

Intercultural communication between Europe and Japan - Can it be more than a fashionable slogan?

Dealing with what people write and say

Japanese texts as a rule give you just the proper amount of frustration. It soon becomes clear that what we encounter there reflects centuries of knowledge, experience and beliefs, views and understandings of reality which we can never share. At the same time the Japanese language material lacks certain views and beliefs which structure and shape what we say and write about.

All this might be good fun, dealing from an armchair perspective with frustrating documents. However, things are not quite so much fun if we include language on the spoken level. Here we come to realize our limitations in a most discouraging way, facing real people who react to what we do, and who create confusion and uneasiness in us by what they do.⁵

Moreover, whereas in the case of written texts we can turn to dictionaries and encyclopaedias and take our time, in the case of spoken language we must heavily rely on feeling and intuition to give us instant help to react in an adequate way.

With these thoughts in mind I have been observing Japan's efforts during the past 25 years to deal with intercultural communication. Particularly from the mid 1980s on "intercultural communication" became a keyword in the context of Japan's efforts at internationalisation and globalisation. Looking back over this period I get the impression that the enormous efforts Japan has indeed been making to communicate across its cultural border have not been matched by a similar degree of success. At the same time, on our, i.e. the European side, very few large-scale efforts have been made to seriously deal with aspects of intercultural communication, at least in so far as the East Asian languages are concerned. Theoretical positions are well-known, but how do we deal with reality? I feel the relationship between Japan and Europe still to be one of non-communication.

⁵ A concise discussion of at least the official side of intercultural communication with Japan, that in effect sums up the major areas of misunderstanding and conflict, is presented in: Nishiyama, Kazuo: *Doing Business with Japan*. Honolulu (University of Hawai'i) 2000.

Who crosses into whose territory?

a) East to West

Intercultural communication is not what Japanese schoolbooks show it to be: Children holding each other's hands and proclaiming: We are all such good friends! It may be true that feelings communicate more than discussions - we all remember the emotional scenes on the day the Berlin Wall fell. But sooner or later you are going to have to talk to each other.

In intercultural communication people are not going to resort to Esperanto. The two partners, East and West, must decide upon somebody's language. Why is it almost obvious that one will choose the Western language, English, German or French? Evidently there exists something like a hierarchy of languages, regulating in which direction adaptation goes.

What is such a hierarchy based on? And what effects does it have? If we look back into Western history, we will see that the energy which went into the development of the modern nation state made up of "educated individuals" was, generally, directed *against* something, always had something like an enemy.⁶ It was energy that grew out of the definition of one form of existence as good, and another form as not (so) good. Modernization in the West has clearly been a process of exclusion of many thinkable life styles in favour of one, which takes on the quality of an ideal. As I hope to show later on, Japanese patterns of communication should not be seen in absolute terms as the antithesis of Western style communication, but in Japanese communication so-called "Western" characteristics serve a function, they are merely one possibility, one option, not *the* ideal.

By contrast, the West has a long tradition of referring to ways of life that do not fit its ideal as "backward", "childish", "slave-like", "not rational", "counter to man's destiny as his own master", "like going back into the 18th century". Naturally, this leads to a much greater reluctance on the Western side to adapt its patterns of communication to the Eastern side than vice versa. On the Eastern side possibly the main reason for non-adaptation is not some deep-lying fear of losing one's identity as a respected citizen, but quite simply a sense of shame not having mastered foreign languages as well as one feels one ought to have.

Does the existence of a hierarchy of languages affect communication with Japan in a negative way? Here I will only make one point.

⁶ See Shimada Shingo: *Die Erfindung Japans. Kulturelle Wechselwirkung und nationale Identitätskonstruktion*. Frankfurt etc. (Campus) 2000, or Giddens, Anthony: *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford 1990.

In a Japanese perspective a hierarchy is never just an order from top down or bottom up. A hierarchy may rule who goes first (like we say "ladies first" when going through a door), but it always gives two sides the responsibility for a similar amount of effort, stress being laid on the aspect "effort". On the communicative level hierarchy demands two complementary types of effort: Basically, a tense and strenuously upheld willingness to adapt from bottom up, in return for signals of awareness and consideration from top down.

At this point I would like to draw attention to so many Japanese memoirs in which interest in and love for the West has quickly turned into hatred. The same can, of course, also happen in Western texts, yet the closeness of admiration and disappointment, which is so distinct in Japanese texts, appears to me to reflect the specific kind of frustration of an inferior who has been hit by a superior he had thought would protect and favour him.

