

# Cultural Preferences for Communicative Functions in English and Japanese: Implications for Cross-Cultural Understanding

Carol RINNERT

- I. Introduction
- II. Background
- III. This Study
- IV. Communicative Functions
  - 1. Requests
  - 2. Invitations
  - 3. Refusals
  - 4. Apologies
  - 5. Suggestions
- V. Conclusion

## I. Introduction

The boldest headline on the front page of a recent edition of the *Asahi Evening News* blared out: “**Culture-Clash Tale,**” the heading on the second page continuing: “MCA-Matsushita communications breakdown may be culture clash.” The article (Fabrikant and Pollack 1994), which had been taken from *The New York Times*, described serious misunderstandings between Japanese electronics company Matsushita, and its recently acquired subsidiary, American film company MCA. According to the article, on a recent trip to Japan with a proposal for a new investment, the heads of the American company felt that they had been “treated as children” by the Japanese corporate officials and “were insulted by the way their Japanese bosses said no.” The Japanese stated that it “was a misunderstanding and not intentional mistreatment of the Americans” (1994: 1). According to the report, “bad feelings persist[ed] nearly two months later” in spite of the Japanese having apologized two times for what the “outraged” Americans “perceived as imperious treatment.” The article concluded with reference to the Japanese concern with “how to recover the mutual

trust” that had been lost (1994: 2). This incident points out the most serious consequences of cultural misunderstandings, that is, potential misinterpretations of other people’s intentions, negative judgments of their character, and ultimately, loss of faith in their trustworthiness.

As has been reported in two recent best-selling books by a sociolinguist in the U.S. (Tannen 1986, 1991), even members of the same culture tend to experience communication breakdowns and make negative judgments of other people’s motives and personalities because of differences in communication style. For example, New Yorkers are often perceived by other groups as pushy and aggressive because of their rapid speech rate and “high involvement” style (including such features as overlapping turns and frequent interruptions in conversation). Similarly, differences in typical interaction styles of males and females, beginning in childhood, can lead to serious problems when adult couples misinterpret each other’s reasons for asking questions (e.g., showing interest vs. seeking information), remaining silent (e.g., deference to the other’s turn vs. protest against lack of attention), or maintaining or not maintaining eye contact (Tannen 1991). Given these conflicts within a single, albeit

---

**Key words:** apologies, appropriate(ness), communicative functions, cross-cultural, English, invitations, Japanese, polite(ness), pragmatics, refusals, requests, sociolinguistics, speech acts, suggestions.

heterogeneous, culture, it should not be surprising to find even more serious misunderstandings across cultures as different as those of Japan and the U.S. This paper will attempt to explore some of the differences in communication style preferences between Japanese and American English, with the purpose of clarifying some of the reasons for cross-cultural misunderstandings like the one described at the beginning of the paper. The ultimate goal is to raise awareness of culturally influenced patterns of communication in order to improve our understanding, both within and across cultures.

## II. Background

A great many studies of cross-cultural differences have been undertaken by researchers using insights and methods from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, cognitive psychology, communications theory, linguistics, philosophy of language, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and sociology. In fact, the complex nature of communication across cultures has inspired interdisciplinary approaches, as evidenced by such volumes as *Intercultural Encounters with Japan: Communication-Contact and Conflict*, edited by Condon and Saito (1974), and *Intercultural Communication: Between Japan and the United States*, edited by Kitao and Kitao (1989), who provide an extensive bibliography.

In attempting to understand Japanese and American cultures, researchers have identified crucial differences in attitudes toward public and private selves (Barnlund 1975, 1989), the Japanese notion of *uchi* (inside group) and *soto* (outside group) (Nakane 1970; Sakamoto and Natsuoka 1982), and hierarchical status within groups (Barnlund and Yoshioka 1990; Beebe et al. 1990). Recent studies, like earlier ones, suggest that in communicating with others, Japanese speakers tend to reveal less about their inner feelings and beliefs than Americans do, have distinctly different ways of interacting with members of their own group as opposed to outsiders, and use different verbal and non-verbal markers based on status/age differences within a hierarchy. In contrast, Americans reportedly tend to reveal more of their inner thoughts publicly, operate on more of a sliding scale of social distance from most intimate friends to strangers, and use fewer markers of hierarchical status/age differences.

One relatively new interdisciplinary field, sociolinguistics, deals with language variation in different contexts and the study of "communicative competence" as proposed by Hymes (1971, 1972), who insisted on the necessity of looking at language in its social setting, as opposed to sentences in isolation, and considering the relation between language use and social factors, such as the relative social status and intimacy of the participants. Another partially overlapping field of language study, known as *pragmatics* (Leech 1983, Levinson 1983), grew out of theories of "speech acts" (e.g., apologies, compliments, invitations) by language philosophers Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1976), and the postulation of cooperative principles in conversation (Grice 1975; Leech 1983) and types and principles of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Leech 1983).

Based on theories of sociolinguistics and pragmatics, a large number of researchers (e.g., Beebe and Takahashi 1989; Eisenstein and Bodman 1986; Kasper 1989; Manes and Wolfson 1981; Olshtain 1983; Wolfson 1989; and many others whose studies appear in Wolfson and Judd 1983) have attempted to compare cultures in terms of their ways of expressing different speech acts, such as requests and refusals, in native and non-native languages, using procedures that vary from collection of written responses on questionnaires to ethnographic description of naturally occurring speech events. These researchers investigate variations in linguistic forms and semantic formulas used for expressing the same speech act within and across cultures, in first and/or second languages, looking for effects of such social factors as the relative age and status of the participants, the degree of intimacy between them, their genders, and the social setting. The following discussion will be based in large part on findings from such studies, as well as the results of questionnaire responses collected from Japanese and American students in the present study.

