

Western and Japanese Discourse Style in a Consensus-Building Task Discussion

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The current study analyzes discourse style differences between western and Japanese interlocutors in a group consensus-building task discussion. Four discussants (American male, Japanese male, German female and Japanese female) first created a ranking of 5 life values and then participated in a group discussion to arrive at a common group ranking. Qualitative analyses revealed (1) that the Japanese male used a strikingly greater number of backchannels and nodding compared to the other three participants; and (2) that the total number of words uttered by the Japanese female was strikingly less than the other participants.

Qualitative analyses further indicated that the Japanese male utilized backchannels to fulfill a variety of functions (e.g., to express listenership, opinions, and turn-management) and the Japanese female used polite or humbling expressions regarding her own English ability (i.e., "I can't speak English well").

Analyses of post-discussion evaluations revealed that the Japanese female was evaluated lower than the other participants, a finding which suggests that limited participation (and not the use of frequent backchannels) negatively impacts the psychological orientation of interlocutors in intercultural communication. The significance of this finding is discussed in relation to the predictions of previous research.

Key Words: discourse analysis, ESL, Japanese, backchannel, nodding

1 Introduction

Studies investigating the discourse style of westerners and Japanese have noted a number of significant cross-cultural differences. First, it has been noted that Japanese participants use more backchannels and nodding compared to Westerners (e.g., Yamada 1997; Furo 2001; Ohama & Nishimura, 2005). For example, Yamada (1997), in her comparative study of American and Japanese bank executive meeting reports that the use of backchannels by Japanese was about twice that of Americans. Similarly, other studies have revealed that Japanese use backchannels as much as six times that of New Zealander's (Ohama &

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Nishimura, 2005). In a study of dyadic intercultural communication between Americans and Japanese, Maynard (1990) also reports a frequent use of nodding and backchannels by Japanese compared to their North American counterparts.

Studies have noted other differences in discourse styles. Furo (2001), for example, investigated differences in discourse style focusing on turn-taking in American and Japanese group discussions. She found that although taking-turn by interrupting, overlap, and backchannels was generally allowed and often seen among westerners, among Japanese it was not often the case. She further reports that backchannels and nodding by Japanese were mainly used for showing sympathy toward the speaker (i.e., not for turn-taking).

Yamada's study (Yamada, 1997) also reveals a number of additional differences in discourse style between Americans and Japanese. For example, one of her findings was that lower-ranked employees used humbling strategies (e.g., speaking significantly less) in meetings. This she argues occurs for the purpose of protecting the face of higher-ranked employees. Similar to Yamada's study, Long (2008) videotaped a discussion task among Americans and Japanese. He reports that the Japanese participants did not participate actively in the discussion. This was particularly the case with regards to the expression of reasons and justifications for conflicting opinions. This was despite the fact the Japanese participants had a relatively high level of English proficiency.

Finally, studies have noted an emphasis on procedural matters (e.g., the overt discussion of the management of turns) by Japanese. Watanabe's (2005) comparative study of American University students and Japanese studying as undergraduates in American universities found that Japanese spent significantly more time discussing procedural matters than Americans. Other studies report a similar difference between Japanese junior high school students who have had extensive time living abroad (returnee) and those without such experience (domestic) (Yamamoto, 2009). Yamamoto's analysis of the initial phase of discussions indicated that Japanese domestic students spent more time discussing procedural matters while Japanese returnee students tended to begin the discussions immediately.

2 Research Goal

The purpose of the current study is to analyze cross-cultural differences in discourse style between in western and Japanese participants in an English task-based discussions considering both verbal (e.g., backchannel) and non-verbal (e.g., nodding) discourse features. It also attempts to clarify how such differences effect the psychological orientation of participants as well as the final outcome of the discussion.

3 Methods

3.1 Procedure

Four participants, aged 20-23, participated in a discussion task (in English) for

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which they were asked to create a group ranking of various “life values” (discussed below). The discussion, which lasted approximately 15 minutes, was videotaped, transcribed and subsequently analyzed using discourse-analysis techniques.

3.2 Participants

The 4 participants consisted of 1 American male (AM), 1 German female (GF), 1 Japanese male (JM) and 1 Japanese female (JF). Two westerners were exchange students from America and Germany studying in a 6-month program at a private liberal arts university in the Tohoku region of Japan. The Japanese male was a 4th year student at the same university who had recently returned from one year studying abroad in the US. The Japanese female was working as a secretary at a local English language school in the same town.

