Intercultural Communication and Politeness: An Examination of American and Japanese Cultures in the Context of Request Strategies

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Introduction

Intercultural communication can broadly be viewed as the sharing of information between people with different cultural backgrounds, where different cultural backgrounds are connected to participation in different activities (Allwood, 1985). On a basic level, varying forms of speech acts are among the activities that all cultures participate in. Within this context, a discussion of request strategies, as they occur in English-speaking American and Japanese cultures, provides a compelling example of how cultural norms can manifest themselves in distinct ways across cultures. As Wierzbicka (1985) notes, cultural norms reflected in speech acts differ from one language to another and different cultures find expressions in different systems of speech acts. An examination of the ways in which cultural norms are expressed and realized in various speech acts, such as requests can be particularly important and has broad implications for the notion of intercultural communications. A failure to observe and appropriately consider the unique and complex nature of others' cultures can potentially have various negative effects ranging from misunderstanding to miscommunication.

In the context of language teaching and learning, providing students with opportunities for cultural knowledge can help mitigate potential misunderstanding. Equipping learners with knowledge about intercultural communication is an overlooked aspect of language teaching practices and as such, it is suggested that cultural knowledge is an essential aspect of pedagogical practices and acquiring proficiency in a language. In highlighting the importance of cultural knowledge in the context of intercultural communication, this paper examines how communication is expressed and manifested in the context of request strategies between American and Japanese cultures.

A request, according to Blum-Kulka, Shoshana and House, (1989) is a pre-event

set of acts that expresses the speaker's expectation toward a future, prospective action from the hearer. Accordingly, it can be assumed that by virtue of making a request, a speaker is making an imposition upon the hearer which can result in a compromise of face. When making a request, the notion of politeness is an important factor to consider. For instance, politeness in requests is a communication strategy a speaker uses to achieve goals and, in a continuing relationship, to help preserve the relationship (Kitao, 1990).

An examination of request strategies between American and Japanese cultures, with reference to politeness theory and the notion of face, provides a suitable explanatory framework for exploring communication styles of these two groups. In accounting for potential cultural variation as it pertains to requests, it is useful to initially consider various cultural dimensions, including notions of individualism/collectivism, high / low context communication, uncertainty avoidance and power distance. These concepts are valuable in highlighting the cultural norms of both societies, including their general perceptions towards and differences in communication.

Defining Culture and Cultural Dimensions

Broadly speaking, cultures tend to have either individualistic or collectivistic tendencies. The United States is seen as an individualistic society and Japan is viewed as a collectivist culture (Gudykunst & San Antonio, 1993). Hofstede's (n.d.) analysis of cultural dimensions is clearly indicative of this fact with Japan receiving a score of 46 and the United States scoring 91 on the individualism/collectivism dimensions. Members of individualistic cultures are concerned with clarity in conversations and view this as a necessary component of effective communication whereas members of collectivistic societies view this to be less important and instead, are concerned with avoiding hurting others' feelings and not imposing on other members (Gudykunst & Lee, 2003).

When considering culture, it is important to be mindful of the notion that societies are complex constructs, thereby requiring an approach that sufficiently considers the multi-dimensional nature of cultures, including an examination of differences and similarities. For example, Gudykunst and San Antonio (1993) point out that while individualism predominates in the United States, collaterality and lineality (two forms of collectivism) also affect behavior and that both orientations also co-exist in Japan,

influencing different aspects of life. Accordingly, individualism and collectivism do appear to affect the choice of strategy used when making a request. Members of individualistic cultures perceive direct requests as the most effective strategies to accomplish their goals, and members of collectivistic societies perceive direct requests as the least effective strategies (Gudykunst & Lee, 2003).

Another useful way of defining cultures is the degree to which a culture is either high-context or low-context with respect to communication style. High-context communication tends to emphasize indirect verbal expression and implications embedded in nonverbal communication (Richardson & Smith, 2007). In contrast, low-context cultures tend to employ a direct communication style and must rely more on the literal interpretation of words when communicating (Storti & Benhold-Semaan, 1997). In this regard, Japanese and American cultures appear to differ. For instance, Richardson and Smith (2007) have replicated the finding that Japan is a higher context and power distance culture than the United States.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree that members of a culture try to avoid uncertainty (Gudykunst & Lee, 2003). With respect to uncertainty avoidance, there appears to be a sharp difference between Japan and America in terms of how the two cultures respond to uncertainty. According to Hofstede's (n.d.) cultural dimensions, Japan (92) is a high uncertainty avoidance culture, and the United States (46) is a low uncertainty avoidance society. Norms and rules in high uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to be clear and guide behavior in virtually all situations, while in low uncertainty avoidance cultures, the rules and norms are not as clear-cut and rigid (Gudykunst & Lee, 2003).

The concept of power distance, as defined by Hofstede (1997), "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (p. 28). Generally, people in high power distance societies accept that inequalities in power and status are natural while members of low power distance cultures see inequalities in power and status as largely artificial (Storti & Bennhold-Samaan, 1997). In most cases, Japan is perceived to be a high-power distance culture, while the United States is thought of as a low power distance society (Morand, 2003). Yet, according to Hofstede's (n.d.) cultural dimensions data, Japan (54) and the United States (40) are relatively close in terms of power distance. This would suggest that societies are complex constructs with their own unique set of norms, thereby requiring in-depth knowledge to facilitate

communication and prevent misunderstandings. As Richardson and Smith (2007) point out, Japanese social norms emphasize the importance of authority in social hierarchies and Japanese have developed special expressions and words used toward superiors.