Example 1:

In 1994, when prime minister Hosokawa said "no" to America's demand that Japan open its markets and follow the principle of quantity control, the journalist Hidaka Yoshiki (one-time guest professor at Harvard) reacted with the following words:

"A relationship between two adults", he wrote, implies for Americans, "a relationship between two people who are absolute strangers (mattaku tanin)". In a society like the American one, which is characterized by disputes (kenka shakai), [a relationship between two adults] means "a relationship in which people also have to reckon with one side being ready to hit the other." Therefore, when Hosokawa went to Washington and proclaimed, "The relationship between Japan and the US has now become a relationship between two mature adults", he declared that he was prepared for a fight.

[...] Hosokawa believed that he was in the right and that his side was stronger. He believed that [...] if the US retaliated and went against Japan, this would damage their own firms and their own population. [...]

Hosokawa was certainly right in this point. If the US, whose economy is so closely interlinked with the Japanese economy, started a quarrel with Japan, then damage would definitely also be inflicted on their own economy. However, Americans do not conclude from this that they should not start a quarrel.

b) West to East

Now let us assume that after all we have adapted ourselves to Japanese norms and communicate in Japanese.

The question that now arises is whether Japanese is altogether equal to English, German or French, i.e. one of the great standard languages of the world. Can we altogether express in Japanese what we want to express if our background is English, German or French?

Is it unnatural for a Japanese to speak English? Of course not, and, as I have said, we even expect him to, as we are as a rule neither prepared nor able to cross the border into his language. How natural is it then for us to speak Japanese? We must remember that Japanese is not a language that has developed techniques for bridging distances between peoples of different cultural and linguistic origin. It is more akin to my own native language, the language of the Swiss Canton of Berne, than to Standard German or English.

What are characteristics of the Bernese language? I would put it this way: The Bernese language carries with it the expectation of minute adherence to specific sets of regionally defined social behaviour, and it is a language used among people who in a sense all know each other. Consequently Bernese is used just as often for communication as for excluding people (i.e. outsiders) from communication. In Bernese it is next to impossible to act correctly on the level of language but not on the level of behaviour. Also it would be rude to demand that people express themselves explicitly - society expects you to know what is meant ("Why should I tell others what they are supposed to know?")⁷.

In theory, Standard Japanese certainly aims not at the ideals of Bernese, but at those of the standard languages of the world. However, in practice this is simply not necessary. Therefore it is not surprising that the techniques for developing communicative skills in a narrow sense, i.e. having language and language alone carry the burden of communicating, remain largely neglected. The result is that Japanese - just like Bernese - is indeed a language you cannot simply "enter" from the outside.

The problem of self-perception

If, to the extent that Bernese does, Japanese has the function of creating the feeling of "we", then what does Japanese society expect you to know about "we"?

⁷ See for instance: Koller, Werner: *Deutsche in der Deutschschweiz*. Aarau (Sauerländer) 1992.

Obviously, in order to be socially acceptable, language must be seen as a subcategory of behaviour.

I already said that effort characterizes communicative situations in Japanese. This effort is expected to reflect the question, not "What must be done?", but "Who must do what for whom?" In other words, if both sides agreed that communication consisted just of passing on information from A to B, then the effort would go into transforming just this information into acoustic or written signals. However, when the human factor of "who must do what for whom" comes into the play, this gives communication a different quality. Spoken Japanese thus becomes an intricate web in which at least two parties give and take bits of information until all sides feel satisfied. Of course, this implies that the information may get across before all theoretically necessary signals have been given, in other words, before things have all been said on a linguistic level.

Actually there is nothing unusual about such communication, though it does not fit the ideal certainly not achieved, but at least reflected in, Western standard languages. There is, however, one element through which Japanese differs radically from the standard languages of the West. Japanese communication is not just a matter of two sides making efforts. Rather, each side's efforts must reflect a specific type of self-perception. You must be willing to

- a) make enormous efforts to grasp other people's thoughts and feelings, and
- b) position human beings, including your own self, above or below other human beings.

a) Grasping other people's thoughts

Let us first look at what it means to have a self-perception that allows us to make enormous efforts to grasp other people's thoughts and feelings.

