Intercultural Communication
— The Role of the Host —

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Abstract: Intercultural communication has as its objective the conveying of ideas between people of different cultures. Usually in intercultural communication situations, members of a host country and visitors to the country or expatriates exchange ideas. The duties of a host, when applied to this type of situation, place an added burden on the members of the country in which the dialogue is taking place. The role of the host in intercultural situations is considered in this paper. Foreigners are divided into three groups and the duties of a Japanese as host to the members of these three groups is discussed. Special emphasis is placed on how the Japanese host should act in order that the foreigner will feel relaxed in intercultural situations.

Key words: intercultural situation, host, foreigner, impersonal contacts, personal contacts.

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Introduction

In this paper I intend to look at intercultural communication from the viewpoint of relationships between the people taking part in it. Much has been written on the fact that we are living in a highly technological society where means of transportation and modern systems of communication make it next to impossible for a professional person to remain isolated in his own cultural milieu. Also, for those who are interested, there are many books, tapes and films that can help one learn more about foreign cultures and how to perfect his or her knowledge of a foreign language. However, in our relationships with people from other cultures, it is easy to forget, when we are in our own country, that we are hosts to the foreigner and that the intercultural situation must be controlled by the norms established for host-guest relationships.

The role of the host, what he should and should not do while engaged in intercultural communication, is the main theme of this paper. As I am writing in Japan, having lived here for almost thirty years and taken out Japanese citizenship, my remarks will be confined to the Japanese as hosts. Those reading this paper in a foreign country will, I hope, take what I have written and apply it to their own intercultural situations. Finally, I am not writing the following to "blow off steam" because of a frustrated life in a country other than the one I was born and raised in. Those who know me realize this, I believe, and those who are meeting me for the first time through this paper,
will have to take my word for it. What has prompted me to write is simply the desire to contribute in some small way to the developing of situations in which intercultural communication will become truly productive for all parties concerned.

Communication

As we all know, communication has many forms. In all its forms, whether it be verbal, written or body language, there is always the danger of obstacles hindering a person’s understanding of a message communicated by the sender. For example, during verbal communication, external noises may impede the comprehension of a sender’s message; illegibility or one’s choice of words could be the cause of a misunderstanding of a written message and visual objects in the case of a large group can very easily interfere with the message a speaker is sending through body language. Even with these obstacles, however, verbal communication usually proceeds fairly smoothly between people of the same culture.

In the case of intercultural communication, on the other hand, these problems can become a major stumbling block to communication. No matter how well a person learns a foreign language, there will always be words, expressions and nuances that will not be understood. Also, as the same body language or gesture can have a different meaning in different cultures, a person could communicate something verbally but express something entirely different through his body language. Another important point, and the main one of this paper, is the attitude a member of the host country shows to a foreigner visiting or living in his country. Before we look at these attitudes, we must consider the different types of foreigner that a person will meet in his home country.

Three Types of Foreigners in Japan

The first type of foreigner is the tourist or person visiting for a short period of time to attend a meeting or on business. As he is not in Japan for long, and as the Japanese he comes in contact with are for the most part those experienced in communicating with foreigners, he usually receives a good impression and arrives back in his own country extolling the virtues of Japan.

The second group is made up of those who have lived in Japan over a long period of time—more than ten years. The reasons for this group coming and staying in Japan range from the conviction that they can contribute something to Japanese society to the hope and realization that they are able to have a better life here than in another country. Members of this group have gone through the ups and downs of adapting to a foreign culture and although they may have had difficulties at first, have carved out a place for themselves either in the Japanese society, the foreign community or as a member of both and have decided to make Japan their home for the foreseeable future.

The final group comprises those foreigners who come to Japan with the intention of
staying for about one to three years. If the members of this group are young with no commitments in their home country, they may extend their stay or if circumstances do not work out to their liking, may shorten their stay in Japan.

Obligations of Members of the Host Country

The member of a host country must always remember that the foreigner he comes in contact with will probably belong to one of the above three groups. Through communication, impressions will be formed that will influence both parties and affect their future relations with people from other countries. Therefore, let us look at a few situations foreigners have been known to complain of here in Japan.

1) Impersonal contacts

A foreigner who has spent many years in Japan said, "Japan would be a perfect country to live in if you didn't have to continually explain that you have not just arrived in Japan." What did he mean? Of course many meanings could be taken depending on the situations he was thinking about at the time, but the meaning I would take is that a foreigner living in Japan, if he is friendly and tries to learn the language and customs of the country, can be quite contented in his neighborhood or at his place of work but once he leaves these two environments, many Japanese see him first as a foreigner, namely, one that cannot speak Japanese and has little experience living in Japan. At times this may be convenient for the foreigner as he is excused from many things that a Japanese would never do or say, but if he often finds himself in this type of situation, it can be the cause of him becoming tense and dissatisfied with his life in Japan. One example will be sufficient to make this point clear. A foreigner walks toward a counter in a store. As he approaches he sees worried looks on the faces of those behind the counter and the movements of some to get out of range of the foreigner's voice. As he draws closer he may hear nervous giggles and if he can understand Japanese, he could well hear the pleading and coaxing until one unlucky individual agrees to or is forced to wait on the foreigner. This may be a bit of an exaggeration and it certainly does not happen in every case, but it is common enough for foreigners to complain of.

