East-West. What May One Generalize About?

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Abstract

Expansion of contemporary trade and information exchange relations does not seem to alter significantly the multi-layered requirements of inter-cultural communication. In a very important sense of this term, many individual decisions related to communication in a multi-cultural environment are inevitably narrowed to a single-context world. Only to some extent, this unavoidable limitation of communication on the verge of heterogeneous cultures may be overridden by omnipresent stereotypes and ad hoc generalizations. On a more advanced level of communication, it is the stereotypes that may foster the instances of miscommunication and lead to serious misunderstandings. In the paper, a short account on stereotypes in inter-cultural communication is going to be presented, with some examples of actual instances of miscommunication in the Japanese-Polish corporate environment. A proposal of a systematized approach towards the issues and intricacies of Japanese-Polish communication will follow.

Keywords: inter-cultural communication, misunderstanding, miscommunication, Poland, Japan

Streszczenie

Wschód-Zachód. Co wolno uogólniać?

Wzrost współczesnej wymiany handlowej i informacyjnej nie wydaje się powodować znaczących zmian w wielowarstwowych wymogach dotyczących komunikacji międzykulturowej. W bardzo istotnym znaczeniu tego terminu liczne decyzje indywidualne związane z komunikacją w środowisku międzykulturowym ulegają nieuniknionemu zawężeniu do świata o naturze jednokontekstowej. Takie wymuszone ograniczenie komunikacji zachodzącej na styku kultur heterogenicznych jedynie do pewnego stopnia można przezwyciężyć poprzez odwołanie do wszechobecnych wyobrażeń stereotypowych oraz doraźnych generalizacji. Na bardziej

zaawansowanym poziomie komunikacji stereotypy mogą jednak stanowić przyczyny niepowodzeń komunikacyjnych i poważnych nieporozumień. W niniejszym artykule zamieszczono krótki opis stereotypów w komunikacji międzykulturowej wraz z kilkoma przykładami rzeczywistych przypadków załamania komunikacji w japońsko-polskim środowisku korporacyjnym. W dalszej kolejności przedstawiono propozycję systemowego ujęcia problemów i szczegółowych aspektów komunikacji w kontekście japońsko-polskim.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja interkulturowa, niezrozumienie, nieporozumienie, Polska, Japonia

1. Introduction

Inter-cultural communication (hereafter: ICC) – information exchange on the verge of heterogeneous cultural environments – is a part of social activity, similarly as trade or advertising. At the same time, while it is relatively easy to compute trade balance, gain and loss, the phenomena related to communication remain to some extent hidden. Their impact on actual results of social activities, although in many cases intangible, may be considered significant, both in affecting the outcome of separated transactions as well as in shaping the long-term relationship patterns between the individuals and groups. This is especially true when it comes to interpretation of objects and events belonging to heterogeneous realities in terms of stereotypes or to relatively frequent instances of miscommunication. Such phenomena, usually not visible in a homogeneous environment, may influence significantly both the outcome of inter-cultural activities and the shape of interpersonal relations. Linguistic sources and translation/interpretation studies sources, as well as actual examples of Japanese-Polish communication have been quoted as the references. The methodology used in the text is of applied character, which makes it possible to interpret data and findings in terms of social sciences.

2. A single-context world

Communication on the verge of heterogeneous environments does not differ in many of its aspects from communication in an environment viewed as homogeneous. In fact, numerous descriptions of multi-cultural events tend to overestimate the impact of homogeneous factors, neglecting potentially destructive influence of cultural differences. As pointed out by Edward T. Hall:

Any time you hear someone say "Why, they are no different than the folks back home — they are just like I am", even though you may understand the reasons behind these remarks, you also know that the speaker is living in a single-context world (his own) and is incapable of describing either his world or the foreign one.

(Hall 1989: 63)

The illusion of homogeneity, while facilitating the *ad hoc* communication, does not bring thorough understanding of other culture's rules and requirements. This is especially visible in long-term relations, when more complicated issues emerge between the involved parties.