Japanese communication, being in principle a two-sided effort, very explicitly divides responsibility for understanding between speaker and listener, and also between writer and reader. By contrast, our standard languages have developed in a direction that places greatest possible responsibility on the one side that sends out signals, and at the same time has reduced the idea of communication to just that of *language* communication, the producer of which is responsible that it will reach an unspecified receiver. In this system, it is legitimate for the receiver to sit back and wait for "logically" structured utterances. Accordingly, communicative training in the European standard languages stresses verbalized communication, and the use of mathematical logic to structure it, already at a very early stage in a child's life. However, in the Japanese case it is usually not

legitimate for the receiver of communicative signals just to sit back, trusting that the person producing them feels as responsible as in the West. In fact (with the exception of specific cases I will turn to below) the speaker or writer is not taught to feel this kind of responsibility, and will tend to place a large portion of responsibility for the success of communication on the receiver.

In this context let me stress that we should not speak of Japanese communication as indirect or vague. The whole talk of the Japanese being *aimai* (ambiguous, vague) is entirely beside the point. The situation we have in Japanese is one where already small children have been trained to make the maximum effort at interpreting situations without waiting for explicit communicative signals. The most common Japanese phrase for this may be: *atama o tsukainasai* ("Use your brains/your capacities to infer!").

I will return to this effort "to use one's brains" in a moment. First let me point out the reverse side of the same coin: If children are trained to make great efforts at interpreting situations, then there also exists the demand to always leave others enough room to interpret situations. In other words, Japanese usually requires its speakers not to be overly explicit, Japanese expressions discouraging explicitness being: "You are *shittsukoi* (persistent, pestering people)!", "*kudo* (wordy, long-winded, tedious)!", and so people will cut you short and say: "*ii - wakatta* (enough - I have understood)!".

Aware of this principle of non-explicitness, people in Japan can get very angry if made to be explicit towards a lower-ranking person, since this betrays the lower ranking person's unwillingness or incapacity to "use his brains".

Japanese communication in principle consists of intensive efforts by two sides. Nonetheless, one-sided explicitness is not unknown. In contrast to the universal Western ideal, however, one-sided explicitness is one communicative possibility, it is an option, as a rule to specifically indicate a subordinate position: Thus we find explicitness in announcements, manuals and cooking books, or when delivering a report to a superior.

b) Placing human beings onto different levels

Now let me turn to a second problem in connection with self-perception. The first problem was, we may recall, "How can we, being relatively passive receivers, become willing to actively grasp what others think and feel without them being explicit?" The second problem now is, "How can we, upholding the ideal of the autonomous individual, become willing to position human beings, including one's own self, above or below other human beings?"

Example 2:

Illustration of the difference between the self-introduction of a non-Japanese father (in Japanese) and Japanese fathers at a Japanese school in Germany:

Non-Japanese: *"My name is H. I am the father of Masao. Masao is in the 3rd class. He likes his classes very much. I ask you politely for your kindness towards my son."*

Japanese: *"I am the father of Takeo. I am receiving the favour that you let my son learn in the 3rd class."*

Japanese: *I am Umeda. I am the recipient of the efforts of those persons who are taking care of the 1st class.*

And this was the self-introduction of Mrs. Takeda, who happened to be the teacher of her own son's class (and therefore could not say: "I am receiving the favour..."). She said: *"I am Takeda. I am learning together with the children in the 2nd class."*

Related to the problem of accepting my own self in a position defined by constellations is the problem of putting others into positions. As a Western speaker, I do not as a rule have negative feelings about showing others that I honour them, and I have various options to express respect for others. But what about the following situations:

Example 3:

A Japanese staff member who had shown a film in his class was later asked whether everything had gone all right. Being used to German forms of communication he started:

totemo yoro... [he was going to say: *yorokobimashita*], *"they all enjoyed it very much"*. However, as you cannot say that other people enjoyed something you have done or produced yourself, he quickly corrected himself half way through the sentence: *isshōkenmei mite imashita*, *"they all watched with great interest"*.

Example 4:

Professor S (60) and university director Y are sitting together. Professor S mentions that his wife is a part-time teacher at the H high school. Upon that Y makes big eyes and says: *"Ah, that was the high school I went to!"*

Thereupon Professor S (quite shocked): *"No, oh, such a person as that (referring to his own, S's wife) teaches there! such a worthless-person works at the respectful-high school at which you have studied!"*

In both cases the speaker must expressly show absence of respect, once for himself, and once for his wife. Can we, following Japanese conventions, put others – or even ourselves - down?

