JAPANESE AND AMERICAN MEETINGS
AND WHAT GOES ON BEFORE THEM:
A CASE STUDY OF CO-WORKER MISUNDERSTANDING

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1. Introduction

Some genuinely illuminating work on interethnic and intercultural communication, and the resulting misunderstandings which often occur, has been carried out by researchers in the fields of sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication (for example, Basso 1970; Gumperz 1982; Scollon and Scollon 1981). Their empirically grounded methodology has contributed solid insights about where the locus of misunderstanding in interethnic encounters may be found. These scholars have specified various distinct categories of communicative behavior which are potentially problematic. Some of these troublesome domains are the discourse structure of the language, cultural assumptions about appropriate behavior and the "presentation of self," and norms concerning the distribution of talk and the exchange of speaking turns. These various ways of speaking and constructing talk may produce or contribute to two fundamental types of misunderstanding: pragmatic misunderstandings and structural misunderstandings.

Structural misunderstandings are located in features of language such as its lexicon and grammar, and are often consciously recognized. For example, every issue of the Japanese pop culture and language learning magazine Mangajin contains a "Bloopers" column in which readers relate some dramatic linguistic mistakes. A recent issue had the following entry by an American man living in Japan:

"I was working in the education department of the Shiyakusho, or City Hall. I had skipped breakfast and went down to the little shop on the first floor, but my choice of breakfast items was limited to mashed potatoes, sandwiches, or Coke. Upon returning to my section of the

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2 My transcription of Japanese is orthographic (rather than phonetic), based on the modified Hepburn Romanization System as used by Kenkyusha (Masuda 1974). In this system, long vowels (which are phonemic) are represented with lines over them, called macrons, rather than with doubled letters. An exception is the vowel "i" which is written as "ii."
office, I wanted to say, "City Hall doesn't have a good shop, does it?" "Shiyakusho wa ii bafien ga nai desu ne." Instead, I blurted out in a loud voice "Shiyakusho wa ii baishun ga nai desu ne" City Hall doesn't have any good prostitutes, does it?" (Mangajin p.4).

In some Japanese and American interactions, such as this one, participants are able to identify certain words or phrases that are problematic and therefore 'know' that they are misunderstanding something. But often, participants misunderstand or misinterpret an interaction without ever realizing that they have done so.

Pragmatic misunderstandings are those in which some participants make situated judgements and interpretations which differ from those of other participants. Speakers analyze these instances not as pragmatic misunderstandings, but as deficiencies in the character or personality of the other, or as traits common to particular ethnic groups. Individuals in any culture interpret what they hear depending on their definitions and assumptions concerning what sort of interaction or speech event they think is in progress. It is conventionally understood that when people from different cultures interact, they bring with them assumptions which may result in misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Yet even when there is a seemingly equivalent or shared folk-linguistic label for a particular activity, such as "meetings," there may still be differences in assumptions about what that activity entails and what behavior is appropriate to it. Assumptions about the purpose of meetings, and what one does prior to and during one, often result in pragmatic misunderstandings.

One problem in Japanese and American interaction may concern differences in understanding and conception about how business is accomplished through meetings and the activities preceding them. While past research has described these differences, the actual talk which occurs during interactions between Japanese and American businesspeople have rarely been the focus of research or analysis. Rather, there is use of self-report data such as questionnaires, interviews and surveys. While this type of data does provide valuable information, it may also fall back on the repetition of unquestioned social science concepts in order to explain hypothetical interactions. Examination of actual business conversations which have been audiotaped or videotaped may yield additional interpretations and findings. The intent of this paper is to look at one such taped conversation to see if anything new about Japanese and American business communication may be learned.

Before looking at a case-study in which we may track individual expression of differing assumptions and expectations, we should first review some of what we already know about Japanese and America conceptions of meetings and meeting preparation.