3. Differences and difficulties

Differences between communication schemes have been described on various levels, revealing the increasing complexity. The progress in analysis of related communication environment parameters may be observed in the set of communication theories proposed throughout the 20th century. The most basic difference emerges in relation of signs to the designates, as described by Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure [1916] 1959: 65–70). Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards in their idea of semantic triangle (Ogden, Richards 1923) add the concept of different ideas and associations connected to signs and designates. Karl Bühler (Bühler [1934] 2011: 30–39) mentions different speaker's intentions and hearer's reactions. Roman Jakobson points out at different emotions, references, poetics, phatic properties of communication, different metalingual features and different responses to the communication stimuli (Jakobson 1960). Dell Hymes accounts for sets of such differences in terms of various forms of speech and different patterns of communication (Hymes 1974: 51). The list of communication models can be expanded by numerous examples basing on pragmatic and sociolinguistic features of a communication act, in terms of "illocutionary act" versus "perlocutionary act" (Austin 1962), "human linguistics" (Yngve 1975), "social semiotics" (Halliday 1978), "discourse" by means of "message" by means of "text" (Leech 1983), "conversational implicatures" and "cooperative principles" (Grice 1989) as well as actual properties of "speech acts" (Geis 1995 and many others). The basic conclusion emerging from them is extremely simple: mere competences on the level of speech may not be sufficient on the level of communication patterns. Main difficulty lays in the fact that relations

between the two levels, neutralized in the process of socialization in one's native culture, may not be rendered in a non-native study of language and culture, inevitably influenced by individual and particular single-context competences.

4. What may be wrong?

The danger of miscommunication or communication breakdown, while directly impossible to measure, is one of destructive factors, inevitably present on any scene of communication, intra- or intercultural. The only certain thing is that it diminishes the communication effectiveness of involved parties, increasing the cost of social activity. On an usual basis, such phenomena tend to be neglected, for the sake of the premise that a smooth information exchange is somehow achieved, as pointed out by Anna Duszak. The inevitable differences of points of view and expectations may make such process extremely difficult. It is especially in this aspect that the ICC may be regarded a "field of increased risk" (Duszak 1998: 332).

When a communication issue emerges, it is necessary to take into account numerous factors for its effective explanation and problem solution. This is where the approach based on the single-context worldview reveals its limitations. It is not uncommon for the ICC observers and researchers to face the phenomena of informer bias and exoticism. Some questions may evoke only a fixed set of answers or apply only to isolated events, not their sequences. Furthermore, the lack of language competence on the researcher's part may narrow the scope of sources to the English-filtered ones, resulting in the lack of immediate contact with language and culture. Additionally, too abstract metaphors, prejudices and stereotypes may influence the result of analysis. It does not seem and exaggeration to point out that without the image of relations between basic notions and cultural facts a researcher or observer will sooner or later arrive at the conclusions they expect to arrive at.

5. Stereotypes and associations

A set of stereotypes on Japan includes, among others, convictions on the alleged Japanese collective attitude and the inability to refuse to a proposal. In (American) English sources (especially in practical, business-oriented descriptions, constituting probably the majority of

sources available contemporarily), they are usually contrasted with American individualism and the tendency to form clear-cut refusals. Visible traces of such convictions may be found in following sections 5.1. and 5.2. Respective quotations come from otherwise quite reliable and popular sources containing the explanation on selected communication instances observed in the Japanese environment.

5. 1. Collective management?

The following passage contains an overt suggestion that the tendency not to look for an individual fault is typical for Japan, allegedly quite contrary to America. At the same time, it does not mention the Japanese preference for fixed solutions and expected behaviour, as well as many other factors which may in fact increase the social pressure on the individual decision as to "doing what is right".

> Akio Morita of Sony complains loudly of the need of American managers to find fault and to penalize each other. The supervisor needs to prove it is not his fault, by sanctioning his subordinate instead. "You are individually responsible...« has the important implication »...and hence I am not." Morita recalls:

> "The American director of a joint venture company in Tokyo complained to me that he has not able to pin down responsibility for an accident at his company and asked me why it seemed impossible to discover the name of the culprit no matter how hard he tried. I explained to him that the merit of his company lies precisely in the fact that everyone recognizes responsibility for the accident and to find the guilty party might destroy the morale of all. We can all expect to make mistakes... I tell our people *Go ahead and do what you think is right. If you make a mistake you will learn from it, just don't make the same mistake twice... A child's mistake does not have to be dealt with by disowning him. It is more important to get the cause... so that you can avoid the problem in the future.*"

> (Turner, Trompenaars 1993: 172)

5. 2. Lack of conflicts?

The next fragment overtly suggests that it is not desirable in Japan to refuse. Harmony is more important than sincerity. At the same time, there are proofs that the mythical Japanese harmony does not always result in smooth communication and the lack of conflicts.