The question of "putting down" people can truly absorb a person's energy in Japan:

Example 5:

A problem causing great stress for Mrs.F. Mrs.F works at the reception of an International House at a university. However, she is not employed by the International House itself, but receives her pay from a firm providing the personnel of the House. The person responsible for the International House is the university official Mr.Oda.

Many visitors come to the International House and tell Mrs.F they would like to speak to Mr.Oda. However, Mrs.F often does not know how to reply. How should she tell the visitors when Mr.Oda is not there?

The visitors obviously expect Mrs.F to say, "Oda will-humbly be back in a minute", or "Oda is-humbly not here today". The visitors expect this kind of answer because they presume that Mr.Oda, who they know is in charge of the International House, is at the same time Mrs.F's superior. And Mrs.F knows very well that people of one's own group or one's own organization must be referred to as being in an inferior position when talking to visitors and persons of someone else's group or organization.

However: Mr.Oda is *not* Mrs.F's superior. Mrs.F's superior is Mr.Tanaka, the director of the firm that employs her. Therefore Mrs.F is in no way allowed to speak of Mr.Oda as being in an inferior position. On the contrary, she must say, "Mr.Oda will-respectfully be back in a minute", or "Mr.Oda is-respectfully not here today."

Now if Mrs.F speaks the way she should speak (that is, showing respect towards Mr.Oda), the visitors would be shocked and left with a very bad impression of the International House. After all, they cannot know that Mr.Oda is not Mrs.F's superior. But if Mrs.F speaks of Mr.Oda as being in

an inferior position (which is what all the visitors expect), then she is unpardonably impolite towards Mr.Oda.

Thus when Mrs.F. must speak about Mr.Oda when he is somewhere where he can hear her, the stress for poor Mrs.F becomes unbearable.

Two further examples are taken from *Practical Japanese Course, NHK Educational Television*, Dec.1993/Jan. 1994, p.48 (Ex. 6), and Feb./March 1994, p.36 (Ex. 7). The question is: How far am I to blame for mistakes done by others? How great a part of others' behaviour is my behaviour?

Example 6:

When Peter Howell is reprimanded, Mrs. Miura, who is superior to Mr. Howell and in charge of training him in the Japanese ways, immediately takes responsibility and apologizes for Mr. Howell's mistakes (i.e. for mistakes done not by Mrs. Miura herself):

- In the office. The head of the department, Iwashita, is furious with his (American) subordinate: "*Subordinate Howell!!*"
- Howell: "*Yes!*"
- Iwashita: "*You are getting us into trouble if you do not report precisely what you were told on the telephone!*"
- Howell: "*Was something not in order?*"
- Iwashita: "*That meeting today with the Yamauchi company! You subordinate told me it would take place on the 4th (yokka), didn't you?*"
- Howell: "*Yes.*"
- Iwashita: "*It was the 8th (yôka)! I lost face terribly.*"
- Howell: "*But I understood 'yôka'.*"
- Iwashita: "*Time and place are to be repeated to make sure they have been properly understood. I've been telling you all the time.*"
- Howell (leaning forward slightly). "*I am very sorry.*"
- Mrs.Miura pushes herself energetically between Howell and Iwashita and makes a very deep bow, saying: "*I am very sorry!*"

Example 7:

The dumbfounded reaction of Betty, Mr. Sugiyama's wife, speaks for itself:

- Mr. Machida: "*Mr. Sugiyama!*"
- Sugiyama: "*Oh, manager (buchô) Machida. Thank you very much [for your kindness] the other day!*"
- Machida: "*Not at all. (Turning to Betty:) Is that your wife?*"

- Sugiyama: *"Yes, this is wife Betty and daughter Yōko. Betty, this is manager Machida, a customer of ours."*
- Machida: *"Pleased to meet you."*
- [...]
- Machida, turning to his wife: *"Taeko, this is Mr. Sugiyama from Murayama Industries. Hey, I talked about him the other day!"*
- Taeko, to Mr. Sugiyama: *"Oh, my husband is always enjoying your assistance." [...]*
- Taeko, to her husband: *"And who is this lady?"*
- Machida: *"This is Mr. Sugiyama's wife."*
- Taeko, to Betty: *"I am pleased to meet you. I am always enjoying your assistance."*
- Betty: *"Er... This is the first time I have met you. I have not assisted you [yet in any way]."*

Limits of tolerance

How tolerant is Japan towards mistakes on the level of language? Probably most foreigners have made the experience that people in Japan are extremely tolerant of mistakes in the use of vocabulary or grammar. What is even more surprising, Japanese often do not even seem to notice mistakes of this kind.