3.3 Materials

Materials consisted of a task-sheet for discussion and a post-discussion questionnaire. The task-sheet asked the following: “what is the most important thing for your life?” and provided the following five possible answers: 1. to have love/romance; 2. to work hard; 3. to be proud of what you do; 4. to have peace of mind; 5. to be devoted to someone/something. The goal was for participants to rank the items in order of personal preference and then to engage in a group discussion in order to arrive at a group ranking to which all participants could agree. The items included in the list were based on Morris (1956), who investigated differences in life value preferences for Western and Japanese cultures. The goal in choosing these items was to stimulate discussion as a result of potentially differing values.

4 Results

4.1 Emphasis on procedural matters

First, as shown in the following examples, the Japanese male participant put greater emphases on procedural matters throughout the discussion.

- In line 9: should we talk about?
- In line 31: you wanna go first, American male.
- In line 58: should I go next?
- In line 107: はい、Japanese female さん、どうぞ。
- In line 237: All right. So, what should we go after doing that?

In each of the above examples, the Japanese male attempts to guide the next speaker or provide a chance for them to express their opinion. It should be noted that no other participant made use of such a strategy. In other words, the above were unique to the Japanese male participant.

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4.2 Use of backchannels, nodding, and speaking time

Table 1 below provides an overview of the findings regarding the use of backchannels and nodding; and the total amount of speaking (in words) by each participant. Based on these findings two patterns can be discerned. First, the total number of words spoken by the Japanese female is clearly less compared to the other participants. As shown in Table 1, the Japanese female uttered only 36 words throughout the course of the entire discussion, which accounted for no more than 2% of the total words uttered. In contrast, there were no striking differences between the total number of words uttered by the other three participants. The American Male spoke 470 words, the Japanese male slightly less (392), and the German female slightly more (659). Although the German female spoke the most and the Japanese male the least of these three, each clearly played an active role in the discussion, particularly in comparison with the Japanese female.

The second pattern that can be discerned is regarding the use of backchannels. As can be noted in Table 1, the Japanese male use a strikingly greater number of backchannels compared to the other three participants. Of the 151 backchannels uttered, the Japanese male accounts for over half (59%), or 88 in total. Of the remaining three participants, although the Japanese female stands out as having used slightly less (11) than the American male (23) or the German female (29), the differences among these three are far less than that of the Japanese male. A similar pattern can be seen with regards to the use of nodding. Compared to the other participants, the Japanese male nodded with a markedly higher frequency (53% compared to 11%, 4% and 31% for the AM, GF and JF respectively).

Table 1: Total Number of Words, Backchannels & Nodding by Participant

| | AM | JM | GF | JF | Total |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-------|
| Words | 470 (30%) | 392 (25%) | 659 (42%) | 36 (2%) | 1557 |
| Backchannels | 23 (15%) | 88 (59%) | 29 (19%) | 11 (7%) | 151 |
| Nodding | 5 (11%) | 24 (53%) | 2 (4%) | 14 (31%) | 45 |

In summary, as shown in Table 1, two cross-cultural differences in discourse style were uncovered: (1) the Japanese female's relatively low number of total words uttered and (2) the Japanese male's relatively high frequency of backchannels and nodding.

In order to further understand the nature of these two patterns, additional quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out on (1) the use of backchannels by function and (2) the nature of the Japanese female's participation.

4.2.1 Backchannels by function

As shown in Table 2, additional analyses of backchannels identified four main functions: (1) to express an opinion (e.g., agreement or disagreement), (2) to indicate

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listenership, (3) for turn-taking, and (4) to give or offer a turn. A final category of “other/unclear” included backchannels without a clear or determinable main function.