## III. This Study

In order to explore cross-cultural differences in perceptions of appropriateness of different linguistic expressions in particular social situations, an English questionnaire was devised, based on results of previous

studies of a variety of speech acts (see Appendix 1). The first section of the questionnaire asked respondents to choose the most appropriate polite response among four alternatives in a given situation. It should be noted that the questions were not intended to elicit responses the respondents thought they would actually make in a given situation, but rather judgments of relative appropriateness of four pre-selected responses in each situation. Thus, the items attempted to measure awareness of appropriate forms rather than the ability to use the forms in actual communication. The second and third sections of the questionnaire elicited judgments of similarity of meaning and relative strengths of persuasive expressions. The fourth section asked respondents to indicate which of six sentences were invitations, and which were not really invitations.

In May, 1994, the questionnaire was administered in regular English classes to first year Hiroshima City University students majoring in International Studies. The number of questionnaires completed by Japanese students majoring in International Studies totaled 82. All of the students were 18–20 years old, and their English language proficiency level varied from high beginner to advanced, based a TOEIC (Test of English in Communication) test administered in April, 1994. The test scores ranged from a low of 320 to a high of 835, with a mean score of 529. According to the official TOEIC test interpretation of the scores, approximately one-third of the students fell in the D level, 220–470 (described as being able to communicate at the most basic level of conversation, understanding easy conversation and able to respond on personal topics), five fell within the B level, 730–860 (comparable to 550–590 on the TOEFL, which is sufficient to enter many graduate level university programs in the U.S.), and the remainder scored within level C, 470–730, which could be termed an “intermediate” level (described as adequate for daily life and certain limited areas of business, able to carry on ordinary conversation, make appropriate responses in uncomplicated situations, and exchange thoughts, with some problems). Most of the students had never traveled overseas, although a small number (fewer than 10%) had lived in the U.S. for periods of time ranging from 2 weeks to one year. In order to explore the reasons for some of the responses given by the Japanese students, indi-

vidual interviews based on the same questionnaire were carried out with 15 volunteers from among the original 82 students in February, 1995. As a basis for comparison, the same questionnaire was given to American students in American Literature and Folklore classes at Boise State University in Idaho. The number of questionnaires completed by American students who indicated their native language was English totaled 65. Of these 65 students, 39 were under 25 years of age, and 26 were 25–60 years of age.

In the following section, a number of the responses from the questionnaire will be presented and discussed in light of various studies of communicative functions in English and Japanese.

#### IV. Communicative Functions

Based on previous research and results from the present study, five communicative functions that appear to differ somewhat in Japanese and English, potentially causing misunderstanding across cultures, were selected for consideration in this paper: requests, invitations, refusals, apologies, and suggestions. (See Appendices 2 and 3 for a summary of responses to the relevant questionnaire items by the Japanese and American students, respectively.)

##### 1. Requests

Requests are potentially face-threatening acts (Kitao 1989). In making a request, the requester is threatening the other person’s need for freedom from imposition (“negative face” as defined by Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987). At the same time, the requester is risking being refused, which is uncomfortable for both parties. On the questionnaire, students were asked to choose the most appropriate polite way to ask their teacher to read their paper and check it for them. Here and throughout the paper, *JS* indicates Japanese student responses, *AS* indicates American student responses, and the percentages indicate the portion of students who selected each response.

<i>JS</i>	<i>AS</i>	
51%	68%	a. Could you read my paper and check it for me?
10%	0%	b. Couldn’t you read my paper and check it for me?

- 1% 0% c. I want you to read my paper and check it for me.
- 38% 32% d. I would like you to read my paper and check it for me.

Only one of the Japanese students chose "I want you to..." as most appropriate, which shows this group's awareness of the inappropriateness of this form for making a polite request in English. In fact, "I want you to..." is generally used by superiors (bosses, teachers, parents) to formulate directions to subordinates (employees, students, children). Therefore, its use by a student to a teacher tends to be perceived as arrogance or pushiness, with the possible exception of cases where the student is of a clearly higher status, much older than the teacher, and/or the direct employer of the teacher.<sup>1)</sup>

The more indirect version of this formula, "I would like you to...", was selected by 38% of the Japanese students. While this formula sounds more polite than "I want you to..." to native speakers, and 32% of the American students selected this response as the most appropriate of the four, one British respondent in a previous study confided that this sounded even worse to him than "I want you to...", because it had an "edge of imperiousness" (i.e., a nuance of condescension, perhaps as if it were coming from a noble person used to commanding others). Several Japanese students who chose "I would like you to" mentioned in the interview that they had learned the polite expression "I would like" in junior or senior high school and felt comfortable with it. One American informant asked about this response also mentioned the politeness of the "I would like" formula. Further research is required to determine to what extent and in what situations this formula is actually used in requests from lower to higher status conversational partners.

The strongest preference for native English speakers responding to this questionnaire (including 68% of the American students) has been "Could you...", which 51% of the Japanese students selected. No native speakers have chosen "Couldn't you...", although 10% of the Japanese respondents did. The negative form appears to be used when there is evidence that the answer will be in the negative, i.e., a refusal, but where there is no evidence either way, the positive modal sounds more natural.

Preliminary data collection suggests that the most common forms of polite requests in American English involve the use of modals, such as "Could you...?," "Would you...?" and "Would you mind...?"<sup>2)</sup> These conventional, indirect formulas, which are widespread in polite English usage, appear to be used infrequently by Japanese speakers of English. For example, in a detailed study of the speech of Japanese and native English speakers in a business meeting, LoCastro (1993) found relatively less frequent use of modals and other markers of politeness in the English of the Japanese as compared to the native speakers, even though the English proficiency of the Japanese speakers was quite high. This difference could result from a number of possible factors, including a low pragmatic competence level in English among the Japanese, caused by a lack of experience interacting with foreigners; differing perceptions of the need for polite markers in that situation; the particular difficulty of acquiring the English modal system (much like the English article system, which is probably the last aspect of English grammar to be mastered by non-native speakers); or a belief on the part of some Japanese speakers that more direct speech is preferable when speaking English.