Yet it would be foolish to think that Japanese were tolerant towards foreigners using their language. Speakers of the Western standard languages often forget that language is mostly seen not as a vehicle for transporting abstract thoughts, but as the very persons using it themselves. I am my language I am using. So, of course, I am not going to allow others to trample around in my private sphere by using my language - unless, at least, they behave themselves properly. It is here, I think, where the Japanese limits of tolerance are reached, not on the level of language itself, but on the level of the behaviour of which language is just one part.

So it is in Japan, and so it is in the Bernese language. In both languages, there exists no notion of persons using it who cannot use it perfectly, or of persons using it independently of proper patterns of behaviour. In Bernese, I am completely at a loss when I have to speak to somebody who does not speak it perfectly. I will only tolerate another Bernese to speak my language, or, at the utmost, transfer upon somebody who speaks it well the status of "honorary Bernese". But woe if this honorary Bernese then does not honour the status of guest he has been granted!

Now if we suppose that we are so fluent in Japanese that the impression of being foreign is minimized, where does tolerance then end? I would say it ends there where it ends in most languages, namely where somebody's language betrays a "wrong" concept of "self".

Like in any culture, so do children in Japan too learn "dogmatically" that there are right and wrong concepts of "self". One keyword in Japan is "shaping self" (Selbstgestaltung, *jiko keisei*): If "self" is actively given a specific shape, this will be rewarded, if it isn't, it will be sanctioned.

In effect, that implies

- that communication cannot revolve "autonomously" just around some topic, without explicit reference to the people who make up the context, and
- that it cannot be "autonomously" structured just according to a person's own intention.

Example 8 shows a rather typical situation where a person – Mrs. Miura - is not given a chance to finish her discussion, in spite of the fact that she urgently needed some help preparing a talk (*Practical Japanese Course, NHK Educational Television, Dec.1993/Jan. 1994, p.74 ff*):

- Mrs. Miura: *"Oh, what shall I do?"*
- Mrs. Koike: *"What's the matter?"*
- Mrs. Miura: *"Oh, excuse me! You know, there is a meeting of the section and department chiefs at half past one. They are going to talk about - can you imagine?! - the image of industry in the age of energy saving."*
- Mrs. Koike: *"In the age of energy saving... That's really something everyone is talking about."*
- Mrs. Miura: *"And what shall I speak about? I just can't think of anything."*
- Mrs. Koike: *"Well... If we think of saving energy and resources, then aren't these wooden [throw-away] chopsticks here a problem? Companies that still use such chopsticks today haven't gone with the times!"*
- Mrs. Miura: *"A waste of resources? Perhaps. But I can't very well start talking about these chopsticks here."*
- Peter Howell (joins Mrs. Miura and Mrs. Koike at their table): *"Hey, what's the interesting discussion about?"*
- Mrs. Koike: *"The pro and contra of wooden chopsticks."*
- Peter Howell: *"What?!"*
- Mrs. Koike: *"These chopsticks here. Whether we really should use such chopsticks."*

- Peter Howell: *"Ah, that's really an environmental and resource problem! Obviously such chopsticks should not be used."*
- Mrs. Miura: *"How can you simply say that? Chopsticks make up hardly 1 % of the wood used in Japan, and that is very little. And besides, you have to think of the people who earn their living by producing chopsticks."*
- Peter Howell: *"But if you look at things from a global point of view, there are many who oppose the use of wooden chopsticks."*
- Mr. Tajima comes along: *"You appear to be having a terribly serious discussion!"*
- Mrs. Koike: *"We are talking about companies in the age of energy saving, and about wooden chopsticks."*
- Mr. Tajima: *"If that's what you are discussing, then don't talk about wooden chopsticks! The waste of paper in our copying machines is surely a much bigger problem."*
- Mrs. Koike: *"But listen, Tajima, if you say so, that is not exactly good for our company!"*
- Mr. Tajima: *"Well?"*
- Mrs. Miura: *"The recycling of paper, the appeals to save energy.. we can't say that our companies are not making every effort. Aaah, I just have no good ideas."*
- Mr. Kinoshita comes along: *"Look at those dreadfully serious faces!"*
- Mrs. Koike: *"We are indeed speaking about serious things."*
- Mr. Kinoshita: *"Good heavens. Stop! Listen - have you any plans for this evening?"*
- Mrs. Koike: *"No, nothing special."*
- Mr. Tajima: *"I also have no special plans."*
- Mr. Kinoshita: *"Well, let's have a drink on our way home!"*
- Mrs. Koike: *"Fine! Lovely!"*
- Mr. Tajima: *"OK. But we all pay for ourselves."*
- Mrs. Miura: *"That's OK with me."*
- Mr. Kinoshita: *"And Howell?"*
- Peter Howell: *"Well, all right."*
- Mr. Kinoshita: *"Fine! That's made up!"*

