

世代間の断絶：異文化間語用論の視点から

'Generation Gap or Genetic Gap?' : Can Discrepancies between Teachers & Students Be Filled Pragmatically?

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Abstract

Young people's communication style is drastically changing nowadays and it sometimes leads to miscommunication with older generations. Classroom situation is no exception and we teachers are often at a loss for what to say or what to do to keep up our relationship with those students. In this essay, some aspects of such communication problems are depicted and the way to cope with the matter is sought from pragmatics perspectives. The tendency to be less specific about their stance, frequent use of various hedging or blurring schemes, and their extremely poor stock of emotional vocabulary are delineated. Then, it is pointed out that we are apt to misunderstand their true communicative intent mainly from decoding their messages based only on our own conventions. If we examine their 'eccentric' lexical choice or linguistic behavior from a cross-cultural pragmatics perspective, their functional motivation in each discourse context becomes apparent. They are trying to evade a 'deeper' interpersonal relation by being 'non-specific' or 'non-committal.' However, there remains the task for us to try constantly to accommodate ourselves to the ever-changing behavior of students.

1. Introduction

The school system in Japan has been experiencing a drastic reform in order to cope with the changing needs of individual people and society. Irresistible urge of 'globalization' and 'information technology innovation' has brought about the introduction of English Conversation and Computer Literacy Education into elementary school curriculums. Although both are intended to upgrade students' communication ability in some way or other, there seems to be some other communication problem occurring in our classroom discourse. In this essay, I would try to depict the nature of the problem and seek the way to tackle the matter from pragmatics perspectives. I try to deal with the very basic problem that lies intrinsically in our professional daily routine, i.e. the implicit 'gap' segregating us from today's young students.

Many schools in Japan are no more as functional

as before, mainly because the general educational system can no longer accommodate with the radically changing needs of neither students nor industries in this very unstable society. Back in the high economic growth period, the system enjoyed its international reputation for the mass-production of high quality scientific minded youngsters with high standard technical skills. Schools were expected to be a kind of source of supply for the industries with such high-standard labor. In those days, people's work ethics were aroused by the guarantee of future economic success.

However, with other Asian neighbors catching up with the trend of globalization, the traditional system would not work well any more. Degradation of work ethics or lapse of moral and morale has come to its extreme, especially after the burst of bubble economy.

Originally, the unique 5 year consecutive education system named 'College of Technology' was

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newly devised by the government to serve the urgent needs from the industries. Our school used to be and it still remains now to be one of the best schools in our local community, I believe. However, I must admit there sometimes occur several problems related to the teacher-student communication breakdown.

The dilemma of so-called 'generation gap' is not at all novel but a cyclically repeated and everlasting paradox of the oldest kind in any human civilization. On the one hand, any culture might be sustained by more or less conventionalization of a set of rules or norms implicitly supported by the value system shared among the community members. On the other hand, there is always the pressure to innovate or reform the old tradition aroused by creative and critical mind of the younger generations.

Moreover, any kind of educational activity could never be safe from the conflict of the values between the younger and the older generations, i.e., students and teachers. This is quite natural because it is in a sense inheritance of some cultural assets from the older generations, and at the same time it is a kind of empowerment of the innovative youth.

Yet, I presume the kind of eccentricity we face today in Japanese educational discourse might be of totally different nature and radically more perplexing and aggravating to older generations than ever before in history.

Perhaps, it might not only be the case with Japan but also with many highly industrialized countries that young people show some queer behavior in their communication style and interactive attitude. Reportedly, they are causing various social problems sometimes leading to the extreme cases such as gunfire in the classroom in the U. S. or the cruel homicide of innocent youngsters or socially weak homeless people in Japan, carried away either captivated by sudden capricious impulse or upon cold deliberate planning.

The devastating situation named 'collapse of classroom community' is also reported to be widely observed in many districts. This could have something to do with the urbanization, but more plausible reason should be sought in the process of psychological or social development of the young,

which is greatly influenced by the radical change of their surrounding society mainly by the acute development of the modern 'information technology.'

As is often noted in many articles, pragmatics covers a vast amount of study areas from individual grammar and usage to people's socio-cultural communication style. In the following sections, I will try to pick up several peculiar aspects of young students' communication style that somewhat segregate us from their world and often lead to incompatible misunderstandings. From the limitation of space, all I can present is just suggestions for possible measures. More detailed examination of the matter should be rendered to future investigation.

2. Fears to Disagree: Dis-communication Syndrome

One of the typical features that distinguish young people from us these days is their peculiar linguistic behavior, or the 'social dialect.' In fact, these could be observed not only as distinct language form and use but also be regarded as the reflection of their unique human characteristics deeply rooted in their distinct communication style or cultural values. The subculture they belong to might be the main underlying factor that critically decides their quite original language use which sometimes sound 'queer' to us, the older generations.

If we first think of the typical aspect of their communicative style, there is an apparent tendency for them to evade 'disagreeing' somebody else's opinion. When they are talking to each other, they seldom 'clarify' their true feelings by linguistic manifestations.

