

Beyond the Japanese language: Communication and the human body

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Introduction

Observing language teaching classes in Japan, particularly when foreign teachers and Japanese teachers can be compared (as in many high schools today), differences of "body language" are quite striking. As for print media on "body language", apart from rather simplistic books outlining culturally based differences of specific gestures also much *manga* (comic-strip or cartoon)-type material exists depicting Japanese and foreigners making characteristic gestures.

Here, I do not want to go into detailed criticism of such materials.¹ The point of departure for my argument is that communication is not a string of signals emanating from my mouth, or, for that matter, from any other part of my body. Rather, I shall take the stance that communication *is* the communicating person him- or herself. In other words, communication is not something separate from the communicator. I "am" my communication, and its recipient will inevitably seek to relate what I have said to my own "self". I shall assume that in communication, whether I acknowledge this fact or not, this "self" is, before anything else, my own body, and not some abstract "self".

¹ In passing, it should be mentioned that materials on "body language" usually ignore the bodily features of vocal sound and language production. Serious scholarly research dealing (though often in an implicit way) with language in conjunction with notions of body and emotion may be found in the writings of Senko K. Maynard. A stimulating analysis of the sound production mechanisms of the human body interactively co-constructing conversational discourse is found in Matsumoto 2003.

It follows that if there are essential differences between what I believe the body to be, and what the other person in a communicative situation believes it to be, severe problems of communication are going to arise.² As I will show, there is enough material to suggest that the present-day Japanese perception of the body - and therefore of the bodies involved in communication - contains elements that differ from a Western perception of the body, and I maintain that an important reason for tension and conflict in cross-cultural communication involving Japanese is due to this fact.³

I may not be able to change my body, but probably the greater problem is that I cannot, or am unwilling to, change my perception of my body. I will not let myself be induced to treat my own bodily self differently from what I insist on seeing as "myself". By extension, I also cannot change my perception of someone else's bodily self, as my general definition of what a body is forms the foundation of all my social activities, and in fact of my very definition of what is human.

Thus the following situation can be a cause for conflict in Japan. If, for

² Here it is worth stressing the fact that communication is of necessity based on systems of belief, e.g. on what a speaker assumes to be (or not to be) in the consciousness of the addressee, and on how a speaker tries, to the best of his/her ability, to make the structure of his/her utterance congruent with his knowledge of the listener's mental world (Matsumoto 2003: 12-15). The importance of the element "belief" in communicative situations is also discussed in Ackermann 2002: 16-21.

³ The "West" shall be defined here as bits of territory that for at least 400 years have shared - and in shifting ways adopted and rejected - specific notions about what was understood to be a modern concept of man. The use here of the term "Western" covers notions discussed, for instance, by Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age*, 2007), who argues that the image of "modern" man is specifically one which grew out of the idea of man as the creation of a human-like God. For the notion of the "West" concepts of man as "civilized", rational and autonomous - and that also implies mind-, and not body-orientation - carry heavy weight; cf. the writings of Immanuel Kant, Norbert Elias or Max Weber. Cf. furthermore van Dülmen (1996), or - to cite some randomly selected studies - Haas 2002 (on the body as a vehicle for a spiritually defined "self"), Weis 1995 (on the lack of a sense of "body" among children), or Mütterich (on a definition of man in opposition to animals). By contrast, Buddhist concepts of rising above the status of this-worldly, bodily "self" in the Six Paths of Physical Existence are not based on an explicit call for "civilization" and rational thinking but focus on the need to subdue bodily impulses as (in a very broad sense) a medically defined means for overcoming suffering.

instance, at the age of 23 I feel I am a full adult, and somebody communicates with me in a fashion that I interpret as, "you are not a full adult," this is not just a matter of words; it is a clash of perceptions concerning my own physical self.⁴ As all who have experienced such situations know, they cannot easily be passed over, because they are threatening to my identity, this identity being nothing else than the way I perceive, and therefore expect others to perceive, my body.

Characteristics of the Japanese perception of the body

My arguments are influenced by day-to-day practical experience in teaching and research, where persons are involved who on the basis of language competence seek a degree of integration in the Japanese or, conversely, in the Western context. My interest has been particularly aroused by observing cases of culture shock (including "reverse culture shock" upon return to one's own culture), which suggest that discussions tend to evolve too much around abstract levels of (clashing) values and are not dealing adequately with identity, which is always also bodily identity.