In an example like this one we certainly see Japanese intolerance at work. Intolerance hardly affects the level of vocabulary (with the exception of "polite language") or grammar, but it seriously affects the structure and the contents of communication, two dimensions we almost always overlook.

Written language

What is a piece of paper with something written on it? People in many cultures will tell you that it is a worthless object that can burn up in a fire, and that only the spoken word, being part of a real human being, can be trusted.

This view shows us again how specific Western culture is when it aims at transcending the level of concrete human beings and fixing information on an abstract level by means of writing. To be clear: It is not writing itself I am discussing here, it is the value that is or is not attached to writing.

If we are aware of the fact that writing does not necessarily mean giving a thought a fixed and final shape, then I think we ought to reconsider the value of many a Japanese text. One of the most puzzling - and for students certainly exasperating - truths about Japanese texts is that they so often appear quickly written, just a flash of an idea, a contribution not to knowledge in a timeless sense, but, on a far more concrete level, only to some ongoing discussion.

I often have had to deal with studies on musical notations, a field that is very rewarding when looking for criteria by which to judge Japanese writing. In musical notation we can trace Western culture's efforts to create universally understandable, timeless and lasting information that transcends specific situations and human beings. Western musical notation shows clearly that to this end writing had to be given a highly analytic structure in the form of a chain of symbols that had to be explicit and at the same time abstract enough for anybody - not just persons who already had a lot of background information - to decipher.

As soon as such a system of notation had developed, it was obvious that it came to be used by people who called themselves "composers" to create not just short melodies and airs, but "timeless" things like string quartets that are minutely fixed entities.

By contrast, Japanese musical notation, just like the earlier musical notation in the West, is more of an aide-memoire, the "real thing" being preserved not on paper but inside a living master. And even here no "real thing" can actually be traced, as it is up to the master to transform what he has inherited from his own master.

Incidentally, I think we should here also recall that the East Asian tradition of writing has one important root in the idea of flowing water, i.e. an inner feeling

transformed into a concentrated output of energy taking shape in the form of blackened water and transferred onto paper by a brush. This is something quite different to "fixing" information.

A written text representing not a will to construct a definite, lasting combination of ideas but rather being a visualization of momentary reality that will change like the flowing of water may in many cases be the only interpretation possible for a Japanese text: memoirs, thoughts and subjective spontaneous ideas, *zadankai* (discussion groups, in which usually very personal and subjective ideas are floated) etc., texts that give a glimpse of something "flowing", not something fixed.

We should try to find out how Japanese people really read texts. Naturally, in the case of cooking books or instructions of the tax office people are going to expect precise information. But how far will they expect precise - "true" - information from written texts in general? Again we may say that in Japan the "Western" – precise - way is not *the* proper way, but one possibility, one option.

As a rule, Japanese people seem to read very fast. Also, it is interesting to note how they comment on texts, using, for instance, expressions like "I have been stimulated" (*kangaesaserareta*), "it was interesting" (*omoshirokatta*), "I have learnt a lot" (*benkyô ni narimashita*). It is rare that a reader will critically ask questions and expect to have been given some fixed truth in a written text. How should *we* then read Japanese texts?

Example 9 (an article from the newspaper *Asahi Shinbun*, February 5, 1994, page 15):

Not boku, not watashi, but jibun

Nowadays many students doing arubaito (i.e. jobbing) refer to themselves, when they are communicating in the context of their job, not as boku ["I" used by male persons, giving the feeling that they have laid aside a certain reserve and "opened up" to the other persons], not as watashi [the most formal and at the same time most commonly used expression for "I"], but as jibun ["self"].