It is sad that this kind of situation should arise at all in a modern country like Japan, when it is so easy to correct. All public institutions or places of business should train their employees to greet foreigners in the same way as they do Japanese, that is, address them in Japanese. If the foreigner speaks Japanese, there is no problem but if he cannot, and the clerk or receptionist is unable to converse in a foreign language, another person can be called to take care of the foreigner. In this situation I would even go so far as to say that though the Japanese may be fluent in English, he or she should open the conversation in Japanese. The reason I say this is that as a member of the host country the Japanese should use his own language thus giving the foreigner the choice of deciding the language to continue the exchange in. If this is done, the foreigner will appreciate it and a good atmosphere for further communication will be created.
2) Personal contacts

In the case of personal relationships between people of different cultures, a common language and an open mind to the cultural differences that will affect the participants’ way of thinking, acting, speaking and above all feeling, is absolutely necessary. This may seem obvious to the reader, especially if he has had experience in intercultural communication, but if we examine closely our past actions, I am sure we can all recall times when we have been remiss in our relationships with people from other cultures, especially in regard to the person’s feelings.

As the main purpose of this paper is to look at the Japanese as hosts to foreigners in Japan, I will now deal with a few points that I think Japanese should be careful of when communicating with foreigners, whether they are in Japan for a few months, years or permanently.

Oral Communication

Dialects and Slang Expressions

As dialects and slang expressions are more common in the spoken language, using them can make your language sound more natural. However, one should be very careful when using a dialect or slang expression in another language. In the case of English, a limited use may be all right but an overuse of either is considered by many to sound uneducated. Also, slang expressions have a short life and are usually confined to younger people. Therefore, there is the danger that one may learn an out-dated expression that would sound strange in a modern conversation or an older person using a young person’s expression could bring smiles to the face of a native speaker.

Another point to remember is that for a non-native speaker it is quite difficult to put the right inflection on some expressions with the result that they sound strange or worse still may convey a different meaning than intended. For example, the simple word “okay” can transmit various meanings depending on the inflection and where it appears in a sentence. I remember listening to a tape of an international meeting in which a young Japanese doctor addressed a question, prefaced by a long explanation, to an American speaker. At the end of almost every sentence in his explanation the young doctor said “Okay?” with a rising inflection. Finally the American doctor became somewhat angry and said, “Yes, I understand. Please continue.” I am not sure why the young doctor used “okay” so many times - maybe he had heard it used in the United States and had incorporated it into his spoken English, or maybe he was worried whether the American doctor understood his English. Whatever the reason, the speaker took it to mean “Do you understand?” and although he may have realized that the young Japanese doctor did not mean it that way, his natural reaction was to become angry.

The study of dialects and slang expressions in order to understand them when they are used in a conversation is necessary but before a non-native speaker uses them he
should be sure that they are conveying the meaning he intends and that the expression is one that can be used in the situation in which he finds himself. In regard to this latter point, many wrong impressions have been given by very fluent English speaking Japanese simply because they did not know that a certain word or expression, while maybe fine in informal conversation among close friends, should not be used in more formal situations or to people older or of higher status.

Creating a Relaxing Atmosphere

How can the Japanese as host make the foreigner feel at home in Japan? In order to answer this question it is necessary to consider the foreigner as seen in the three groups mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

If a visitor is in Japan for only a short time, the host will have to be prepared to answer many questions. For the visitor everything is new and he wants to learn as much as possible during his stay. Many visitors before coming to Japan have read at least one book on Japan, so the Japanese should be ready to answer questions on various subjects. If one does not know the answer to a question, he should not be embarrassed to say so - no one can know everything. Also, instead of laughing a question off with a remark like, "We have a lot of strange customs, don’t we?", if a person really wants to know something and is not just making conversation, tell him you will find the answer for him.