Request Strategies, Politeness, and Face

With respect to examining request strategies as they occur in Japanese and American cultures, it is essential to understand the concept politeness as it pertains to these strategies and the notion of face. Since a request creates an imposition and can be a threat to one's face, the use of politeness is an effective strategy that can mitigate this. Brown and Levinson (1987) provide a model of politeness that is claimed to be universal in application and premised on a hierarchical division of politeness strategies where indirectness is linked to politeness. In the case of a face-threatening act or an imposition, like a request, according to this model a speaker has the following options:

(1) to do the act baldly, 'on record', without redress; (2) to use positive redress action, i.e. to 'give face' by indicating in some way solidarity with the hearer ('positive politeness'); (3) to use negative redressive action, by using mechanisms which leave the addressee an 'out' and permit him or her to feel non-coerced and respected ('negative politeness'); and finally (4) the speaker may choose to go 'off record', i.e. to perform the act in a way that will enable him or her to avoid taking responsibility for doing it. (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

Given that politeness theory is also largely concerned with the notion of face, a crucial role of politeness is to soften the force of a face-threatening act, such as a request, thereby helping to preserve the addressee's face (Morand, 2003, p.523).

The notion of face can be summed up as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself which is interactionally and symbolically defined through approved social attributes" (Gagne, 2010, p.124). In most collectivistic societies like Japan, other-face maintenance strategies are dominant whereas both self- and other-face maintenance strategies are prevalent in individualistic cultures such as the United States (Cocroft & Ting-Toomey, 1994, p.473). In accounting for this and the fact that Japanese report using more indirect communicative strategies than North Americans, Triandis (1995) explains that since maintaining harmony within one's in-group is a primary concern of collectivistic cultures, indirect strategies considered to be far less face threatening and are more likely to preserve in-group harmony.

Taking into consideration the concepts discussed thus far, according to politeness

theory, members of Japanese culture, which is characterized by high power distance relations, are predicted to use negative politeness and off-record strategies, while people from the United States, which is an example of a low power distance culture, are predicted to prefer bald on record and positive politeness strategies (Hill, et. al., 1986). For instance, utterances falling into the "off-record" category tend to be ambiguous and loosely constructed, thus allowing for the attribution of more than one meaning (Morand, 2003). On the other hand, to go "on-record" baldly entails speaking in direct, blunt terms with no attempt to soften the face threatening act (Morand, 2003). In terms of actual request strategies, it seems that there is a significant discrepancy between the Japanese and Americans. However, a closer examination of relevant information reveals that this is not necessarily the case in all instances.

Negative politeness tactics assume the existence of an imposition and are generally thought to be more polite than positive ones since they are presumed to be less direct (Morand, 2003). Yet, it is important to exercise caution in assuming that indirectness inevitably implies politeness. For example, in the case of requests, Blum-Kulka's (1987) study shows that the most indirect request strategies were not judged as the most polite and in fact, strategies rated as the politest were conventional, indirect, "on-record" requests whereas hints, "off-record" form of requests, were judged to be most indirect. This is indicative of the notion that societies and intercultural communication are complex phenomena that require a wide range of factors be considered.

With respect to perceptions of politeness in requests between Americans and the Japanese, Kitao (1990) concluded that there were no significant differences between the two groups in their perceptions of politeness. Conversely, Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) found that with respect to perception of politeness, even though level of formality was a factor for both the Japanese and Americans, formality was more important to the Japanese and hints were considered to be the politest forms of requests by the Japanese whereas Americans rated hints as relatively impolite. For example, the very informal hint "Are you through with the book yet?" (p.179) was thought to be relatively polite by the Japanese participants. On the other hand, the formal and conventionally indirect statement, "I was wondering if you could show me the book." (p.177) was considered to be the politest example by American speakers. Interestingly, the statement chosen as most polite by American speakers can perhaps be constructed as a negative form of politeness since the past tense is used to create distance. As well, a hedge is used.

Based on the above, it would appear that both Americans and Japanese perceive negative politeness tactics as being most polite. However, given the complexity of cultures, caution is required in assuming that what people perceive to be most polite is necessarily how actual communicative encounters occur. As Morand (2003) points out, although many cultural and situational variables must be considered, Americans are most likely to utilize direct, positive politeness strategies while Asian countries, such as Japan, are most likely to be characterized by indirect, negative politeness tactics.

Conclusion

Examining intercultural communication in the context of politeness, face, and request strategies provides a compelling case for the notion that cultural communication is complex. Although societies share a wide range of similarities, it is imperative to be aware of the potentially distinct differences between cultural norms and the manner these are expressed in communication and various speech acts. The case of American and Japanese cultures demonstrates this. Awareness about differences and similarities is an important component of language teaching and learning. Given the inevitability of globalization which leads to a need for intercultural communication, learning about other cultures is an inescapable feature of language education and needs to be carefully considered in language educators' planning and pedagogical practices.

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Abstract

This paper examines the role and complex nature of cultural norms in the context of intercultural communication and how these are reflected in specific speech acts – namely, requests. Culture and politeness are utilized as an explanatory framework to compare Japanese and American use of request strategies. An exploration of cultural dimensions of individualism / collectivism, high / low context communication, uncertainty avoidance and power distance provide evidence for the existence of differences in cultural norms between Japanese and American societies. These are reflected in each culture's respective understanding of politeness, which affects communication styles in a manner that generally conforms to cultural norms. Evidence suggests that Japanese and American people's perceptions of politeness affect and influence the use of specific request strategies in complex, often different ways.