Reading Japanese instructions for the proper handling of equipment, for entering a room, offering service to customers, or seeking and taking up a job, one cannot but marvel at the careful descriptions and illustrations given, showing positions and movements of the body, or of parts of it. Such materials were extensively consulted for this paper.⁵ Moreover, also materials dealing with

⁴ Specifically, I am referring to the clash between the Japanese idea of *shakaijin* (a person who is a full member of society, nowadays normally a person who has graduated from university and is employed in a firm), and the German idea of *mündig* (a mature, adult person, responsible for him- or herself, basically a person over 18).

⁵ To mention a few publications, they include Andō 1983, Eguchi 1981, Japan Productivity Center S.E.D. Freshman Series 1990-2000, Mabuchi and Nanjō (1993/1997), Tetsudō Journal 10/1990, Kanai 1995, Kanai 1997, Kōda 1994, Yamaguchi 1991, as well as numerous leaflets and pamphlets. However, this kind of material is being continuously produced, and the only noteworthy changes are adaptations to technological development and the inclusion of chapters on how to deal with new kinds of technical equipment.

more "spiritual" aspects of life such as self-presentation and self-perception, or being a "respectable member of society", or training in the arts, contain a wealth of information on the human body. Importantly, they are not product-oriented, but production-oriented, focusing on processes and thus on the body doing or expressing something.⁶ Particularly interesting publications in this respect are cooking books, where the greatest attention is not given to the product, but to the hands, arms and body producing it.

A feature that strikes a Western observer is how seriously the body is taken - or how seriously the fact is taken that a person is a body. Bodies, or parts of them, have in the past already been depicted in minute detail in everything from picture scrolls to poetic writing. But modern instructions for handling machines are just as detailed: They mostly not only show inanimate objects, but the human bodies - or at least arms, hands or fingers - actually using or producing the objects.

Let me furthermore mention journals on baby-care.⁷ These not only include factual discussions of various topics concerning child rearing, but also long collections of photographs of actual babies, not strictly necessary to convey a specific point. Thus these journals seem to be saying, "A person is, before everything else, a physical entity with individual attitudes which are as manifold as individual bodies are."

Only in passing can I add here that in the religious context in Japan, strongly rooted as it is in traditions of soothing and healing, we find close attention given to individual parts of the body whose well-being can be prayed for.

Finally, with regard to language, it is worth noting that many perfectly common expressions in Japanese would tend to be tabooed in Western conversation as too "bodily": *oshiri* (only translatable obliquely as the "behind/bottom/backside", or in a vulgar way "butt/bum"), *ochichi* (only

⁶ Examples are the huge number of books continuously produced to guide people through the maze of norms and rules that shape *reigi sahō* (etiquette) or *kankon sōsai* (formal ceremonial occasions).

⁷ E.g. *Watashi no akachan* ("My baby"), Shufu no Tomosha. Appears monthly.

translatable obliquely as the "breast", or through vulgar expressions), *oshikko* (only translatable obliquely through expressions like "pee", or, again, in a vulgar way). Even feet in the sense of their existence without shoes on can be a tabooed topic in the West.

To sum up, an enormous amount of energy is invested in Japan to think about, describe and analyse human beings as physical entities, covering the complete range from real individuals to the ideal perfect business man.

The static body versus the dynamic body

The bodies represented in Japanese materials as a rule are not merely static entities, being tall, thin, chubby, elegant etc. In most cases they are actively doing something, running about, laughing, presenting something, reacting to and interacting with others. The huge number of books we find today on the service industry - for instance books on how to arrange a shop floor - are vivid examples of the immensely careful observation of individual bodily movement. These illustrations, together with the accompanying analyses of who is doing what, and who should do what and why, cannot but fascinate any European used to a more abstract and fact-oriented, not body-oriented form of presentation. Moreover, and importantly, the body is also understood to be the object of training and shaping. In Japan, a person is thus not merely just a body that acts, a person is a body that can be worked on to act in a certain way.

The moving body in any culture is presumably perceived more intensely as "self" than the static body. We need only, for instance, to compare our own self-perception as static "self" with neatly cut hair, and as dynamic "self" helping a lady into her coat. My self-perception of "me in a dynamic state" - feeling obliged to help a lady into her coat - is probably more directly related to my sense of self than whether I have neatly cut hair or not.

It is therefore of interest that in Japan we find such a wealth of references to the body in a dynamic state, i.e. to the physically active, "energy-laden" body.