2. American meetings: Agenda and action

The importance of the meeting in American culture is evident in numerous reports on the frequency with which they are held. For example, Snell (1978, p.xi) claims that 75% of executive time is spent in meetings, and Doyle and Straus (1976: 4) report that for middle management, 35% of the working week is spent in meetings. Mintzberg's (1973) important study also supports the view that formal meetings are integral to the way in which work gets done in American offices. Many American businesspeople
assume that meetings are for the purpose of getting some specific actions done, which may include one or more of the following:

- present information & share opinions
- make decisions
- pool skills and resources
- formulate plans
- assign tasks & responsibilities
- clarify problems & ideas
- establish deadlines, plan of action
- iron-out disagreements & solve problems
- create & stimulate ideas
- bargaining & negotiating
- promote team spirit & give encouragement
- elicit feedback
- provide guidance & training

These assumptions about the purpose of meetings are reflected in popular meta-linguistic terms such as brainstorming, buzz session, head-busting, briefings, presentations, and training sessions. One of the more strikingly culture-specific aspects of the American meeting is its decision-making function: "The meeting is a decision-making body, a place of force and persuasion" (Snell 1978: p.xii). Meetings are therefore thought to be the appropriate place in which to persuade people or try to change their minds. The assumption that meetings involve decision-making and the resolution of conflict that goes with it is also seen in the numerous books of the "How to.." genre which proffer advice and strategies for behavior in meetings. Examples of this variety include: How to Win the Meeting (Snell 1978), How to Make Meetings Work (Doyle and Straus 1976), Running a Meeting That Works (Miller 1991), Meetings, Meetings: How to Manipulate Them and Make Them More Fun (Fletcher 1984).

The belief that meetings are about problem-solving, conflict resolution and other active, participatory behavior is demonstrated by people's judgements about what constitutes a successful meeting. For most, a "good" meeting is one in which something "got done" such as results, decisions, solutions, and formulations. For Americans, meetings are for the presentation of facts, numbers, and material which is given so that decisions can be made to direct a course of action. Decisions on what should be done are thought to logically follow from the facts and material presented within the context of a meeting.

Stewart (1976: 2) claims that Americans are concerned with matters of procedure and with agenda setting. 'Getting things done' and having a plan of action are ways to satisfy a need to see and feel that something is being accomplished. Given the structure of the American workplace, this necessitates a series of meetings and the establishment of a plan with goals and a course of action mapped out. Having a plan or agenda leads to the conception of action as a chain of linear events (Stewart 1976: 6). This concept of action as sequential results in a preference for tackling things one
at a time. According to Graham and Herberger (1983: 164), "Americans usually attack a complex negotiation sequentially—that is, they separate the issues and settle them one at a time." Clyne (1981) also notes this linear orientation of Americans during business meetings. Koike (1988) suggests that this habit of doing things sequentially often leads to problems in negotiations with Japanese, who work on a project as a whole or unit. Americans expect certain decisions to be made before they can go on to the next item on an agenda, and experience a sense of frustration when nothing is determined sequentially. There are also explicit rules for the orderly and systematic conduct of a meeting, modeled on Parliamentary Procedure and codified in standard references such as Robert’s Rules of Order (1977).

The systematic nature of meetings are also seen in the key role and reverence in which a meeting’s agenda is held. (The importance of the agenda to an American meeting has been examined by Linde, 1991). This emphasis on agenda and linear ordering of activity means that preparation before a meeting is largely a matter of scheduling. Advice on what one should do prior to a meeting is usually limited to the planning of the meeting itself and giving advance notice to participants. This contrasts sharply with the Japanese understanding of what one should be doing prior to a meeting, and it is to this which we now turn.

3. Japanese meetings: Activity and approval

There are various types of meetings held in Japanese offices, and many are similar to American business meetings such as staff meetings, creative sessions, training sessions and presentations. In many cases, however, much of what Americans do in what they consider a proper meeting is done by Japanese prior to such a formal event in pre-meeting interactions. It was proposed by Graham and Sato (1984: 127) that Japanese meetings themselves are really only a type of ritual approval of what has already been decided during numerous individual conversations during the pre-meeting period.

There has been much written about the importance of group cooperation and the maintenance of harmony within the Japanese workplace (Alston 1986; Pascale and Athos 1981; Graham and Sato 1984; Okabe 1983). While such a focus on harmony and cooperation is useful for understanding Japanese behavior, it is nevertheless unreasonable to expect that Japanese businesspeople never disagree or have conflict. Characterizations such as Kerlinger’s (1951: 38) statement that Japanese reach decisions together "almost by a sort of empathy" and Arggle’s (1982: 71) claim that decisions are "carried out by a kind of acquiescence to the will of the group" are stereotypical images that merely mystify a much more down-to-earth process.