In a situation of intense and continuous social contact, the maintenance of harmony with one's social environment becomes a key virtue that extends to other spheres beyond the family. In most collectivist cultures, direct confrontation of another person is considered rude and undesirable. The word *no* is seldom used, because saying "no" is a confrontation: "you may be right" and "we will think about it" are examples of polite ways of turning down a request. In the same vein, the word *yes* is used to maintain the line of communication: "yes, I heard you" is the meaning it has in Japan.

(Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov 2010: 106–107)

Only two simple examples of common stereotypes on Japan and Japanese communication environment, the allegedly collective attitude and the assumed lack of conflicts, have been quoted in this section. Quite apart that they may happen to prove useful to explain some selected situations and settings, it is obvious at first site that they are not applicable to any representative of Japanese society and to any possible scene of communication. An attempt at more advanced approach to the facts of inter-cultural communication with the Japanese is going to be presented in following sections – on selected examples of Japanese-Polish communication.

6. Selected instances of miscommunication

Situations described in subsequent steps in three sections below took place in corporate and academic environments in Poland, in the heterogeneous Japanese-Polish context. They were selected from this context due to the following reasons: 1. Polish is a native language of the author; 2. Polish and Japanese communication environments are rarely described in a contrastive approach 3. It is conceivable that certain alleged features of Japanese communication environment recognized stereotypically may be falsified when contrasted with Polish communication environment. This is by no means to imply that English (American) communication environment is identical to Polish communication environment or to suggest that Japanese communication environment is incompatible with any other one.

Each subsection includes an example of miscommunication rather hard to explain with the use of stereotypes briefly mentioned in 5.1. and 5.2. Participant roles are indicated by capital letters. Descriptions of each situation contain the explanation of its context and participants in their initial sections and the summary of results in final sections.

6.1 PL Interpreter vs. JP LM Trainer

CONTEXT: A Japanese company with Polish employees.

PARTICIPANTS: Japanese (male) Trainer, Polish (female) Interpreter.

i. An experienced Japanese Lean Management Trainer works with Polish employees and an Interpreter.

ii. The trainees are not able to understand Trainer's explanation and expectation, although they are interpreted correctly into Polish. They ask the Interpreter to repeat.

iii. The Interpreter repeats the explanation. Then, she starts explaining her interpretation of the training content by her own words. At last she even begins to instruct them.

iv. The Trainer gets furious at the Interpreter. He accuses her of taking over his role and ignoring him.

RESULT: After the incident, the Interpreter was excluded from major interpretation works for a long time, since part of the Japanese staff regarded her as a potential "trouble maker".

6.2. New JP President vs. PL Managers

CONTEXT: A Japanese company with Polish employees.

PARTICIPANTS: Japanese President, Polish Managers.

i. A new Japanese manager of a production plant in Poland takes over a president position from his Japanese predecessor. The previous president revealed an open and flat management style and was respected by Polish employees.

ii. This new President applies the stiff Japanese management style, characterized by the authoritative, dominating and target-focused approach to the Polish management staff.

RESULT: During his first year of presidency, the President loses more than half of the Polish management team members, since they cannot bear such treatment in their work place.

6.3. JP Professor vs. PL Student

CONTEXT: A Polish academic institution.

PARTICIPANTS: Japanese (male) Professor, Polish (female) Student.

i. A Japanese Professor is invited to an Art Academy in Poland to give some lectures.

ii. On the first day of his visit, the Academy organizes an orientation event. They ask a Polish female Student with the Japanese language knowledge to accompany and support the Professor. RESULT: The Professor is very dissatisfied with being "taught anything" by the Student and rejects the suggestion to join the event.

7. Basic notions

While generalization on the level of stereotypes is usually not successful when applied in interpretation of actual communication events, one's own experience may constitute a useful reference on inter-cultural facts. Table 1. below provides a list of basic convictions observed in Japanese and Polish communication environments during translation and interpretation activity of one of the authors of this paper. Despite their general character, they may prove effective a point of departure for a more advanced model of communication. It should also be noted that the postulated basic notions rely, rather than on the concept of East and West, on the ideas of ethnic communities of Japanese and Poles, contrastively. Although also the generalizations on the level of ethnic communities may be not effective, proposed notions are supported by analysis of actual events recorded in non-abstract contexts.