(Here I can only in passing draw attention to the link with the culturally seminal concept of *ki* as life-supporting cosmic energy and therefore to the focus on life – and "self" – in a dynamic state.⁸) Accordingly, a Japanese language learner quickly becomes aware of the frequency of expressions capturing the body in its dynamic, energetic state, such as *ganbaru* (invest your whole physical energy), *taimingu* (from English "timing", frequently used in the sense of coordinating every movement of body and mind), *yōryō yoku* (being skillful in the way you handle something), or *sekkyokuteki* (doing something very actively). All such expressions refer to action and the use of physical energy. Also, the important concept of *reigi* (respectful, courteous behaviour) suggests a very high degree of trainable physical activity of arms, legs, head, eyes, coloring of voice etc. By contrast, the English idea of politeness is almost devoid of energy and tends to emphasise rules for refraining from doing certain things.⁹

Japanese expressions appear more concrete, in the sense that they leave no doubt that physical movement and energy is required, than the types of references to proper attitudes and behaviour in Western languages. In the latter, notions typically revolve around ideas like tactfulness, consideration, good atmosphere, friendliness, or orderliness, all expressions that do not refer explicitly to people sweating, breathing, running, getting tired and keenly observing their bodies. Even the Western notion of "showing respect" is first and above all a way of thinking, not a set of bodily rules.

⁸ To understand this point we may of course consider traditional texts on medicine and healing. However, it is equally interesting to note the practical use of the concept of life as a flow of movement in such materials as Mabuchi and Nanjō (1993/1997).

⁹ The tradition of making explicit seasonal references in language, letter writing or gift giving as part of etiquette is worth taking note of here (for instance *shochū mimai* – seasonal mid-summer greetings, literally, "I am approaching you, or sending you this card, because it is now the time of the greatest heat"), as it is directly linked to the activity of picturing a recipient's or interlocutor's concrete bodily feelings (feeling hot, feeling tired, feeling weak etc.).

Positioning of persons

One aspect that can be the cause of some of the gravest problems of communication with Japanese, and a salient feature of Japanese communication, is the "positioning of persons", which, in effect, is a positioning of bodies and involves not only activity on the level of imagination but also, very concretely, physical energy. You not only cannot speak Japanese without defining who (socially) stands where and in what relationship to whom, but, besides applying the necessary rules to linguistic utterances, it is necessary to bow, run, laugh, or choose specific voice qualities.¹⁰

Now if, as is the case in principal traditions of Western thinking, human beings do not feel to be, and do not want to be seen as, bodies in such a very concrete sense, what happens to the specific signals indicating that and how an individual (person speaking, person spoken to, and person spoken about) is socially positioned?

To signal that one sees another person (socially) standing above oneself is something all of us, sometimes reluctantly, occasionally need to do. Thus the Japanese concept of *me-ue* ("somebody standing above my eyes", i.e. somebody you have to look up to) is at least partly comprehensible. However, explicitly conceding that my or anybody else's body is inferior runs counter to what is acceptable nowadays in most Western societies. True, I may – perhaps with difficulty – come to realize that proclaiming my wife, my secretary, my student or myself to be inferior may be little else than a "social game", i.e. something just done to keep relationships smooth, but it still remains a "bodily" – and not merely conceptual – reality to be acted out and affecting my bodily sense of identity.¹¹

¹⁰ If I fetch something for someone who is superior I must either run or at least move my body as if it were running. Or if I talk to someone who is inferior I must be careful that my voice is not too soft and high, but rather crisp and energetic and on a relatively low pitch.

The total human being

One of the most conspicuous aspects of Japanese discussions of the body is the fact that a human being is always a total physical and mental human being, not an abstract entity that just thinks, feels, wants or represents something. We should compare this to the deep imprint the Western conception of man, which gradually developed during the 18th and 19th centuries, has left on us, according to which man is endowed with the capacity of rational thinking and thus – in contrast to an animal - possesses dignity outside and above physical form.

In the Japanese view the many specific parts of the body can be said to form the object of continuous awareness and are focused on as the object of shaping processes. Accordingly Japanese texts on professional training abound in details on how to stand, dress, walk, greet, sit, talk, move, lift something, listen, bow, even think and feel, and particularly also behave specifically in relationships with people who are older, younger, of one's own group, or of someone else's group.

A person understood to be an integrated totality of bodily parts that are observed, trained and shaped in accordance with specific functions leads to the question of what exactly *jibun* ("self") is. Japanese thinking and writing abounds in discussions of *jibun*. This *jibun*, however, is apparently not seen as possessing an abstract "identity" that can be isolated. Rather, *jibun* is a material, bodily entity that runs about, sweats, bows, observes and is observed, and always forms part of a constellation of other bodily *jibun*.

¹¹ Documents dealing, for instance, with day-to-day concerns in German principalities dating from the 18th/19th centuries use a literary style that in very elaborate wording physically positions writer and addressee within spatial frames of reference. This feature underlines the fact that the "West" is no absolute notion that can be fully contrasted with another culture, but rather a specific thrust in the development of the conception of man that at the present point in time can be seen to have left distinct traces where the communicative patterns of Western European languages prevail, but not necessarily elsewhere.