Any person visiting a foreign country, even if his stay is short, wants to do the right thing while there and this is especially true in Japan where customs may be quite different from his home country. Therefore if a foreign visitor asks about some point of etiquette or politeness, do not reply with words like, "We do it this way but it is not necessary for you to do it." This will only embarrass him and make him feel like an outsider. The secret to good relationships in such situations is to never embarrass a guest even if one thinks it is kind to do something or suggest something. My most embarrassing moment after I had been in Japan for only a short time was when I was invited to a Japanese home for dinner. As we entered the Japanese-style room I was told where to sit and found that the host out of kindness had placed two cushions on top of each other at my place. I can still remember how uncomfortable I was on those two cushions looking down at the other people around the table. The duty of the host is to make a visitor feel relaxed, both physically and mentally, but if the guest is worried about what to do or being different from others, this will be impossible to accomplish.

In dealing with foreigners from the other two groups, that is, those who have been in Japan for two or three years or longer, a problem sometimes arises regarding language. In my work I have the occasion to meet young Americans, most of whom are in Japan as English teachers. They have told me on arriving in Japan they began teaching English immediately and although they were living in Japan, the environment in which they lived, worked and recreated did not change much from their home country as
their employers and friends could all converse in English. This type of environment was fine for them during the first six months or so as they were able to learn much about Japan without facing the problem of language. After this initial period of fascination, however, they began to feel frustrated as they realized how confining their world was without the Japanese language. They started to study Japanese and for many this is where their problem intensified. They wanted to use the Japanese they were studying but as most of their friendships had been formed while using English, they found it difficult to start speaking to their friends in Japanese. Also, many of the Japanese who had worked hard to master English did not want to lose the chance of conversing in English with a native speaker. Because of this situation, many of these young English teachers tried their Japanese on strangers only to be often greeted with blank stares, answers in English or just indifference, with the result that many became downhearted, gave up and went home with a bad impression of Japan, which they likely passed on to their friends.

Today there are many young people from around the world coming to Japan with the intention of staying a few years or more. Most of them are university graduates and many of them come with the desire of beginning a study of the Japanese language or perfecting a knowledge they have already attained in their home countries. According to an article, Teachers of Japanese, by Mizue Sasaki in the Mainichi Daily News (Sept. 23, 1985), the number of foreigners studying Japanese in Japan increased from 10,429 in 1975 to 25,933 in 1983 and those learning Japanese in foreign countries grew from 77,827 in 1974 to 405,779 in 1982. Therefore, there is a good chance that the foreigner one meets in Japan will have a working knowledge of Japanese or at least will be expecting to use the Japanese he is studying. Because of this situation, which has developed in the past few years, there are a few things I feel a Japanese as a member of the host country must be heedful of when dealing with any foreigner in Japan.

Six Suggestions for Better Cultural Communication

First, the host should let the foreigner decide which language is to be used in conversation. It may be that the foreigner will switch to his native language, or to English if his mother tongue is unknown to the Japanese, as the conversation proceeds but he should be allowed to decide when the switch is to take place. Many foreigners become angry when they say something in Japanese only to be answered in English or when the opening remarks of a conversation are in Japanese but once the pleasantries are completed the Japanese begins to speak in English. A Japanese may do the latter out of politeness but the foreigner may take it to mean that his Japanese is not good enough to carry on a serious conversation. Also, if a Japanese can tell that the foreigner is not grasping his meaning, instead of changing over into English, would it not be better to use simpler Japanese or give him a couple of words in English so that he can grasp the gist of the conversation? Of course, the foreigner should be humble enough to revert to a
mutually understood language if the conversation is beyond him, or at least ask the meaning of words he does not understand.

Secondly, the Japanese who insists on always speaking in English to young foreigners trying to learn Japanese is not only going against the rules of hospitality but is creating an atmosphere where true intercultural communication can never take place. The foreigner is apt to avoid this type of person as he feels the Japanese is not interested in him as a person but just someone on whom to practice his English. The foreigner's conclusion may be wrong but the result is the same — loss of a chance to communicate. Most Japanese are willing to help a foreigner with his Japanese but there are a few who are more anxious to perfect their English. There is a story told of a young foreigner who while in Japan studied Japanese very hard and became quite proficient in it. He knew a Japanese who always insisted on speaking in English to him as he said he needed the practice for when he went to the young person's home country. The Japanese finally went abroad and the young foreigner met him there. As the young foreigner did not have a chance to speak in Japanese in his home country, he spoke to the Japanese in Japanese but the Japanese replied in English, "English is the native language of this country so we must speak in English." The young person's conclusion was, "Why didn't he apply the same rule, at least sometimes, when we were in Japan?" The situation of this story does not arise too often but if it does, it will be difficult to continue meaningful communication over a long period of time.