1) Situation 1 : After school.

Student A: '*Kyou dou suru?*'

'What are you gonna do today?'

Student B: '*Kaeru.*'

'I'll come home (straight).'

That is all. The interactant 'A' would not stick to continue on their conversation, not asking any further what particular reason another one has for coming home. Never do they dare to step into

inferring another person's inner feelings. However, we should attend this is a bit different from the mutual respect for 'privacy' in the western culture. They simply guard themselves from receiving some 'negative' response from others by never taking the risk of rejecting or hurting them. In other words, they fear hurting others for fear of being hurt by others.

2) Situation 2 : At the fancy shop.

Student A: '*Kawaiku nai?*'

'Isn't this cute?'

Student B: '*Kawaii.*'

'It's cute.'

That is all, again. They never go on to specify their inner feelings by reference to its color, design, or anything. It might be rendered to each other's interpretation. By obscuring the details, they can at least safely share the same attribute of the object material. '*Kawaii*' has become a very general attributive expression. In other words, it has tremendously extended its connotative meaning.

As far as the interactants are of the same age group, the intended communicative tactics will work well, causing little trouble. In both cases, we might conclude that they withhold any more particular comment to avoid possible conflict between them. If we dare to try some elucidation from pragmatics terms, the possible candidate is the 'Approbation Maxim' to 'minimize dispraise of other; maximize praise of other' (Grice, 1975:52), or the 'Flattery Maxim' (Leech, 1983:135). Also, we could find an answer in one of the 'politeness strategies,' i.e., 'Strategy 12: Be vague' (Brown & Levinson, 1987:226). Or otherwise, these conversations might function at least to feed the needs for 'establishment and maintenance of contact,' i.e., 'phatic communion' between the interactants (Levinson, 1983:41).

However, some problem arises between teachers and students even at our school concerning the distal gap between the 'presuppositions' upon the politeness strategy contemplated to their counterparts.

3) Situation 3 : In the classroom.

Teacher: '*Kore dou omou?*'

'What do you think of this?'

Student: '*Betsuni*'

'Nothing particular.'

Teacher: '*Nanka omou koto naino?*'

'Don't you have any idea?'

Student: '.....'

Teacher: '*Nanka itte yo.*'

'Say something, please.'

Student: '.....'

This is not so much a 'sound' communication as it is in the above two instances. Apparently, it fails to construct an 'adjacency pair' of Question & Answer in this case (Schegloff and Sacks, 1974). The student's too much 'reserved' attitude or the seeming 'lack' of intention to keep the conversation going on might irritate us and sometimes result in the misjudgment of it as a sign of their rebellious spirit.

I'm afraid this might seem to be rather an extremist's view, but unfortunately even I could daily encounter similar quasi-conflict situation or miscommunication with my students. I'm becoming mid-40s and our age difference has almost reached as large as literally one 'generation.' Sometimes I wonder if my students are 'aliens' coming from another planet. (Perhaps, vice versa.)

Presumably, these attitudes could be interpreted as the manifestation of their restraint from trying to establish an interpersonal relation or total rejection of communication. Considering the rapidly changing Japanese society, urbanization might be the key term that would provide a plausible explanation. There is no local community left any more around us that used to be expected to nurture the relatively 'cooperative' and rather 'homogeneous' characteristics of Japanese people.

In any local town in Japan, students are busy from a very early age studying not only at school but also at a cram school preparing for the awaiting entrance examination. From their early ages, they are isolated or segregated in their homes and schools, never provided with occasions to socialize with children of different ages through 'role plays' in a virtual community formed on their own. Their

families are highly 'nucleacized' with no grandparents or siblings living together.

The only popular mode of 'play' for those children is with TV or TV games (and computer games these days), facing monitor screen all the time completely isolated from other 'living' human beings. Pragmatically speaking, the human 'communicative competence' (and also the linguistic ability) should be acquired at least in combination with the development of the 'socializing ability.'

There is no doubt the absolute lack of human interaction during the 'critical period' for language acquisition should have invited such a serious discommunication syndrome of the young people now observed all over Japan. In other words, one of the indispensable environmental conditions for the acquisition of the 'communicative (or pragmatic) competence' is critically lacking in today's Japanese society.

Almost 30 years ago, Nakane (1970 : 154) wrote with stress put upon the vertical principles of ranks and hierarchy within a small community, 'while the outlook of Japanese society has suffered drastic changes over the past hundred years, the basic social grammar has hardly been affected.' Also, many western scholars repeatedly pointed out our society's uniqueness and stability. For example, it was stated that 'empathy' and 'conformity' are primary key concepts to understand the 'indirectness' of Japanese communicative style (Clancy 1990:33). However, I think another perspective is needed for the true understanding of today's young people's 'queer' communication style.

3. Various Hedging Schemes or Indirect Strategies

In the previous section, I tentatively concluded that today's young Japanese are somewhat 'lazy' in not trying to be 'specific' enough in their linguistic descriptions of their inner feelings. Meanwhile, they seem to pay far more attention to establishing a 'amiable' interpersonal relationship with their interrogators.