A question that is typically asked in the West is, "Does an 'inner person,' a 'person true to himself,' altogether exist in Japan, if a human being is not more than a body all the time acting and reacting?"

Confronted with this question we should not forget that the Japanese language does possess a common, very frequently used and well understood expression referring to the inner person, namely *kokoro* (the heart, the inner compass). The feelings, disposition, and mentality of this "inner person" are described as *kokoro-gamae* (lit. the "structure of a person's *kokoro*"). However, how far is this *kokoro* distinct from the physical, bodily human being, in other words, how far is the "inner person" thought of as differing, or even having to differ, from the "outer person"?

Of course Japanese will complain, just like we would, if they are not able to do and say what they would like to, that is, if they have to conceal their "inner person". But that is not the point. The point is that no "inner person" is taken into account in the process of shaping the bodily self, and no thought appears to be given to the fact that somebody's "outer person" might be different from an "inner identity", or vice versa. Rather, concealing thoughts for the sake of politeness or advantage is most likely to be understood as practical common sense, not as crushing any "inner person".

Japanese type instruction clearly reflects the belief, expressed particularly in traditional training contexts, that *kokoro* both shapes, and is shaped by, bodily appearance. This justifies teachers or seniors to start an instruction process by the training of form, taking it for granted that *kokoro* will follow. In the end, this is believed to bring about unity of the "inside" and the "outside" person, or, to use traditional Japanese terms, the unity of *kokoro* and *kata*, *kata* being the body performing a fixed pattern of complex, adequate movements. This is not to say, however, that identity of "inner self" and "outer self" - of *kokoro* and *kata* - is always a fact; rather, it is a basic normative stance and point of reference for the Japanese conception of man as a social being manifesting "self" through bodily movement.

A cross-cultural comparison of "acceptable" forms of self-perception

As discussed, the degree of "bodilyness" of a communicative situation can be assumed to be linked to culturally determined patterns of self-perception. Therefore, in order to better understand my own culture's patterns of self-perception, I went to libraries and bookshops, looking for roughly the same type of materials on bodily appearance and movement that in Japan can be found in huge numbers. However, it quickly became apparent that almost no general discussions, let alone detailed instructions, existed concerning the body in communicative action.¹²

A very small number of books on manners could be found, all of them, however, written in an apologetic style, in essence saying, "We feel really embarrassed to have to ask you to observe certain (minimal) rules of bodily comportment." Two aspects of these materials are worth recalling. One is the absence of details; the texts are structured around general concepts such as tactfulness, consideration, friendliness, or orderliness. Not being strictly correlated to concrete bodily action (what part of the body should, for instance, concretely show friendliness, and how exactly should this be done?) I wondered how communication with the far more specific Japanese could function.

The second aspect is the apologetic style just mentioned of the Western material on the body in communicative action. One frequent stylistic technique employed by the authors to show their own distance to what they are saying is the use of humorous language. In Japan, however, even if humorous elements (especially the illustrations) are used to make the publication appeal to the common reader, the style of argument dealing with the body in social and communicative interaction is totally serious, and never humorous.

Thus the message of the Western materials seems to imply that it is not

¹² Here I do not consider very specialized training materials whose authors often have a background in psychology. These materials cannot (yet) be seen as providing common information for "ordinary" people.

"proper" to be too detailed about a grown-up human being in terms of his or her concrete body. Instead interaction is guided by ideas and ideals, leaving open, and perhaps also being relatively tolerant about, what goes on on the level of concrete physical appearance and movement. In other words, the Western materials clearly reflect the assumption that no other person has the right to even hope for specific patterns of bodily movement. That is, a grown-up individual demands to be autonomously responsible for his or her own body.¹³

What is astonishing about this historically rooted rule is that with it interest in one's own body as an instrument for communication – or, for that matter, as an instrument for anything – seems to have disappeared and been replaced by orientation towards abstract ideals about "man".¹⁴

Thumbing through a set of regulations from 1960 for work in transportation services in Switzerland¹⁵ I found almost exclusively instructions for the correct handling of equipment.¹⁶ This stood in sharp contrast to corresponding Japanese materials with their elaborate instructions for head, hand or body movements for greeting, checking operations, communication with other staff and customers or efficiently tackling complex tasks. The only part in the Swiss materials dealing with the human body was a list of certain forbidden activities, which is the very opposite of shaping the body.