The last alternative above points out a major factor that may affect the choice among different request forms by English and Japanese speakers communicating with each other, that is, the commonly accepted stereotype that English speakers are direct, while Japanese speakers are indirect. In actuality, as demonstrated by Miller (1988), both English and Japanese speakers often use varying degrees of indirectness, depending on the specific relationship between the speakers and the situation. Looking at communication styles in work situations in Japan and analyzing video and audio taped data in Japanese and English, she suggests that in-group vs. out-group membership can be a stronger factor than relative status in determining the levels of directness or indirectness employed. For example, she shows examples of a higher status Japanese director using indirect hints to indicate to a subordinate from another work group that a translation of an advertisement had to be changed. When the subordinate, a native English speaker, failed to realize that this was a request, rather than simply advice, the Japanese superior ultimately stated a very direct request. In a similar vein, Japa-

nese subordinates, speaking in Japanese, were found to use direct language with superiors who were members of the same working group pursuing the same interest or goal, which contradicts the stereotype that Japanese are always indirect when speaking to superiors, and shows that the situation is more complex than commonly realized. Clearly, more research is needed in order to understand the most appropriate ways to formulate requests in Japanese and English, depending on particular factors like the relationship between the speakers and the difficulty of the request (Kitao 1989).

## 2. *Invitations*

As pointed out by a number of English textbooks (e.g., Richards et al. 1990; Kitao and Kitao 1991), invitations potentially cause problems across cultures because it is not always clear to members of one culture what constitutes an invitation in another culture. One area of potential misinterpretation involves the use of invitation-like formulas as markers of friendliness. Examples of such expressions in English include "let's get together for lunch soon" and "drop by any time," which may sound like invitations but are not intended as invitations. The results from the questionnaire show that while there was not unanimous agreement among the American students, many more Japanese students were unsure about the status of invitations and friendly expressions. The percentage of responses for each are given on the left; *I* indicates judgment as an invitation, whereas *N* indicates judgment as not being an invitation.

JS		AS		
I	N	I	N	
37%	63%	12%	88%	1. Let's get together sometime soon.
83%	17%	98%	2%	2. If you're not busy on Saturday night, would you like to go out?
33%	67%	12%	88%	3. When are we going to get together? Just give me a call.
82%	18%	85%	15%	4. Shall we meet on Wednesday for lunch?
40%	60%	88%	12%	5. Do you want to go out to dinner next week?
57%	43%	14%	86%	6. I'll give you a call and we'll make a date for

dinner.

In the individual interviews, several Japanese students mentioned that English invitations state a particular time (day or date), whereas friendly expressions have only vague or no time references. Most of the students agreed that numbers 2 and 4 above are invitations, but only 40% of the Japanese, as opposed to 88% of the Americans, identified number 5 as an invitation. Three of the Japanese students interviewed said that the expression "do you want to..." is a question about what someone wants to do, i.e. future intentions (comparable to "do you plan to..."), not an invitation. Two others cited the less specific time reference "next week" instead of a specific day, one of them saying that two or three days away would still be an invitation, but next week is too far away.

Potentially more serious in terms of cross-cultural misunderstanding is the identification of numbers 1, 3, and 6 above as invitations by so many of the Japanese students, as opposed to the American students, more than 85% of whom did not consider them to be invitations. When there is no follow-up to the suggestions contained in expressions like these, those who have interpreted them as invitations will quite naturally feel slighted because they perceive that the "invitation was insincere." These perceptions of friendly expressions as invitations that never materialize have led foreign visitors to the U.S. to perceive Americans as insincere and untrustworthy. One reason for the relatively large number of Japanese students considering number 6 to be an invitation may result from a translation from the Japanese "*ato de denwa o shimasu*" (I'll call you afterwards), which indicates that the speaker is making a fairly definite commitment to call, probably later the same day, according to one Japanese informant. In interviews, several students cited particular forms like "Let's" and "Shall we" as invitations, regardless of the content of the rest of the sentence, and one decided that number 2. wasn't really an invitation because of the expression "would you like to," which she interpreted as asking about someone's feelings, not asking them to do something.

## 3. *Refusals*

Refusals to invitations and requests are dispreferred responses in most cultures, perhaps because of a

widespread preference for agreement (as expressed in a maxim of the cooperative principle, Leech 1983), and perhaps because of the face-threatening aspect of being seen as lacking in generosity (a threat to one's own "positive face," that is, the need to be valued by other people, Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987) or as lacking care or respect for the other person (a threat to that person's positive face). Whatever the reasons, refusals are seldom stated in terms of a simple "no" in either English or Japanese. Some studies have found that when they are refusing invitations, English speakers tend to give positive evaluation and a specific excuse, whereas Japanese speakers tend to apologize and give less specific reasons (e.g., Beebe et al. 1990). According to their findings, questionnaire response d., below, would represent the preferred native English refusal to a dinner invitation from a friend, whereas b. should constitute a popular choice among the Japanese.

#### JS

- 33% a. It sounds nice, but...  
 9% b. I'm sorry, but I'm busy.  
 6% c. Thank you, but I want to eat at a restaurant that night.  
 52% d. That sounds like fun, but I have to finish my report that evening.

A third of the Japanese students chose a., which contains a positive evaluation and nothing else except "but" (a signal of contrast, without any apology or reasons given). This may represent pragmatic transfer from Japanese expressions like "*chotto...*" (literally meaning "a little" but indicating some difficulty) or a tendency not to refuse an invitation explicitly. Choice c., which originally appeared as a response on an open-ended questionnaire eliciting refusals from Japanese students at a national university, was selected by only 6% of the students. Choice of this form may exemplify the stereotypical idea that English speakers prefer directness, whereas most, if not all, native speakers, like this group of Japanese students, would consider it impolite to use this kind of personal preference as an excuse to refuse an invitation. Generally, English speakers tend to say why they are "unable" to accept. Even if they, in fact, are able to but simply choose not to attend, there is a strong preference against saying "I won't attend" or "I want to do something else," which is probably related to threats to the positive face of both

speaker and hearer.