In contrast to these scholarly assessments, my own personal experience (I spent four years in Osaka working for Japanese companies) and my research on business interactions have led me to the view that Japanese do not exist in a state of constant harmony and cooperation, and that problems associated with power and influence are just as real for a Japanese person as for an American person. The important difference
will be found in the manner and place in which conflict and disagreement are handled. One alternative method for ironing out disagreements and dealing with conflict is often referred to in the business literature as the ringi seido 'written proposal system' (March 1982; Moran 1985; Graham and Sato 1984). The ringi sho 'consensus form' is not used for all business decisions, and each firm will have its own criteria (risk or monetary value) for determining when a formal consensus form is needed. In any case, both prior to the circulation of a form and in cases when a form is not used, co-workers will nevertheless engage in frequent one-on-one interactions with those most affected by a proposed project. The busy effort involved in achieving consensus, whether formalized on a form or not, is often seen in activity that goes on prior to actual 'business meetings.'

The folk meta-linguistic term most often associated with this pre-meeting activity which has been written about in the past is nemawashi, which contrasts with the basic term for meeting (kaigi). Originally used in gardening to refer to the preparation of soil and roots before transplanting, through metaphoric extension it is now used in business to refer to prior preparation before proposing a plan or holding a formal meeting. It refers to an activity which in essence is a type of pre-meeting held one-on-one. One function of nemawashi is to allow people the opportunity to argue privately, rather than publicly, which might entail a loss of face. Nemawashi may occur outside the workplace, in bars, cafes, or sports venues, where distinctions between business and social interaction are blurred. Alston (1986: 301) describes one of the social functions it has:

"[...] discussing and negotiating disagreements in private means personal favors can be exchanged. Nemawashi binds co-workers in a net of mutual debt and in an on-going exchange of favors."

In American business the most closely equivalent terms would be "spadework" or "preliminary groundwork." Yet the purpose of American-style spadework or groundwork is to influence decisions and other active work which will be done during a meeting. Groundwork provides the information and facts that will be used during a meeting to add import or give conviction to arguments. Spadework often refers to a kind of advance lobbying to influence the conduct of a meeting, and therefore, can have negative connotations of buttering-up or apple-polishing. These same negative connotations do not attach to nemawashi, however.

During Japanese pre-meeting interactions individuals can gather information, argue privately, get ideas percolating, do some informal probing, and get reactions before establishing a plan or agenda. It is precisely in some of the most common activities associated with nemawashi, such as problem-identification and solving, decision-making, division of labor, sharing of opinions and ideas and resolution of disagreements, that we see a contrast with the assumptions Americans have about what

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There is often no clear distinction between business and non-business talk within the workplace as well (Miller 1993a).
one does during what is labeled a meeting. As Zimmerman (1985: 213) stated:

"In fact, a formal meeting is usually nothing but a confirmation of what has already been decided on an informal basis... Very little is decided at such formal meetings; what happens is that decisions are confirmed."

One difference between nemawashi and the way Americans may have informal discussions around the water cooler or in the bathroom is that nemawashi is in no way considered a covert or extraneous activity, but is recognized as a marked, culturally-appropriate process in business decision-making. Despite the fact that nemawashi takes place in what Americans might consider informal contexts, it is a part of a methodical and structured process.

Given these differences in assumptions held about the process of doing business through meetings and pre-meeting behavior, as well as the different opportunities co-workers have for talking outside the context of meetings, it should not be surprising that misunderstandings between Japanese and Americans who work together sometimes happen. What is more discouraging is evidence suggesting that rather than evaluating these misunderstandings as having to do with conceptions of speech events or expectations about business procedure, interactants often assume that the problem relates to fundamental differences in national character. As a case in point, we are constantly reminded of a difference between Japanese and Americans which is uncritically accepted and habitually repeated: Japanese, we are told, are always indirect and ambiguous, while Americans are presumably unable to be anything but direct and pushy (Pascale and Athos 1981; Graham and Sato 1984; Okabe 1983; Hall and Hall 1987). These are characterizations which are most commonly elicited in data from interviews and questionnaires, and which are then used to "explain" recurring intercultural problems.

4. Meetings and office space

American meetings are held frequently because they address numerous functional and logistical needs. Perhaps the fundamental purpose of meetings is to establish and facilitate communication. The manner in which most workplace environments are structured, with individuals having separate offices, or at least individual desks (often with a partition or within a cubicle), means that meetings are the best occasion in which co-workers can manage and accomplish collective work. This function is reflected in the metaphor that meetings are "the communication switchboard of every organization" (Snell 1978: p.xi).