A dominant theme in Western thinking especially from the 19th century on has been not only human dignity in a nonphysical sense, but also the liberation

¹³ One topic of overriding importance when seeking to understand Western attitudes towards the body cannot be discussed here, namely the fact that in influential segments of Western societies strict rules for bodily comportment and movement applied to persons who were not considered "autonomous, responsible members of society", that is, mainly, to children. The question, however, remains how far children's education can be termed "bodily" in the sense of consciously shaping the body and not just adjusting it to abstract rules unrelated to the practical performing of tasks, or merely forbidding certain types of posture and movement. As for military training, this needs to be considered in its own terms.

¹⁴ Tattooing, piercing, or nudism are definitely of a sub-cultural nature, while suggestive forms of communication are rarely consciously shaped and can even be considered rude in the face of the rule, "Say what you mean!"

¹⁵ Städtische Verkehrsbetriebe Bern 1963.

¹⁶ For instance, instructions for accelerating in case of a delay, or for coupling operations.

of man (or at least of "educated man") from physical effort. Thus, for instance, information is increasingly provided through the written word, which consequently is becoming more and more detailed. By contrast, Japan still now surprises us by human beings using their physical energy to emphasise and duplicate information that we can also read on boards and hear on tapes - which, we think, should be there to replace human bodily effort.

An interesting observation on the relationship between body and identity could be made when a German TV program¹⁷ discussed good manner training in Germany, the participants all being German. The program confronted the viewer with the fact that it would do no harm to be, in effect, a little more "Japanese", i.e. to pay more attention to details of posture and bodily movement.

During the program we could see by the reactions of the participants that such training had a surprising effect on most of those who subjected themselves to it, as they had actually never given any thought to observing, let alone shaping their body or bodily movements. After the training, many of the participants showed a mixture of astonishment and pride at appearing smarter than before.

However, some trainees simply refused to adhere strictly to what they had been told to do. Maybe as adults they were just reacting in opposition to being instructed how to behave. Maybe, however, their feelings went deeper and reflected something like hidden fear of having their "inner self" injured if told to become one with polite outward, bodily movement. It is quite likely that these trainees did not see "self" as consubstantial or identical with their body; in fact, they may even have resented being thought of as a body.

Conclusion: Is "self" identical with a person's body?

As I have tried to show, the Japanese understanding of the human body appears to differ in essential points from that in the West. Differing views about the relationship between "self" and the body are fields of conflict in

¹⁷ ARD, February 19, 1999.

communication between Japanese and foreigners. As Japanese reactions towards communicative behaviour of persons from Western cultures indicate, Japan shows little tolerance towards the contradiction that on the one hand obviously only a physical body can communicate, but on the other hand that this body should, please, not fully be taken as a person's "real" self.

Whatever shifts may be occurring (in the West we are indeed witnessing an enormous rise in interest in the body far beyond such specialized areas as fashion or theatre),¹⁸ I do not think that the gap between Japanese and (traditional) Western concepts of bodily self is closing. It is unlikely that Japan would ever find shaping human expression by means of the body irreconcilable with the idea of some "real" self. Also, there is no indication that the definition of *reigi* (respectful, courteous behaviour), one of the central concepts of Japanese social behaviour, might be shifting to include such relatively imprecise notions as "tactfulness," "consideration," or "friendliness." It is not, and *reigi* continues to encompass bodily movement such as bowing, running, or handling things in a specific way.

The question thus remains what kinds of bodily self are being communicated when Japanese and Western persons meet. Theoretically the Western side might be trying to signal, "I am unwilling to think of myself as a body, so please do not see me just as my bodily self!", while the Japanese side might be indicating, "I have been working hard at shaping and training my body and expect a reward for this (e.g. a positive reaction, or a favour from you)." These are very different expectations.

We thus continue to face the difficult task of coming to terms with discomfort arising from diverging beliefs in what the human body is; beliefs which, as was pointed out at the beginning of this paper, fundamentally determine

¹⁸ We can observe that the young generation in Germany often takes a much more pragmatic view of shaping the body in the context, for instance, of "customer service". We should also carefully observe how, over a longer period of time, "Western" materials for proper comportment do show shifts in the degree of attention paid to one or the other part of the body (cf. Krumrey 1984).

communicative processes. We must speak of discomfort when our body needs to utter words, assume postures and perform movements in ways that run counter to our self-perception; equally, we must speak of discomfort when our body must refrain from uttering words, assuming postures and performing movements that we feel to be essential for maintaining our sense of personal identity.

Communication, however, cannot function in conditions of bodily discomfort. After all, communication is not just signals emanating from my mouth; it is my very own bodily self. So how can I communicate if my body cannot or will not produce the expected signals? That question, however, cannot be dealt with here and must be treated as the central topic of training in intercultural competence.

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