This jibun used to be a common pronoun for the first person singular among students who were members of athletic associations, and if we go back still further in time, we find it used in the military. Why, however,

has this jibun now become so popular? We tried to get an answer to this question in and around the campus [of the Hôsei University in Tôkyô].

It appears that jibun is used in contexts like students' part-time jobs, rather than when they are among each other. Take, for instance, an office. Section chief Nakayama says, "Who has written these papers? I wonder if it was Satô." Tanaka (a male student), standing nearby, says, "No, jibun was asked by Satô to write them." Satô (also a male student), who was doing some other work, says, "Oh, I'm sorry, jibun was busy last night studying for an examination, so [jibun] asked Tanaka." Why is this jibun being used in this conversation?

"Mmm. Difficult to answer, suddenly being asked such a question," says Imai Hiroki (22), 4th year student at Hôsei University, Department for Social Studies, combing his long hair with his fingers. "The expression <jibun> is characterless. If I were spoken to by classmates or colleagues [nakama] using such an expression, I would feel lonely (sabishii). But perhaps it has become fashionable nowadays to use jibun as the pronoun for the first person singular."

Takahashi Shinya (22), also a 4th year student in the same department, who in his high school days jobbed at a landing pier unloading ships, says, "The world of classmates and colleagues (nakama) is a world where usually no [grammatical] reference is made to the subject. But when one goes jobbing and suddenly confronts other people, one feels confused and... isn't it so that then the word jibun comes out?"

Some ten or more years ago, the National Research Institute for the Japanese Language (Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyûjo) published a volume with the title "Language in the Life of the large Cities [Daitoshi no Gengo Seikatsu] - Analyses". There we can read that among adults in Tôkyô watashi was used by 62% of the people as the pronoun for the first person singular. Jibun, however, was the least frequently used of all possible pronouns.

Incidentally, in the Kansai region, we find many instances where, since former times already, jibun designates the person spoken to.

Students use ore [fairly rough sounding "I" used by male persons among people they are close with, and sometimes also in front of subordinates], or boku, also atashi [a somewhat nonchalant variant of watashi, often

used by female persons], and at times some dialectal expression. Once one has become a member of society, however, watashi begins to appear within the context of [vertical] relationships between superiors and inferiors. So it is understandable that watashi is not a word students will use. Yamashita Shin (41), chief announcer at the Japan Broadcasting Corporation NHK, is of the opinion that, "[jibun] is possibly employed by young people as a kind of "assistance" to help them get used to the standard language [of society]".

Moreover, within the various contexts of education, great emphasis has been laid in recent years on training debate (giron), and we cannot overlook the fact that here the "subject" is frequently mentioned.

Mr. Yamashita's colleague, Ishiodori Shôichi (35), points out an aspect of popular culture and says, "It is so that in recent years rock music singers are often heard to use the word jibun. It is therefore possible [that the use of jibun] is influenced by [the wish to adopt] an image of "being hard and tough" (kôha)."

We are on a campus where the final examinations of the year are just over. Nakano Osamu (60), Professor of Communication at Hôsei University, Department of Social Studies, says, "In present-day Japanese, honorific language (keigo) is not even used between parents and children any more. In fact, it has become a trend to call [the parents] by their given name. We have therefore to take into account a background of loosening of standards, both in a general sense, as well as specifically with regard to language."

"In other words", Nakano Osamu continues, "relationships between people have become horizontal to an extreme degree. As a result, the nuances by which watashi, boku, ore, atashi and so on are individually characterized have become unimportant. So it is possible that jibun, that retains a slight indication of an existing vertical relationship, is perceived as a fresh way [of speaking of oneself]. In contrast to ore, which puts emphasis on the self that is asserting something, jibun is used both when one wants to conceal an individual standpoint or responsibility, as well as when one wants to emphasize that one is a self differing from all others. It is also an expression of the loss young people feel at in an age when the rules governing the use of language have become indistinct."

Though I admit that newspaper articles usually have characteristics that cannot be generalized as typical for all written texts in a language, nevertheless I think that the example chosen does show features found in present-day Japanese books and articles far beyond the realm of newspapers.