Table 2: Backchannels by Function

| | AM | JM | GF | JF | Total |
|---------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------|
| Opinion | 4 (7%) | 46 (75%) | 11 (18%) | 0 | 61 |
| Listening | 6 (12%) | 25 (49%) | 9 (18%) | 11 (22%) | 51 |
| Turn taking | 9 (30%) | 13 (43%) | 8 (27%) | 0 | 30 |
| Turn giving | 1 (20%) | 3 (60%) | 1 (20%) | 0 | 5 |
| Other/unclear | 3 (75%) | 1 (25%) | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Total | 23 (15%) | 88 (59%) | 29 (19%) | 11 (7%) | 151 |

As shown above in Table 1, the Japanese male used a far greater number of backchannels (88) compared to the American male (23), the German female (29) and the Japanese female (11), all of whom have a similar frequency of usage (although the Japanese female is slightly lower). Based on the results shown in Table 2, it is clear that the majority of backchannels used for expressing an opinion (75%) and indicating listenership (49%) were done by the Japanese male. The overall distribution of backchannels by function is fairly similar for the American male and German female. It is also notable that all of the Japanese female’s backchannels were use to indicate listenership.

4.2.2 Japanese female’s discourse

Also, as shown in Table 1, a striking characteristic of the Japanese female’s discourse style, in comparison with the other participants, was the limited nature of her contribution to the discussion (i.e., 2% of the total words uttered and no more than 36 words in all). In order to further understand the nature of the Japanese female’s participation, qualitative analyses were carried out on the two segments of discourse in which she participated.

Transcription Excerpt 1

| | AM | JM | GF | JF |
|-----|---|---|----|--|
| 107 | | はい、Japanese femaleさん、どうぞ。(JM pointed to JF with his both hands) | | |
| 108 | | | | @ @ @ |
| 109 | (nodding at JF's remarks) | | | うーんと、No. 1 D, で No. 2 E, No. 3 が ^s A, No. 4 が ^s C, No. 5 B |
| 110 | | | | ummmm |
| 111 | | | | I, I can't speak English well> |
| 112 | >you could explain it to him and translate it | >umhhh | | |
| 113 | 14 second (while JF spoke) | | | ahhhhhh, うーんと、ふん、ummmm (JF looked at her sheet) |

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Transcription Excerpt 1 (shown above) begins with the Japanese male managing the discourse and offering a turn to the Japanese female (line 107). On line 109, the Japanese female responds by telling her ranking in a mixture of Japanese and English (うーんと、No.1 D, で No. 2 E, No. 3 が A, No. 4 が C, No. 5 B”). Then, after a long vocalization (“ummmm”) on line 110, she utilizes a humbling expression to describe her English level (“I, I can’t speak English well”). Both the American and Japanese male link on to this expression. The American male provides a solution to what he interprets as a problem posed by the Japanese female (“you could explain it to him and translate it”), to which the Japanese male backchannels in agreement (“umhhh”). Interestingly, the Japanese female does not follow this suggestion, but rather seems to express confusion or possible hesitation in a mixture of Japanese and English on line 113 (“ahhhh. うーんと、ふん、 ummmm”).

The Japanese female’s use of the humbling expression “I, I can’t speak English well” appears to create a lack of trust in the other participants (i.e., causes them to doubt her ability to partake equally in the discussion). Because it is likely that the Japanese female utilized such a strategy in an attempt to gain sympathy and understanding and thereby facilitate her participation, the ultimate effect of this strategy is unfortunately ironic. Transcription Excerpt 2 provides further evidence in support of this interpretation.

Transcription Excerpt 2

| | AM | JM | GF | JF |
|-----|-------------------|----------------------------|----------|----------------------|
| 178 | | | だいじょうぶ？> | |
| 179 | | >だいじょうぶですか？ | | (JF looked up at GF) |
| 180 | now we just have, | | | |
| 181 | | | C and E | |
| 182 | | C and E | | |
| 183 | | | | uhunnn |
| 184 | | probably what would we do? | | |

Transcription Excerpt 2 begins on line 178 of the transcript and is the only direct interaction between any of the other participants and the Japanese female following the interaction depicted in Transcription Excerpt 1. As can be seen, on line 178 the German female expresses concern towards the Japanese female in regards to her lack of active participation. Interestingly, however, she does it in Japanese by asking her if she is okay (“だいじょうぶ?”). On the following line (179), the Japanese male mimics this by repeating the same phrase in Japanese to the Japanese female adding the politeness marker “-des” on to the copula along with the question indicator “-ka” (“だいじょうぶですか?”). This segment clearly

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illustrates a loss of confidence on the part of the other participants with regards to the Japanese female. It is also the final overt attempt made by any of the participants to include the Japanese female in the discussion. The Japanese female also makes no further attempts to actively participate on her own.