If the organization of the American workplace makes numerous meetings

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4 Miller (1993b) discusses in more detail the organization of space in Tokyo offices, and how this organization may reflect cultural values and assumptions about privacy and identity, as well as have important symbolic dimensions.
necessary, there are also proxemic reasons for the Japanese emphasis on getting things done during pre-meeting interactions. Japanese offices are physically arranged with co-workers sitting together at desks grouped into working islands, rather than in individual offices or cubicles. This arrangement is sometimes called *obeya seido* 'open space system,' in which desks are grouped into 'function orientation sections' or *kakari*. Below is an example of what an idealized office space would look like.

Both Pascale (1978: 106), and Zimmerman (1985: 208) have noted that with this use of office space, it is much easier to exchange ideas and to solve problems without having to arrange a meeting in order to do so.

The structure of the Japanese workplace will also contribute to more communication verbally rather than through memos. In a study of how technical information is conveyed among Japanese and American aerospace engineers and scientists, for example, researchers found that Japanese write fewer memos and letters than do their American counterparts (Kohl et al. 1993).

Diagram 1.
5. Data

Sociolinguistic studies have made it clear that individuals do not consistently give accurate descriptions of their own communicative behavior and language use (Labov 1966; Blom and Gumperz 1972). Therefore, if we are interested in looking at how understanding takes place in Japanese and American business interactions, self-report data may be insufficient when we are dealing with behavior such as assumptions about meetings, which are often below a level of conscious awareness. In order to better understand the unconscious differences that may affect interpretation, the examination of naturally occurring business talk may provide some useful insights.

This case study is based on ethnographic observation in conjunction with close examination of talk from a naturally-occurring conversation. The conversation was transcribed from a videotape made of an interaction between an American and his two Japanese co-workers in their office in Tokyo. I spent many weeks of observation during which workers became accustomed to my presence and role as a researcher. Gradually I began taping daily work behavior at this firm, and although participants were initially self-conscious and aware of my activities, over time they became more comfortable around me. At no point did I create a situation or try to elicit speech to be taped. Individuals who were taped were doing their normal business routines that they would have been doing whether I was present or not. Because the burden of maintaining everyday business operations and procedures took priority over their concern with me and my activities, I feel that the interactions closely represent naturally occurring speech. All videotaping was done openly, with prior knowledge of all participants. To safeguard the rights and privacy of those I taped, their names and the name of their company will be changed to pseudonyms.

6. Case study of co-worker misunderstanding

The individuals in this case study worked for a small advertising agency called "Shinjinsha" that handles both international and domestic accounts. This firm provided print and television advertisements for numerous small accounts as well as some major international accounts. This particular office was the site of the Accounting, Advertising and Administrative sections of the company. The three participants in this conversation are two Japanese, Muramoto (M) and Aoki (A), and one American named Penn (P). All of them held the title of Account Executive and their statuses were roughly equal, with Muramoto having had slightly more authority. Muramoto spoke fluent English, Aoki did not. At the time of the taping Penn had lived in Japan and worked for this company for a little over one year. He spoke some Japanese. This was a typically Japanese office space, with desks grouped into function orientation sections or kakari, as in diagram 2.

Penn sat in the same kakari as Aoki, and Muramoto sat at an adjacent working island. People were constantly coming and going, and it was quite common and normal for workers in this office to move around and sit at different kakari, in some of the
During the course of this particular conversation reference is made to two accounts: "A Company" (and its product), and "B Company" (and its various hair care products). Muramoto has come over to stand next to Penn and Aoki at their *kakari*. In the first part of their talk Penn and Muramoto have been discussing A Company and Penn agrees to contact Mr. Shane, an employee of A. (Transcription conventions here are, for the most part, patterned after Moerman, 1988. The brackets indicate overlapping talk).

Diagram 2.
Data segment 1

1 P: (.hhh) Okay (.01) alright so (. ) alright, I will call /Mr. Shane tomorrow/
2 M: /ne then umm /now/ you understand what we’re gonna do^5
3 P: More or less /yes/
4 M: /ne/ um (that’s good)
5 P: Now let’s talk about B company (.01)
6 M: um .../Sore de(heh)/
   ‘Then..’
7 P: he /he doesn’t/
8 M: Ne kore mo wakatta desho
    ‘You already understand this, right?’
9 P: Hai
    ‘Yes’
10 M /A Company/only they have three salesmen so they need s-some
11   follow-up ah material /or/
12 P: /right/

In this first segment of conversation we see that Penn has tried to change the topic of
correspondence from A Company to the B Company account (Line 5). His suggestion is
followed by a pause and Muramoto continues to discuss A Company in the following
lines (6-11). This segment of talk is followed by a half minute of talk about the B
Company account. Although Penn’s first effort to bring up the subject of B Company
has failed, he tries again after a few more minutes of talk:

Data segment 2

13 P: Okay n-ya know we should /talk/ about....
14 M: /Sore de ne/
      ‘So then’
15 P: ye/ah/
16 M: /ahhmm/ market itself is quite na-complicated

In this segment, we see that Muramoto has cut off Penn’s attempt to change the topic
with her overlapping talk (Lines 13 and 14) and her continued focus on A Company
(Line 16). After a short time in which they continue to talk about A company, Penn
tries to bring up B Company again:

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^5 The Japanese sentence particle ne appears throughout the transcript and has been
translated as stress or as a tag question. Sentence particles such as ne are interesting features of
Japanese that indicate affect and are tied to social status, gender and situation. For more on the use
of ne in its function as a listener-eliciting device, see Miller (1991).
Co-worker misunderstanding

Data segment 3

17 P: Okay hai wakatta okay Aoki-san ima (,.01)
   ‘Okay I understand, okay Mr. Aoki now.’
18 A: B Company deshō?
   ‘It’s B Company right?’
19 P: So dakara ne (. ) jūni-oku
   ‘That’s right, because, there’s ( ¥ ) 1,200,000,000’
20 A: uh?
21 P: So when will we meet to talk /about B Company/?
22 A: /A Company nanasenman/
   ‘A Company is ( ¥ ) 70,000,000’

Penn indicates that he has understood the A Company matter and then directs his attention to Aoki, who displays his awareness that Penn wants to talk about B Company (Line 18). Penn brings up the amount of money that is budgeted for the B Company account (Line 19), which is a large sum, and then asks when they can talk about B Company (Line 21). Here he is giving “facts” as a reason or justification for his interest in talking about B Company. In Line 20 Aoki begins a repair initiator (‘uh?’), and in Line 22 he points out that A Company is a different amount. It could be that he really misunderstood Penn’s reference in Line 19 as referring to A Company and is correcting him. It could also be a strategy to turn the topic back to A Company. In any case, the conversation continues to be about the A Company budget (Line 22) and the dealers involved. During this part of the conversation Penn brings up B Company again, and Muramoto tells him not to worry, that they have a few months to work on it. Yet Penn is still concerned and proceeds to give reasons why he feels they need to talk about it now:

Data segment 4

23 P: Okay:: I know that but if-even if we have a presentation its
24 still time off. We need time to develop creative, we need
25 time to put together some solid thinking, an (,.03)
26 So we need to sit down ( . ) /an-an/
27 A: /Wakarhaden de/
   ( ‘He) doesn’t get it’
28 M: (Heh) asatte pursento
   ‘Presentation day after tomorrow’
29 P: Huh?
30 M: The day after tomorrow I have another presentation

Penn explicitly states what it is that he wants to do about the B Company account (Lines 23-26). He feels they need to schedule “time for creative” which indicates a desire to have a meeting for idea flotation and stimulation, or even a brainstorming
session. When he says they need "time to put together some solid thinking" and "sit down" these are expressions that usually mean getting some tangible ideas down on paper, formulating a plan and setting an agenda. Penn's concern is first met with silence, and then Aoki makes an aside to Muramoto (his gaze is directed to her) that Penn is not getting it (Line 27). (Aoki is using the Osaka dialect with the negation suffix -hen rather than the -nai suffix of standard Japanese). Despite the absence of a pronoun, it is clear from the context that the subject of wakararen is Penn. The "presentation" brought up by Muramoto (Line 28) is offered as a reason and justification for staying off the topic of B Company. In the next segment talk about A Company continues:

Data segment 5

31 M: Demo wakatta deshô? Anô: A Company no?
    'In any case, you understand, right? The A Company one?'
32 P: Yeah wakatta
    'I understand'
33 M: You remember the name of Sano-san=
34 P: =Ah hah
35 M: You remember the name of the company- "A Company"?
36 P: Ah hah-but I-but A Company but I don't understand why if A
    Company is this much [P writes a number] and B Company is
37 (.2) this much [P writes a number] why we're not spending more
38 time with this right now (.03)