Thirdly, if a young foreigner, or even an older one, asks the explanation of some point of grammar or the meaning of a word, he should be given as complete an explanation as possible. I have heard young foreigners complain that they are often told this or that Japanese is too difficult for them. It may be, but should not the student of the language be left to come to that conclusion by himself? Also, in the course of a conversation in Japanese, one should not stop often and ask the foreigner if he understands certain grammatical points or particular words. This will only embarrass him. Most people conversing in a foreign language with any proficiency have learned to listen for the meaning of sentences rather than individual words. A meaning can be conveyed by the words surrounding the unknown word, the context in which the sentence is found, the body language accompanying it, and the way the sentence is said. Even with all these helps, if the foreigner does not understand the word, phrase or sentence, it is up to him or her to ask the meaning. The Japanese, on the other hand, if he realizes that the foreign listener is not comprehending a certain word or grammatical construction, instead of embarrassing him by asking if he understands the meaning, as I said above, he can express himself in simpler Japanese or if he knows the English equivalent, simply say it.

Fourthly, once again, to avoid embarrassing the foreigner, use the language that fits the situation you are in. By this I mean, if a Japanese knows a foreigner can speak Japanese and the two are in a group where some or even one cannot understand English, the language that is common to all should be used. If the Japanese insists on speaking
to the foreigner in English, he may give him a bad impression as well as embarrassing him. The foreigner may feel that the Japanese thinks his Japanese is not very good, or worse still, he may conclude that the person he is talking to wants to show off his knowledge of English in front of other Japanese. As for embarrassing the foreigner, speaking to him in English in this kind of group has put him in a no-win situation. If he replies in English, he is isolating himself and the Japanese who speaks to him in English from the other members of the group; if he replies in Japanese, he feels that he is being impolite to the speaker. As the foreigner does not know what to do and still be polite, he usually mumbles something or remains quiet, neither of which are conducive to conversation.

Fifthly, and this is a "do" rather than a "don't", if a Japanese finds himself in a situation where he must use English, he should not hesitate to speak. I have known many Japanese down through the years who although they had a very good knowledge of English and would converse with me in English when we were alone, when they found themselves in a group where English was being spoken, they would become quiet and withdrawn. I know there are many reasons for this, such as, natural shyness, situations where one understands most of what is being said but fears that he may have missed something and by speaking will show his ignorance, and the difficulty of expressing oneself when friends more fluent in English are present. However, I think one should always remember that the foreign language is not his native language and therefore mistakes are bound to be made. The secrecy of becoming fluent in a foreign language is to be relaxed when using it in various situations. This can only be attained by resolving to speak in all situations where English is called for, even though one makes mistakes. This resolution will have to be renewed many times during one's life as there will always be situations where one will be tempted to remain silent when he knows he should give his opinion. However, if one perseveres, he will gradually lose his timidity and find it much easier to act as host to foreigners who have no knowledge of the Japanese language.

Finally, and this applies to the foreigner who can speak Japanese as well, the most important point of any intercultural conversation, discussion etc. is to communicate. If one or both have the secret desire or determination to prove his proficiency in the other person's language, meaningful communication will not take place. Those engaged in intercultural communication must be mature and decide which language will be the most beneficial to accomplish the purpose of communication, namely, the exchanging of ideas.

Conclusion

In this paper I have expressed some points which I personally feel Japanese as hosts in intercultural communication situations must be careful of. As I was writing this paper, faces of many Japanese I have met flashed before my mind's eye. Most of them
are perfect hosts to foreigners visiting Japan and true friends of the foreigners who have made their home in Japan. The memories and stories I have heard of a few others prompted me to write this paper as I know this small group can, to a greater or lesser degree, be an obstacle to true intercultural communication.

There were times while writing the first draft that I had fears that either the Japanese or foreign reader would take offence at or the wrong meaning from what I was writing. I was tempted to change some parts but then decided to leave them as written, relying on the openmindedness of the reader to see my conclusions as observations of one individual who is interested in creating situations where true intercultural communication can take place. I hope that what I have written will be a springboard not for talks that will end up in sessions dealing only with the shortcomings of a foreign culture in which one is living or has lived in or the faults of foreigners living in the reader’s country, but that it will encourage discussions that will help make both the home and work environments places where true intercultural communication may always take place.

References

異文文化間コミュニケーション
—受け入れ国側の役割—

大 石 真 一
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要 旨：異文文化間コミュニケーションの目的は、異文化の人々が相互に意見を交換することです。
異文文化間のコミュニケーションにおいては、通常受け入れ国の人は外国からの短期滞在
者（例えば、学会参加者、留学生、観光客）や移住者と話し合いをもっています。このような
状況では、受け入れ国側の人々には特別な負担がかかります。このレポートでは、異文文化
間コミュニケーションにおける受け入れ国側の日本の役割を考察しています。外国人は
3つのグループに分けられています。これに対して日本人は受け入れ国民としてこの3つ
のグループに対して、どのような義務があるかを検討しています。外国人が異文化の中に
あってリラックスできるためには、受け入れ国民としてのふさわしい態度が重要であるこ
とを特に強調するものです。

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