4.3 Post-discussion evaluations

The above analyses uncovered two striking cross-cultural differences in the discourse style of the Japanese and western interlocutors: (1) the high frequency of use of backchannels and nodding by the Japanese male and (2) the markedly limited nature of participation on the part of the Japanese female. In order to assess the nature of any affect of these differences on the psychological orientation of the interlocutors, participants completed a post-discussion questionnaire in which they evaluated each of the participants, including themselves. As can be seen in Table 3, evaluations of the American male, Japanese male and German female exhibit a similar pattern in that they were ranked at either 3 or 4 by all participants. In contrast, the Japanese female, with the exception of the American male, was ranked markedly lower receiving only a 1 from herself and 2 from the Japanese male and German female.

Table 3: Post-discussion Evaluation Questionnaire

| | AM | JM | GF | JF |
|----------------------------|-----|------|-----|------|
| Ranking by American male | (4) | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Ranking by Japanese male | 4 | (3) | 4 | 2 |
| Ranking by German female | 3 | 3 | (4) | 2 |
| Ranking by Japanese female | 3 | 3 | 4 | (1) |
| AVERAGE | 3.5 | 3.25 | 4 | 2.25 |

*4 = "total satisfaction", 1 = "total dissatisfaction"

5 Discussion and Conclusions

The current research investigated cross-cultural differences in discourse style in a task-based discussion task between western (American & German) and Japanese interlocutors. As a result of both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the following cross-cultural differences in discourse style were identified: (1) the Japanese male focused on procedural matters and used a markedly higher frequency of backchannels and nodding; and (2) the Japanese female's participation was a highly limited compared to the other participants and she used humbling expressions to describe her English ability.

As noted above, similar differences have been reported in previous studies. Multiple studies, for example, document the relatively high frequency of backchannels used in Japanese compared to American English (e.g., Yamada, 1997; Furo, 2001; Maynard, 1990). Similarly, a focus on procedural matters

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(Watanabe, 2005; Yamamoto, 2009); limited participation (Long, 2008); and the use of humbling strategies (Yamada, 1997) have been reported elsewhere. However, also as noted above, much of the research investigating such differences has relied on the analysis of intra-cultural rather than inter-cultural discourse. As a result, although many conjectures regarding the effect of cross-cultural differences have been made, little is known regarding the actual affects.

The current study has attempted to remedy this imbalance in part by (1) examining cross-cultural differences in discourse style and (2) by investigating the effect of such differences on the psychological orientation on interlocutors. Post-discussion evaluations indicated that the Japanese female was evaluated markedly lower compared to the other participants (with the exception of the American male). Based on this finding, it can be said that the current research provides no evidence in support of the negative effect of a high usage of backchannels and nodding. This goes against the predictions of Yamada (1997). However, it does provide evidence of a strong effect of limited participation on evaluation.

The significance of these findings is two-fold. First, they underscore the danger in automatically assuming that differences in discourse-style will contribute to misunderstanding and negative feelings. As seen in this research, not all differences have an equal effect. On the other hand, they illustrate the potentially significant impact of some cross-cultural differences. Specifically it appears that humbling expressions, a common discourse strategy employed by the Japanese, combined with limited participation (also fairly common of Japanese interlocutors) can negatively impact evaluation of performance in cross-cultural encounters. Clearly further research into the effect of a variety of cross-cultural differences in discourse style is warranted. Moreover the current research, which is based on the analysis of data from a single conversation among 4 participants, is inconclusive in determining the systematic nature of cultural difference in discourse style between western and Japanese interlocutors.

An additional potentially significant area of interest is the implication of these findings for English education in Japan. The current findings suggest that “content” (volume of utterances) rather than “form” (the use of backchannels) is a significant factor in determining westerners’ evaluations of Japanese ESL speakers. However, given the limited nature of the task employed, this finding must be interpreted cautiously. In interactions with real-life consequences (e.g., business negotiations), it seems likely that cross-cultural differences in the interpretation of non-verbal cues will contribute more significantly to interlocutor evaluations.

As English is used as a language of inter-cultural communication in an ever-increasing number of settings, expanding our knowledge of how cross-cultural differences in discourse style effect such interactions is of paramount importance and will likely remain a significant topic of future investigation.

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