Table 1. A set of JP and PL convictions considered typical in a given communication environment (adapted from Jabłoński 2013).

JP	PL
a. People are basically different (including especially stiff formal regulations, never to be neglected). Most relations are asymmetrical. Lower rank is no shame. In any case, it is better than indefinite rank.	a. People are basically equal (except stiff formal regulations, which can in most cases be neglected). Most relations are symmetrical. Lower rank is a shame. Higher rank may arouse envy.
b. Free exchange of views reveals rather undesirable individual differences.	b. Free exchange of views enables the interaction partners to know each other.
c. Group relations are more important.	c. Group is not that important.
d. It is better to hide one's personal views, especially towards one's vertical senior.	d. Hiding one's personal vies makes communication difficult, ranks regardless.

| e. Sincere behaviour depends on context. It may be allowed within one's own group. | e. Sincerity means that one always acts in the same manner, regardless of context. |
| f. Outside one's group only predictable role play enables effective interaction. Role standard violation is incomprehensible. | f. Should people like to play roles, they ought to be creative. Role standard violation is creative. |

Convictions presented in Table 1. have been described with the use of possibly basic and clear-cut vocabulary. The contrastive set of rules is going to be used in the following sections to determine basic behaviour patterns observable in Japanese and Polish environments.

8. Behaviour patterns

Available behaviour patterns are quoted below after one of expert sources considered classic (Table 2.) As can be seen, the values of Japanese *uchi*, *soto*, *omote* and *ura* are applied and combined into a basic set of patterns.

Table 2. A set of Japanese behaviour patterns considered most typical (adapted from Sugiyama–Lebra 1976: 112).

	omote 'official'	*ura* 'unofficial'
uchi 'private'	- (NONE)	INTIMATE
soto 'public'	RITUAL	ANOMIC

The set of Japanese behaviour patterns provided in Table 2. reveals relatively few combinations. Some values do not combine (*omote* does not combine with *uchi*). In the course of communication, actual values of some parameters may be overridden in the context of the RITUAL behaviour pattern. In other words, what is viewed as true or false on the level of private interaction may not be valid officially, when a ritual is applied.

Some other values result in a rather ineffective combination of the ANOMIC pattern, used in unpredictable situations and towards potential enemies. It may result in an openly aggressive behaviour or in the retreat of an individual or group from the communication scene, when no RITUAL pattern may be applied. Otherwise, with the RITUAL pattern applied, the interaction is going to be carried out strictly according to the pattern, unless the INTIMATE pattern can be

used.

As an extremely simple rule, it may be assumed that whenever the INTIMATE pattern is not applicable, the available RITUAL pattern should consequently be implemented during the interaction performed in Japanese communication environment. Respective rituals are usually created and maintained on the basis of different social organizations. They are learned and mastered by group members in the process of their socialization or at an initial stage of joining the group.

The set of values provided initially by Takie Sugiyama–Lebra and combined in Table 2. has been used as a point of departure towards the description of the behaviour patterns typical for Polish communication environment. They are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. A set of the Polish behaviour patterns considered most typical (adapted from Jabłoński 2013: 217).

	omote 'official'	*ura* 'unofficial'
uchi 'private'	SINCERE	INTIMATE
soto 'public'	RITUAL	HONORABLE

Table 3. reveals relatively many patterns (all values may be combined into sets). While Polish communication environment and its RITUAL patterns do not differ from the Japanese patterns as to the way they are created, maintained, learned and mastered, in the Polish environment a tendency may be observed to avoid the RITUAL patterns. In other words, whenever the INTIMATE pattern is not applicable, the SINCERE pattern is attempted, which in Japanese terms of behaviour interpretation may constitute a major violation of expected standard. A member of Polish communication environment may not hesitate to allude to true and false values of some parameters, disregarding the RITUAL requirements.

Besides, in Polish communication environment, instead of the ANOMIC pattern known from Japanese communication environment (*cf.* Table 2.) the HONORABLE pattern of behaviour may be used towards partners interpreted as offensive or in the context when partner's rank is uncertain. The technique of retreat from the communication scene or aggressive behaviour patterns are employed only towards the individuals with ranks considered significantly lower or communication participants viewed as extremely troublesome. Towards the individuals

with ranks considered equal to of higher than one's own, a member of Polish communication community may employ the HONORABLE pattern of behaviour and be ready to act even in an unexpectedly generous manner as compared to the application of the RITUAL pattern available towards strangers or other non-members of one's group.