At first glance, in comparison with the Japanese students' responses above, the American students' responses below look more like the predicted Japanese responses, i.e. a strong tendency to give a vague or no reason. However, follow-up interviews of American respondents indicate that those who chose a. assumed that the ellipsis (...) represented missing words, i.e. an excuse would be inserted by the speaker. In fact, ending a sentence with "but" is ungrammatical in English, whereas Japanese "*keredomo*" or "*ga*" corresponding to "but" frequently ends utterances in Japanese. It is possible that the same ambiguity between a trailing off voice and words assumed missing occurred for some of the Japanese students, as well. Thus, this kind of item on a questionnaire would need to be clarified in any future studies.

#### AS

- 26% a. It sounds nice, but...  
 24.5% b. I'm sorry, but I'm busy.  
 1.5% c. Thank you, but I want to eat at a restaurant that night.  
 48% d. That sounds like fun, but I have to finish my report that evening.

Like invitations, when refusing requests, English speakers reportedly tend to give specific reasons why they cannot fulfill the request (Beebe et al. 1990), whereas Japanese speakers have a well-known reputation as tending to avoid saying "No" and using a number of more indirect expressions and evasions (Ueda 1974). In the following item from the questionnaire, response c. was intended to represent a typical (according to Beebe et al. 1990) native English refusal to a request from a colleague for a ride, whereas a., b., and d. represent typical indirect formulas, like those reported in Ueda (1974). Over 40% of the Japanese students selected one of the more vague formulas, whereas close to 60% chose response c., which gives a specific reason for the refusal.

Once again, according to native English speakers who selected option b., the "but..." was interpreted as being followed by an appropriate excuse. The preference for b. over c. among American students can be seen as suggesting that an apology ("I'm sorry") is considered more polite than "I can't" and/or that other excuses of the speaker's choosing would be preferable

to the one given in c., which to some respondents sounded untrue or at least unconvincing.

JS	AS	
7.25%	1.5%	a. It's difficult.
27%	72%	b. I'm sorry, but...
58.5%	25%	c. I can't. I have to pick up my sister at the airport.
7.25%	1.5%	d. I'm not sure. I'll have to think about it and let you know.

With some indirect refusals, particularly those like d. and even a. above, English speakers may not understand that their request has been refused. With refusals like the intended meaning of b., where the apology makes the refusal clear but no reason is given, an English speaking addressee may feel insulted because no attempt is made to explain the refusal, as could have been the case in the cultural clash incident cited at the beginning of the paper. In the newspaper article, the description of the welcome that "appalled" the American visitors stated that only after "lower-level Matsushita executives had made it clear that they would not consider the proposal" did the Japanese head of the company show up, reportedly saying, "I don't see any smiling faces. I see you have been told" (1994: 1). While the facts that their request was being refused rather than accepted, that the Matsushita president was two hours late, and that they were tired from jet lag undoubtedly contributed to the negative feelings of the Americans, the form of this statement by the Japanese president, with no expression of apology or reasons why the request could not be granted, undoubtedly contributed to the lack of rapport between the two groups.

#### 4. Apologies

As is well-known, Japanese speakers very frequently use many different apology expressions, whether or not the speaker feels at fault. In addition, apology forms (most notably *sumimasen*) are sometimes used in situations where an English speaker would express appreciation, not apology (Coulmas 1981). In contrast, expressions of apology appear to be less frequent in English (Narita and Young 1994).

Crucial factors affecting the choice of apology expressions include the seriousness of the offense

(Wolfson 1989). For example, English speakers tend to say "Sorry" if the offense is minor, "I'm sorry" or "I'm really sorry" for more serious offenses, and "I'm terribly sorry" and "Please forgive me" only for very serious problems. The following questionnaire items attempted, in part, to tap students' awareness of appropriate English formulas based on the seriousness of the offense. The first asked for the best choice among the following expressions after accidentally bumping into a stranger.

JS	AS	
64.5%	100%	a. Oh, excuse me.
4%	0%	b. I'm so clumsy.
8.5%	0%	c. Please forgive me.
23%	0%	d. I'm terribly sorry I offended you.

The second one elicited judgments of apologies for having dropped and broken a neighbor's vase.

JS	AS	
20%	11%	a. Oh, I'm sorry.
2%	0%	b. Oh dear. I hope it wasn't too expensive.
27%	4.5%	c. It was my fault entirely. Can you ever forgive me?
51%	84.5%	d. I'm really sorry. It slipped right out of my hands. Let me replace it.

The results indicate that a majority of the Japanese students were aware of appropriate differences in apology forms according to the seriousness of the offense. However, a substantial minority apparently were not, as a total of 31% selected c. and d. as the most appropriate responses to the first, less serious, offense, and 22% chose a. or b. for the second, more serious, offense. One student mentioned in the interview that he would have preferred "I'm sorry" in the former situation and that "Excuse me" would be used when someone wanted to pass through a crowd but not after having bumped someone. Relatively elaborate apologies to less serious responses may lead to Japanese speakers being seen by English speakers as overly deferential, but should not cause any serious problems of mistrust. In contrast, giving minimal or inappropriate apologies for more serious offenses could cause serious misunderstandings.

Researchers have reported a tendency for English

speakers to give more explanations for why the offense happened as compared to Japanese speakers (e.g., Barnlund and Yoshioka 1990). Several Japanese students interviewed said that they thought d. as an apology for breaking the vase was too long or had “too many words,” and one said he chose c. because if it was his fault he didn’t “want to give excuses.” This accords with advice given to JSL (Japanese as a Second Language) learners in Japanese business situations, where the most common expression appears to be *makoto ni moushiwake gozaimasen*, “there is truly no excuse” (Takamizawa 1994). Native English speakers may expect an explanation of how the offense happened in order to feel assured that it was not intentional or the result of any lack of caring for the other person. However, such explanations could be seen by Japanese recipients as making excuses or trying to place the blame elsewhere, rather than taking responsibility oneself. In intercultural interaction, Japanese may tend to be perceived as self-deprecating for apologizing so much and for taking on the blame for everything that goes wrong, whereas English speakers may seem rude and/or egotistical for not apologizing enough and for making excuses.