In a paradigmatic way we may see in it some of the concrete problems we face when dealing with written Japanese texts, namely,

1) Much of what is written and published in Japanese has the characteristics of a snapshot, that is, both writers as well as readers take an immense interest in observing and registering moments within the process of human movement, change and development. The outcome of this interest is that written texts, contrary to what we presumably expect, often do not have a definite character, and do not give conclusive answers or insights.

2) The absence of conclusive answers, insights, or results, is hardly a problem for readers who can picture the context and add their own interpretation. It does, however, become a problem for readers like us who have been trained to think of written language as something more fixed, more lasting, and therefore also more definite in style and substantial in content.

3) What do we do with a text meant for readers who will almost certainly sense a degree of comfort just when made aware that problems *are* being discussed? We would probably tend to think more in terms of solving than merely discussing problems.

Intercultural communication between Europe and Japan - Can it be more than a fashionable slogan?

My paper had the intention of increasing awareness that language should not be seen as a dimension of its own, but within a wider context.

Thinking about the Japanese use of language I cannot help coming to the conclusion that we in the West are very much heirs to a specific historical development. This development has consisted of freeing the individual from ties to specific situations and specific other individuals. In this context the ideal of universal communication took shape, meant to reach, and be deciphered by, non-specific receivers. I maintain that this cannot be expected from the Japanese language.

The ideals just mentioned have certainly, to a lesser or higher degree, structured our expectations of what communication should be. However, if we look outside the realm of our standard languages we will see that also in Europe real language is by no means just a vehicle to transport thoughts from A to B.

A next point I wished to stress is that due to the limits of tolerance that structure the Japanese concept of "self", and thus the way "self" structures communication, Japan cannot be expected, for the time being at least, to uniformly adopt Western concepts of communication. However, within specific fields and in specific constellations Japanese communication does not differ much from what we are used to in the West. When natural scientists get together, when a subordinate reports to a superior, or when at the business meeting a foreign speaker is requested to hold back his personal opinions, then the Japanese language is no less clear and precise than English or German. The fact that the Japanese language has several options of style presumably enables Japanese to adapt more readily to our patterns of communication, whereas we might be blocked from crossing into the Japanese communicative system by an idealized view of "self" standing outside and above specific situations and constellations.

To sum up, I think it is an illusion - even a dangerous illusion - to be optimistic about intercultural communication. After all, we are dealing here with a field in which, for instance, one side, by being open-ended, angers the other side by a lack of precision, and the other side, by being precise and explicit, angers the first side by implying: "You are probably too stupid to infer what I mean."

What should we do? I think we should understand that language is not just an instrument to transport information, but that language *is* the person using it. In other words, by becoming increasingly acquainted with concrete persons I think it is possible to overcome - or perhaps better: to forget - the communication gap just through habit, through intuitively knowing how to calculate what the other side means, just by being used to somebody. I feel tempted to go as far as to maintain that communication can only function through habit and intuition, and that a more critical and analytic approach to intercultural communication can (apart from being of abstract intellectual value) only give supplementary insights that might help correcting a few minor points.

In this sense I am extremely critical of too much top-heavy research being done - by Europeans on Japan and by Japanese on Europe - outside the actual cultural context, outside the framework of real persons. This, I maintain, can easily contribute to rigid notions about cultural differences and at the same time do

nothing to break the illusion that intercultural communication will function if only we have academically analysed all the differences correctly.

Note: It is particularly important to look at the practical solutions to problems of intercultural communication. As a lot depends on the degree of urgency, ways of successful communication are often found that would theoretically have seemed difficult.

The point is for us to draw attention to the levels on which problems and tensions occur, and to the time needed and the type of effort that must be invested once urgency is recognized. Thus innovative material on intercultural communication may, for instance, be found in case studies of individual organizations. Examples are:

A.Jungová, M.Klemm und V.Simeunović: *Škoda auto – Kommunikation in multikulturellen Unternehmen*. Universität Erlangen (Institut für Soziologie) 199 .

G.Schreyögg: "Die Bedeutung der Unternehmenskultur für die Integration multinationaler Unternehmen." In: M.Kutschker (Hg.): *Integration in der internationalen Unternehmung*. Wiesbaden (1998).

M.Heidenreich und G.Schmidt (Hrsg.): *International vergleichende Organisationsforschung. Fragestellungen, Methoden und Ergebnisse ausgewählter Untersuchungen*. Westdeutscher Verlag (Opladen) 1991.

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