with accompanying explanation and delineation that is learner-focused. For target natives, not accustomed to observing or analyzing their own behavior, particularly in terms that are meaningful to base natives, the challenge is enormous.

With the emphasis on performative culture as the basis for foreign language instruction, parallels to theatre become apparent. As the learners participate in the target culture, they become actors and assume a new persona: they act out roles different from their base-native roles. They must memorize their parts, learn to deliver them appropriately, and rehearse them until their delivery is smooth and effortless. The director (= supervisory instructor) provides useful background information concerning the script and analyzes each role in detail, while the producer and coaches (= instructors and teaching assistants) mold the final production in classes devoted to use of the target language and in language labs.

As native speakers of the target language and cultural natives of the target culture, target-native instructors have a crucially important advantage: they are the ideal providers of authentic target language and the ideal models of the target culture. However, to fill most effectively the role of instructors of learners who are base natives and who bring a totally different mindset to the language classroom, they require training that at the same time acquaints them with that unfamiliar mindset and makes explicit features of their own language and culture that they have always taken for granted. Contrastively, base-native instructors, whose mindset matches that of the learners and who have shared with the learners the experience of learning the target language as a foreign language, are by definition not native speakers of the target language and not the ultimate authority on authenticity.

An ideal language program includes representatives of both types of instructor, with each filling the role for which s/he is fitted. All require thorough training in foreign language pedagogy focused on the particular target/base combination involved. but the target-native concentrates on the actual use of the language ("act" instruction) while the base-native instructor talks *about* the language in English ("fact" instruction). In the language program whose instructors are all of one variety, it is important that learners have opportunities to see and hear the authentic language of native speakers when the instructors are base natives, and have access to learner-focused analysis and explanations if the instructors are all target-natives.

We haven't discovered any magic potion or procedure that will enable us to master a foreign language in record time or with a minimum of effort. It continues to take a lifetime. However we are making progress in the quality of our instruction. The test is in the outcome of the training: how do our learners perform in the target society? Do Japanese interact comfortably with our graduates in Japanese? or do they quickly switch to English?

Native language-in-culture control is the miracle accomplishment of one's entire lifetime. Some say it's more miraculous than getting to the moon. Learning a foreign language-in-culture, when approached appropriately, certainly rates high on the list of fascinating activities. This is not a matter of learning lists of isolated vocabulary or translating isolated English sentences into Japanese, or taking kanji quizzes, or laboriously decoding Japanese passages. Rather it involves learning authentic language as it is used within the society where it is native and learning how to interact effectively with natives of the society. Interpreting even indirect messages correctly, understanding implications, reading between the lines, making linguistic predictions, guessing intelligently – these are all skills to be worked on. Few pursuits can be more challenging, stimulating, or gratifying.

### Note

1. Jorden with Noda, 1988, p. 112

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