### 5. Suggestions

When giving advice, English speakers tend to formulate their suggestions using modals (*should, ought to, could, might*). The following questionnaire item was designed to elicit judgments of appropriateness of suggestion expressions, comparing three modal forms and the direct imperative with *please*, a fairly direct translation of the commonly used *-te kudasai* form in Japanese. The situation described was advice to a friend having trouble sleeping.

JS	AS	
13.5%	3%	a. Please try drinking some sake before you go to bed.
0%	2%	b. You must try drinking some sake before you go to bed.
23%	90%	c. You should try drinking some sake before you go to bed.
63.5%	5%	d. You’d better try drinking some sake before you go to bed.

Although many native English speakers would

probably prefer “might” or “could” or “why don’t you” when making a suggestion like this one, when they are forced to choose among the above options, the results indicate that almost all would choose “you should.” The particular selection of options in this item was based mainly on results of a study by Altman (1990) showing a considerable difference between native English speakers and ESL (English as a Second Language) students in the U.S. in terms of their judgments of the meaning and relative strength of the English forms “you should” and “you’d better”. The ESL students in his study assumed “you’d better” means something like “it would be a good idea,” whereas native English speakers took it to mean “if you don’t, there may be negative consequences.” On the other hand, the ESL students considered the modal *should* to be close in meaning to “it is necessary” whereas for the native English speakers it had the meaning “it would be a good idea” or “it might help.” The following item from section 2 of the questionnaire, based on Altman’s study (1990), elicited students’ judgments about the meaning of *should*. Respondents were asked to choose the sentence that was closest in meaning to the italicized part of the original.

In order to improve our skills, *we should try to practice every day.*

JS	AS	
5%	61.5%	a. It would be a very good idea for us to practice every day.
83%	14%	b. It is necessary for us to practice every day.
12%	24.5%	c. It might help if we practiced every day.

As shown in these results, the Japanese students’ perceptions tended to match those of the ESL students in Altman’s study and to differ from the perceptions of the Americans, who tended to choose either “it would be a good idea” or “it might help,” as opposed to “it is necessary” as closest in meaning to “we should.”

Based on the responses to section 3 of the questionnaire, again taken from Altman (1990), the following table lists the ranking of expressions from strongest (1) to weakest (7) by the Japanese and American students.



Japanese Students	American Students
1. you must	1. you must
2. you have to	2. you have to
3. you should	3. you'd better
4. you'd better	4. you're supposed to
5. you're supposed to	5. you should
6. you can	6. you can
7. you could (17% = you'd better)	7. you could

According to the results of independent *t*-tests, Japanese students' judgments of the strength of "you should" were significantly higher, and those of "you'd better" and "you're supposed to" were significantly lower, than American students' judgments ( $p < .000$ ). It should be noted that 17% of the Japanese students judged "you'd better" as the weakest, like the majority of the ESL students in Altman's (1990) study. According to reports from some Japanese students and teachers, this perception of "you'd better" as carrying weak force may result from inaccurate descriptions in some English textbooks in Japan of "had better" as being equivalent to "it would be better." While there are cases in which "had better" carries such a meaning (e.g. "I don't know the answer, so you'd better ask someone else."), there are many other cases where "had better" is used as a warning or even a threat (e.g. "You'd better stop doing that." and "You'd better not be late again.")

English and Japanese speakers could see each other as impolite or pushy if they are not aware of differences in appropriate ways of making suggestions. More research is necessary in order to determine how speakers use various forms of persuasion and interpret their use in actual situations in both languages.

## V. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that both Japanese and American students recognize differences in appropriateness of particular expressions in specific social situations. In some ways their perceptions appear to be similar, whereas in others their judgments of appropriateness may differ in ways that could potentially lead to misunderstandings of each others' intentions in communications across the two cultures. Specifically, Japanese and American students' judgments of appropriate requests in this study did not differ very

much; their judgments of appropriate refusals and apologies differed somewhat; and their interpretations of invitations and suggestions differed markedly.

Based on the interviews with 15 of the Japanese students, we can identify several factors that may relate to the kind of judgments and interpretations elicited in this study. First, since the responses of several of the less fluent English speakers in this study were closer to the native English tendencies than those of some of the relatively more fluent speakers, it can be hypothesized that oral fluency does not affect judgments of appropriateness of expressions for communicative functions. However, interpretations of certain speech acts in this study appear to have been influenced by experience abroad and other sources of cultural knowledge. For example, "excuse me" as an apology after bumping into a stranger was selected by all of the students who had lived in the U.S., as well as another student who reported having noticed that it was used in American movies in that kind of situation. On the other hand, judgments of the relative strength of "should" and "had better" and of invitations as opposed to non-invitations seem to have been less affected by overseas experience, given the fact that responses from students who had lived one year in the U.S. did not necessarily match the American responses. A number of students demonstrated conscious awareness of cultural differences in communicative functions, for example, by pointing out that certain choices were "very Japanese" or took the "Japanese position [of] not wanting to say why" when refusing a request. Finally, the effects of instruction on certain judgments of appropriateness should be noted. For example, two students mentioned having learned from teachers that in refusing an invitation, one should express positive evaluation and give a reason; another mentioned having learned from a TV program that "should" is polite for giving advice; and a number of students mentioned having learned in junior high school that "had better" or "I would like" were polite expressions.