9. The analysis

Due to limited size of this paper, it is impossible to include thorough analysis of a vast selection of the ICC communication situations in Japanese-Polish environment. Still, the three situations described briefly in the sections 6.1. through 6.3. reveal certain easily observable features characteristic for both environments. At the same time, while it would have probably be possible to solve the emerging problems with implementation of the alleged patterns of collective management or lack of conflicts (*cf.* section 5.), had they existed, it is rather unlikely that such patterns of behaviour have actually been introduced in the described situations.

In 6.1., the Interpreter employs the SINCERE pattern (it is interpreted as a bare fact that the employees do not understand the Trainer's explanation) and then the HONORABLE pattern of behaviour (doing more than expected) towards the Trainer. The Trainer, however, interprets the situation as a violation of the RITUAL rules and employs the ANOMIC pattern of behaviour.

As can be seen, SINCERE language skills may not prove sufficient for a successful interaction. The RITUAL character of Japanese interaction patterns should be observed. HONORABLE pattern of behaviour in this context may be interpreted as an ANOMIC incompatibility.

In 6.2., the President sticks to the strict RITUAL pattern of behaviour, not taking into account the SINCERE competence and abilities of Polish management staff. The two heterogeneous points of view lead to an open conflict and to communication breakdown.

As an additional important factor of this situation it may be pointed out that in direct communication between the parties a foreign language (English) was used. It might have made the co-operation with the Polish management staff, who have never experienced the typical style of Japanese management, even more difficult.

In 6.3., the Professor interprets the situation as a violation of the RITUAL pattern. As a result, he applies the ANOMIC pattern of conduct. From the point of view of the Student and

Polish academic institution delegating her, based on the HONORABLE (courtesy towards the Professor) and SINCERE (the Professor does not know, the Student does) assumptions, there is nothing wrong in providing the Professor with assistance of the Student.

As a suggested solution, the Professor could be accompanied by his counterpart of the academy or another person on an equal vertical tank. He should have also been informed on the event in advance.

Apart from the above brief explanations of situations 6.1. through 6.3., they may be other specific factors influencing the observed course of interaction. They may also be successfully explained in terms of proposed patterns of behaviour (Table 2. and 3.). For example, from the point of view of a male Japanese participant of the corporate communication scene the very presence of a female participant may be regarded as unexpected and influence the incorrect interpretation of the RITUAL rules of conduct. At the same time, in terms of Polish interpretation of the environment parameters, the parameter of sex may be viewed as a SINCERE (no sex discrimination is allowed under any circumstances) property of the context, not related to any RITUAL constraints. When applicable, a workaround may be provided, either by instructing the concerned individuals in advance about the rules of communication in the heterogeneous environment, or by exchanging female participants to male participants in specific contexts. Even is such case, significant amount of tension may emerge.

10. Conclusions

As can be briefly concluded, stereotypes and fixed interpretation schemes may be useful only to some extent in actual instances of ICC. At the same time, the very existence of stereotypes, as well as of a common communication code (or an interpreter), does not effortlessly or automatically solve the issue of different situation patterns available in heterogeneous communication environments. Still, certain properties of situation patterns may be repeatable and easily observable. Their explanations should help in solving the ICC problems by systematic approach, not by seeking for oddities and incompatibilities. In this aspect, much can be learned from individual experience, including analysis of actual instances of miscommunication and taking advantage of one's common sense.

Limited set of examples and their brief analysis provided above may contribute, as far as the

authors are concerned, to a better understanding of communication events on the verge of heterogeneous cultural environments. As a more universal rule, it is usually more effective to focus on specific properties of actual communication events than on abstract generalizations. While it may be convenient in some circumstances to use stereotypes, it is important to point out that often-quoted icons of Asia and West do not explain too much when applied without reference to more specific patterns of behaviour. As indicated in the mere title of one of papers by a Japanese expert on Polish studies, Tokimasa Sekiguchi, "Asia does not exist" (Sekiguchi 2008). It is a mere concept used for emphasizing the (usually considered unpredictable, random and bizarre) idea of a set of behaviour patterns incompatible with the (usually considered fixed, systematic and expected) rules and manners of European origin. Being useful only as an ad hoc, lay approximation to the multi-layered communication events, it does not meet strict standards that could lead to a more systematic description of actual inter-dependencies and effective solution of potential communication issues.

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