Another aspect of their typical linguistic behavior is their indirectness or 'hedged' commitments in their articulation. Many of us realize that they

frequently append some obscuring or purposefully blurring expressions at the end of their sentences. Some of the common instances are '-toka' (or something), '-tteyuka' (- or something, I should say), '-mitaina' (-or stuff like that), etc.

These evasive 'tags' could be interpreted as typical markers of 'vague and inexplicit speech' (Dines, 1980:30). Roughly, their function could be 'to cue the listener to interpret the preceding element as an illustrative example of some more general case.' (Dines, 1980:22) Also, other forms of 'reminding' or 'attention calling' expressions such as '-janaidesuka' (-, isn't it?) or '-nandesuyo' (-, it really is) could often be heard among young people's speech. Their function is no doubt 'seeking a hearer's agreement' or 'urging the hearer to admit (agree)' (Itani, 1995:150) the exact wording or the content of proposition.

Moreover, irregular rising intonation at the end of a word just in the middle of a sentence might sometimes be employed probably to implicitly confirm the addressee's attention or recognition.

To sum up, the point is that these various schemes are employed to deliberately incorporate the addressee into the conceptual staging of their interpersonal relation, or tactfully rendering part of commitment (or responsibility) to the addressee.

However, it is quite annoying that these schemes are not at all 'familiar' to us, the older generations. Whenever we encounter these schemes, we might well misunderstand them or just become 'irritated' against such 'strange' communication style. Perhaps, our generation is far more 'conservative' of the old norms of 'communication style' than accommodating with these eccentric lexical phrases or less conventional grammatical usage.

4. Scanty Emotional Vocabulary Leading to 'Impatience'

Next point to be noted is more linguistically oriented. It seems to me that today's young people have only very limited number of options in their choice of 'emotional' vocabularies. Of course, the Japanese language has a great tradition of linguistically delineating delicate human sentiment or subtle feelings in depicting natural beauty with a wide

variety of vocabularies.

However, the young these days seem to have abolished this tradition and always neglect the effort to specify their feelings deliberately choosing the most suitable 'word' for expressing their feeling. I think this is especially true of their poorest expressive power or scanty selective options for their negative feelings. All I hear from their mouths is either 'Mukatsuku' (irritating) or 'Kireta' (originally meant a 'short-cut' in an electric circuit but now metaphorically extended to the brain circuit to mean 'distracted' feeling or emotionally 'out of control').

The problem is that their physical reactions also follow this simple two-step leap, instead of the gradual escalation from just a bad feeling by way of middle range emotion to the extreme of 'rage.' Rather, once they are scolded or just criticized about their bad deed, they would suddenly flash and burst into anger, saying, 'Buchi-gireta!' (cut off short).

Edward Sapir pointed out many years ago that 'the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group...' (Sapir, 1941). If they are really identifying or subjectively conceptualizing their own negative emotion only with the dichotomy of the both poles, there is no wonder they should suddenly burst into rage, for it is the only possible option to be selected next after the state of irritation.

Quite regretfully, there have been a number of reports about violent juvenile crimes such as gun fire in the classroom in the United States. I was astonished by the news that 6 year old boy had shot his classmate girl to death in front of his teacher and other classmates. I don't believe why they are so generous in allowing such proliferation of the gun, an instant killer tool. They would say it is tough to be a teacher in the States, but the case is not any easier in Japan.

Sad to say, we cannot contend with confidence any more that Japanese schools are as safe as before. Several years have already passed since a 26-year-old junior high school teacher was stabbed to death by a 15-year-old boy just after her English class in Kuroiso, Tochigi. It is reported that the student was first scolded for coming late for her class, and

then reprimanded again for talking loudly during the class. Reportedly, the student muttered to his classmate, 'I'll kill her.' Then the classmate literally advised him, 'Don't kill her.' But he did it. I think this is no doubt a prototypical case that indicates their extraordinarily quick temper and almost helpless emotional 'impatience.'

5. Conclusion

Fortunately, there has no serious (criminal) case happened around myself yet. But students' autistic sensitivity and their outrageous temper which could be easily triggered has almost become our common 'shared knowledge.' It is inevitable for teachers as part of their professional role to give them 'instructions,' 'preaching' or even 'scolding' at times. Thus, it must be stressed we should pay attention to their peculiar character on any occasion where we give them some directive 'guidance' or just suggestive 'instruction.'

Pragmatic examinations above stated of their unique communicative behavior suggest that we tend to misunderstand their true intentions submerging deep under their eccentric lexical choice or linguistic behavior. Perhaps, we should not straightforwardly take their style as 'impolite' or 'disgraceful,' but rather try our best to infer their psychological tendency to be 'non-specific' or 'non-committal' trying to evade entanglement in a 'deeper' interpersonal relation. Accordingly, we might like to face them not as inhabitants within the same culture but as representatives of another 'distinct' culture. It is imperative that we should take as much fruit from the elucidation of 'cross-cultural pragmatics' in our daily communication with the younger generation.

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