The lack of unanimity among native English speakers in responding to most parts of this questionnaire can be seen to reflect two factors that need to be kept in mind when interpreting studies of this sort. First, unlike grammatical competence, which all speakers of normal intelligence are believed to share equally in spite

of their dialectal differences, "rules" of appropriateness for communicative functions cannot be said to be followed equally by all members of a speech community. In fact, some people are seen as more skilled "conversationalists" than others, and some are seen as constantly "putting their foot in their mouth" by making inappropriate remarks.<sup>3)</sup> Second, a great deal of caution is necessary in interpreting questionnaire data eliciting linguistic judgments and other decisions regarding subtle differences in meaning. One reason is that presenting situations and expressions isolated from their context leaves a great deal of interpretation up to the respondents. Another is that reading a question too quickly or misreading an item can skew a respondent's answers, as can misinterpreting the directions. In addition, ambiguity and/or vagueness resulting from attempting to render spoken language in writing is a constant risk that must be monitored carefully. Thus, follow-up interviews with a number of the same subjects have to be considered essential in studies using questionnaire data.

This study has attempted to show that simplistic analysis based on a single discipline or reliance on stereotypical accounts of behavior in two different cultures cannot begin to explain the reasons for the kind of cross-cultural misunderstanding demonstrated by the Matsushita and MCA executives cited at the beginning of this paper. An interdisciplinary approach, involving both qualitative (e.g., Miller 1988) and quantitative (e.g., Herbert 1990) analysis, should prove helpful in investigating the causes for cross-cultural communication breakdowns like this one. One aspect of the analysis should involve detailed study of actually occurring verbal and non-verbal communication, ideally through use of visual and auditory recordings, and elicitation of interpretations by members of the different cultures involved.

Through human interaction both within and between cultures, most speakers of English and Japanese are seeking smooth social interaction and harmonious relations, as well as meaningful communication. Accepting commonly held stereotypes of the two cultures can seriously distort our perceptions of each other. By conducting solid research on culturally influenced communication patterns, we can gain the necessary insights to cross the barriers between cultures and foster

deeper understanding among the members of Japanese speaking and English speaking societies.

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Kathleen Warner for administering the questionnaire at Boise State University and to all the students both there and at Hiroshima City University for participating in this study. I also want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful suggestions to improve this paper. Remaining shortcomings are my own responsibility.

### Notes

1. Unfortunately, extensive personal experience indicates that "I want you to" is frequently used in requests by Japanese students to their native English teachers. This has been reported to cause newcomers to Japan considerable discomfort, often on an unconscious level.
2. Anecdotal evidence suggests that British English speakers may use "Will you...?" more frequently and/or find it more polite than "Would you...?" but this hypothesis requires further research.
3. Extreme difficulties in communicating appropriately could result in a speaker being judged as abnormal, stigmatized and ultimately institutionalized, as pointed out many years ago by Goffman (1959).

### References

- Altman, R. 1990. "Giving and Taking Advice without Offense," in R.C. Scarcella et al., eds., *Developing Communicative Competence in a Second Language* (pp. 95-99). N.Y.: Newbury House.
- Austin, J. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Harvard and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barnlund, Dean C. 1975. *Public and Private Self in Japan and the United States: Conversation Styles of Two Cultures*. Tokyo: Simul Press.
- Barnlund, Dean C. 1989. *Communicative Styles of Japanese and Americans: Images and Realities*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Barnlund, Dean C. and M. Yoshioka. 1990. "Apologies: Japanese and American Styles." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14, 193-206.
- Beebe, Leslie M., and Tomoko Takahashi. 1989. "Do you have a bag? Social Status and Patterned Variation in Second Language Acquisition," in Susan Gass et al., eds., *Variation in Second Language Acquisition: Discourse and Pragmatics* (pp. 103-125). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Beebe, Leslie et al. 1990. "Pragmatic Transfer in ESL Refusals," in R.C. Scarcella et al., eds. *Developing Com-*

- municative Competence in a Second Language* (pp. 55–73). N.Y.: Newbury House.
- Brown, Penelope, and Stephen Levinson. 1978. "Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena," in E. Goody, ed., *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction* (pp. 303–349). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Penelope and Stephen Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Condon, John and Mitsuko Saito. 1974. *Intercultural Encounters with Japan: Communication—Contact and Conflict*. Tokyo: Simul Press.
- Coulmas, F. 1981. "Poison to Your Soul: Thanks and Apologies Contrastively Viewed," in F. Coulmas, ed., *Conversational Routine* (pp. 69–93). The Hague: Mouton.
- Eisenstein, Miriam and Jean Bodman. 1986. "I very appreciate': Expressions of Gratitude by Native and Non-native Speakers of American English." *Applied Linguistics*, 7, (2): 167–185.
- Fabrikant, G., and Pollack, A. 1994. "Culture-Clash Tale." *Asahi Evening News*, Sunday, November 6, 1–2.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Grice, Paul. 1975. "Logic and Conversation," in P. Cole and J. Morgan, eds, *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts* (pp. 41–58). New York: Academic Press.
- Herbert, R.K. 1990. "Sex-Based Difference in Compliment Behavior." *Language in Society*, 19: 201–224.
- Hymes, Dell. 1971. "Sociolinguistics and the Ethnography of Speaking," in E. Ardener, ed., *Social Anthropology and Language* (pp. 47–93). London: Tavistock.
- Hymes, Dell. 1972. "On Communicative Competence," in J.B. Pride and J. Holmes, eds., *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 269–293). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Kasper, Gabriele. 1989. "Variation in Interlanguage Speech Act Realisation," in Susan Gass et al., eds., *Variation in Second Language Acquisition: Discourse and Pragmatics* (pp. 37–57). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Kitao, Kenji. 1989. "Differences between Politeness Strategies Used in Requests by Americans and Japanese," in Kenji Kitao and S. Kathleen Kitao, eds., *Intercultural Communication: Between Japan and the United States* (pp. 139–154). Tokyo: Eichosha.
- Kitao, S. Kathleen and Kenji Kitao. 1991. *Communicating with Americans: Functions in English*. Tokyo: Eichosha.
- Leech, Geoffrey N. 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Levinson, Stephen C. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LoCastro, Virginia. 1993. "Linguistic Politeness of Japanese Speakers of English." Paper presented at the 4th International Pragmatics Conference, Kobe, Japan (July).
- Manes, Joan, and Nessa Wolfson. 1981. "The Compliment Formula," in F. Coulmas, ed., *Conversational Routine* (pp. 115–131). The Hague: Mouton.
- Miller, Laura Ann. 1988. *Interethnic Communication in Japan: Interactions between Japanese and American Co-Workers*. Doctoral dissertation. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI.
- Nakane, Chie. 1970. *Japanese Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Narita, S. and R. Young. (1994). "Apologies in English by Japanese Learners." *JALT Journal*, 16, (1), 75–81.
- Olshtain, E. 1983. "Sociocultural Competence and Language Transfer: The Case of Apology," in Susan Gass and Larry Selinker, eds., *Language Transfer in Language Learning*. (pp. 232–249). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Richards, J.D. et al. 1990. *Interchange I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sakamoto, N. and R. Natsuoka. 1982. *Polite Fictions: Why Japanese and Americans Seem Rude to Each Other*. Tokyo: Kinseido.
- Searle, John. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, John. 1976. "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts." *Language in Society*, 5: 1–23.
- Takamizawa, H. 1994. "Key Expressions for Business." *The Daily Yomiuri* (Monday, September 26), 8 (A).
- Tannen, Deborah. 1986. *That's Not What I Meant! How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*. New York: Ballentine Books.
- Tannen, Deborah. 1991. *You Just Don't Understand*. New York: William Morrow.
- Ueda, Keiko. 1974. "Sixteen Ways to Avoid Saying 'No' in Japan," in John C. Condon and Mitsuko Saito, eds., *Intercultural Encounters with Japan: Communication—Contact and Conflict* (pp. 185–192). Tokyo: Simul Press.
- Wolfson, Nessa. 1989. *Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL*. New York: Newbury House.
- Wolfson, Nessa and E. Judd, eds. 1983. *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*. New York: Newbury House.

## Appendix 1

## Questionnaire on Sociolinguistic Rules of Appropriateness

## A. Choose the one most appropriate polite response for each.

1. *You run into an acquaintance while shopping.*

A: Hi. How's it going?

- You: a. I'm going by bicycle. And you?  
 b. Couldn't be better. How about you?  
 c. I'm going shopping to get some things.  
 d. Everything's wonderful! I just got a new job, my parents are coming to visit in October, and I'm moving to a much bigger apartment in the next three months.

2. *You wrote a paper and want to ask your teacher to read and check it for you.*

- You: a. Could you read my paper and check it for me?  
 b. Couldn't you read my paper and check it for me?  
 c. I want you to read my paper and check it for me.  
 d. I would like you to read my paper and check it for me.

3. *You are staying in Los Angeles for five days.*

Friend: Would you like to come to dinner at my house on Friday?

- You: a. It sounds nice, but...  
 b. I'm sorry, but I'm busy.  
 c. Thank you, but I want to eat at a restaurant that night.  
 d. That sounds like fun, but I have to finish my report that evening.

4. *After you've made a speech, a stranger says the following to you.*

A: Your speech was very good.

- You: a. I'm glad you liked it.  
 b. Do you really think so?  
 c. Oh no, it really wasn't very good.  
 d. I've studied public speaking for many years, but I can't make good speeches.

5. *You accidentally bump into a stranger.*

- You: a. Oh, excuse me.  
 b. I'm so clumsy.  
 c. Please forgive me.  
 d. I'm terribly sorry I offended you.

6. *You dropped and broke your neighbor's vase.*

- You: a. Oh, I'm sorry.  
 b. Oh dear. I hope it wasn't too expensive.  
 c. It was my fault entirely. Can you ever forgive me?  
 d. I'm really sorry. It slipped right out of my hands. Let me replace it.

7. *Your response to an apology by a person who broke your vase.*

- You: a. That's okay, don't worry about it.  
 b. That's okay, but please be more careful next time.  
 c. What a shame! Oh well, I was tired of it anyway.  
 d. I don't understand how anybody can be so clumsy.

8. *Your friend is having problems getting to sleep at night and asks your advice.*

- You: a. Please try drinking some sake before you go to bed.  
 b. You must try drinking some sake before you go to bed.

- c. You should try drinking some sake before you go to bed.  
 d. You'd better try drinking some sake before you go to bed.
9. *A colleague has asked you to give him a ride, and you have decided not to give him one.*

You: a. It's difficult.  
 b. I'm sorry, but...  
 c. I can't. I have to pick up my sister at the airport.  
 d. I'm not sure. I'll have to think about it and let you know.

10. *An acquaintance tells you he thinks your child is very talented.*

You: a. Yes, she is.  
 b. Thank you.  
 c. Oh no, she isn't talented.  
 d. Actually, she's not very talented but she works hard.

**B. Circle the letter of the sentence that is closest in meaning to the italicized part of the original.**

1. In order to improve our skills, *we should try to practice every day.*  
 a. It would be a very good idea for us to practice every day.  
 b. It is necessary for us to practice every day.  
 c. It might help if we practiced every day.
2. The boss told us *we'd better work overtime* or we won't finish in time.  
 a. It would be better if we worked overtime.  
 b. If we work overtime, we will finish in time.  
 c. If we don't work overtime, something bad might happen.

**C. Rank the following expressions of persuasion, from strongest (1) to weakest (7).**

- \_\_\_\_\_ you could  
 \_\_\_\_\_ you have to  
 \_\_\_\_\_ you're supposed to  
 \_\_\_\_\_ you must  
 \_\_\_\_\_ you can  
 \_\_\_\_\_ you'd better  
 \_\_\_\_\_ you should

**D. Indicate which of the following are invitations (I) and which are not really invitations (N), by marking "I" or "N" next to each.**

1. Let's get together sometime soon. \_\_\_\_\_  
 2. If you're not busy on Saturday night, would you like to go out? \_\_\_\_\_  
 3. When are we going to get together? Just give me a call. \_\_\_\_\_  
 4. Shall we meet on Wednesday for lunch? \_\_\_\_\_  
 5. Do you want to go out to dinner next week? \_\_\_\_\_  
 6. I'll give you a call and we'll make a date for dinner. \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2

## JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENT RESPONSES (N=82)

**A. Choose the one most appropriate polite response for each.**

1. *You wrote a paper and want to ask your teacher to read and check it for you.*

- You: 51% a. Could you read my paper and check it for me?  
 10% b. Couldn't you read my paper and check it for me?  
 1% c. I want you to read my paper and check it for me.  
 38% d. I would like you to read my paper and check it for me.

2. *You are staying in Los Angeles for five days.*

Friend: Would you like to come to dinner at my house on Friday?

- You: 33% a. It sounds nice, but...  
 9% b. I'm sorry, but I'm busy.  
 6% c. Thank you, but I want to eat at a restaurant that night.  
 52% d. That sounds like fun, but I have to finish my report that evening.

3. *You accidentally bump into a stranger.*

- You: 64.5% a. Oh, excuse me.  
 4% b. I'm so clumsy.  
 8.5% c. Please forgive me.  
 23% d. I'm terribly sorry I offended you.

4. *You dropped and broke your neighbor's vase.*

- You: 20% a. Oh, I'm sorry.  
 2% b. Oh dear. I hope it wasn't too expensive.  
 27% c. It was my fault entirely. Can you ever forgive me?  
 51% d. I'm really sorry. It slipped right out of my hands. Let me replace it.

5. *Your friend is having problems getting to sleep at night and asks your advice.*

- You: 13.5% a. Please try drinking some sake before you go to bed.  
 0% b. You must try drinking some sake before you go to bed.  
 23% c. You should try drinking some sake before you go to bed.  
 63.5% d. You'd better try drinking some sake before you go to bed.

6. *A colleague has asked you to give him a ride, and you have decided not to give him one.*

- You: 7.25% a. It's difficult.  
 27% b. I'm sorry, but...  
 58.5% c. I can't. I have to pick up my sister at the airport.  
 7.25% d. I'm not sure. I'll have to think about it and let you know.

**B. Circle the letter of the sentence that is closest in meaning to the italicized part of the original.**

In order to improve our skills, *we should try to practice every day.*

- 5% a. It would be a very good idea for us to practice every day.  
 83% b. It is necessary for us to practice every day.  
 12% c. It might help if we practiced every day.

**C. Rank the following expressions of persuasion, from strongest (1) to weakest (7).**

1. you must
2. you have to
3. you should

4. you'd better
5. you're supposed to
6. you can
7. you could

**D. Indicate which of the following are invitations (I) and which are not really invitations (N), by marking "I" or "N" next to each.**

- I=37%, N=63% Let's get together sometime soon.
- I=83%, N=17% If you're not busy on Saturday night, would you like to go out?
- I=33%, N=67% When are we going to get together? Just give me a call.
- I=82%, N=18% Shall we meet on Wednesday for lunch?
- I=40%, N=60% Do you want to go out to dinner next week?
- I=57%, N=43% I'll give you a call and we'll make a date for dinner.

## Appendix 3

## AMERICAN UNIVERSITY STUDENT RESPONSES (N=65)

**A. Choose the one most appropriate polite response for each.**

1. *You wrote a paper and want to ask your teacher to read and check it for you.*

- You: 68% a. Could you read my paper and check it for me?  
 0% b. Couldn't you read my paper and check it for me?  
 0% c. I want you to read my paper and check it for me.  
 32% d. I would like you to read my paper and check it for me.

2. *You are staying in Los Angeles for five days.*

Friend: Would you like to come to dinner at my house on Friday?

- You: 26% a. It sounds nice, but...  
 24.5% b. I'm sorry, but I'm busy.  
 1.5% c. Thank you, but I want to eat at a restaurant that night.  
 48% d. That sounds like fun, but I have to finish my report that evening.

3. *You accidentally bump into a stranger.*

- You: 100% a. Oh, excuse me.  
 0% b. I'm so clumsy.  
 0% c. Please forgive me.  
 0% d. I'm terribly sorry I offended you.

4. *You dropped and broke your neighbor's vase.*

- You: 11% a. Oh, I'm sorry.  
 0% b. Oh dear. I hope it wasn't too expensive.  
 4.5% c. It was my fault entirely. Can you ever forgive me?  
 84.5% d. I'm really sorry. It slipped right out of my hands. Let me replace it.

5. *Your friend is having problems getting to sleep at night and asks your advice.*

- You: 3% a. Please try drinking some sake before you go to bed.  
 2% b. You must try drinking some sake before you go to bed.  
 90% c. You should try drinking some sake before you go to bed.  
 5% d. You'd better try drinking some sake before you go to bed.

6. *A colleague has asked you to give him a ride, and you have decided not to give him one.*

- You: 1.5% a. It's difficult.  
 72% b. I'm sorry, but...  
 25% c. I can't. I have to pick up my sister at the airport.  
 1.5% d. I'm not sure. I'll have to think about it and let you know.

**B. Circle the letter of the sentence that is closest in meaning to the italicized part of the original.**

In order to improve our skills, *we should try to practice every day.*

- 61.5% a. It would be a very good idea for us to practice every day.  
 14% b. It is necessary for us to practice every day.  
 24.5% c. It might help if we practiced every day.

**C. Rank the following expressions of persuasion, from strongest (1) to weakest (7).**

1. you must
2. you have to
3. you'd better



4. you're supposed to
5. you should
6. you can
7. you could

**D. Indicate which of the following are invitations (I) and which are not really invitations (N), by marking "I" or "N" next to each.**

I=12%, N=88% Let's get together sometime soon.

I=98%, N= 2% If you're not busy on Saturday night, would you like to go out?

I=12%, N=88% When are we going to get together? Just give me a call.

I=85%, N=15% Shall we meet on Wednesday for lunch?

I=88%, N=12% Do you want to go out to dinner next week?

I=14%, N=86% I'll give you a call and we'll make a date for dinner.