We begin to see Penn's increasing frustration as indicated by perturbations in his talk ("Ah hah-but I-but A Company but I..." in Line 36) that indicate he is having some communicative difficulty. Penn points out the differences in the budgets, which he writes out on paper. Here, the activity of writing is being used to enable and buttress a comparison, to point out the importance of discussing the account. He is using a strategy of comparing the larger amount of the B Company account which he stresses with "this" to the smaller A Company account as a logical reason for devoting more time and energy to B Company (Lines 36-39). For Penn, it is obvious that they should want to have meetings about B Company, given the size of its account. During this part of the conversation, both Aoki and Muramoto begin to show their own increasing frustration and impatience with Penn. Muramoto stands up and juts her hip out in a defiant pose. Aoki begins pacing behind his desk. When Penn looks up from writing the numbers both Muramoto and Aoki turn away from him, avoiding eye contact. Penn continues talking:

6 Streeck (1993) has discussed the way doodles and writing such as this are used symbolically in the same way that gesture may function.
Penn emphatically explains that he will call the A Company person and "that's done," he does not want to talk about it anymore because "now we should talk about B company" (Line 41). His use of "than playing around" in Line 40 to describe what he sees Murasaki and Aoki doing indicates his unawareness of the nature of their nemawashi activities. Muramoto's fast-paced wakatta's are equivalent to her saying "that's enough already" likewise indicates her impatience and misinterpretation of Penn's eagerness. Penn continues talking and is interrupted (overlap of Line 44) by another wakatta from Muramoto. This time she accompanies it with two hands held up in front of herself as if to fend off Penn's remarks.

Penn goes on to express concern and worry over the details of the B Company account (Lines 45 to 48). He wants to do typical American meeting activities such as assign tasks ("who will do what") and set goals and policy ("what direction we are going to take"). These are potentially face-threatening activities, and also activities rich in opportunities for the exchange of favors and obligations, which Japanese would be more likely to do during pre-meeting interactions. Earlier in the conversation, both Muramoto and Aoki have done a bit of nemawashi with Penn by taking into account some of his concerns. Now their hesitation to continue this discussion demonstrates a desire to go on with nemawashi activities with other co-workers, on other occasions, before making decisions of the type that Penn is advocating. As Penn is talking, Muramoto walks over to another desk to get a large glossy magazine, which she carries back to the desk next to Penn. She plops it down and begins to flip through the pages, avoiding eye-contact with Penn. When Penn adds "right" to the end of his turn in Line 48, Aoki's nonverbal response is to shake his head horizontally several times and wave his arm back and forth. Penn then verbalizes Aoki's nonverbal "no no no no" in Line 50. After a minute of silence, Muramoto tells Penn that he will get more information on the A Company account, and then Penn makes a last effort to direct the talk to B Company:
Muramoto tells Penn he will get information on the A company account, and Penn brings up B Company again (Lines 56-57). This time Penn's frustration is being overtly expressed verbally and non-verbally. As he repeats "B company" (Line 57) he taps his desk with both hands. Both Aoki and Muramoto ignore this and go on to talk about things other than B company. During the remainder of the working day Penn grumbled off and on about his co-worker's uncooperative attitude for not wanting to have a meeting about the B company account.

7. Consequences of misunderstanding

The American in this situation appeared frustrated by the fact that there was no specific plan of action, no written-out agenda for the B Company account. He attempted to propose a meeting, in the American sense, in order to block out the details of the campaign, and indicated that such a meeting should take place as soon as possible. He contrasted the numbers for the two accounts as a method of pointing out the greater importance of the B company account. He assumed that, logically, the acknowledgement of such an impressive amount would result in observable action being taken. Given the "facts" Penn did not understand why Aoki and Muramoto did not agree to begin planning and meeting about B Company immediately. His desire to promptly hold a meeting also demonstrated enthusiasm and initiative, traits highly valued in American business. He did not expect that any useful action could be possible until after a meeting was held and an agenda established. For Penn, the purpose of a business meeting is to establish agendas, work-out solutions and iron-out disagreements. Penn later aired his opinion that his co-workers were being too indecisive and were attempting to exclude him from participation in planning a meeting. In this case, he interpreted his co-workers' putting him off because they desired to continue with pre-meeting nemawashi with others as hedging, indecisiveness, ambiguity and rejection.

In contrast to this, Penn's two Japanese colleagues treated his questions and concerns as premature until they could conduct additional spadework activities, finding out what others felt about the account, what tasks and responsibilities people had in mind, and blocking out some of the outlines for a plan of action prior to scheduling a meeting. All this activity takes time, and they felt they had plenty of time to do it before a 'meeting' was needed. Penn's insisting that they "sit down" and "put together some solid thinking" was seen as embryonic, and is the type of behavior that led them
to evaluate Penn as pushy and aggressive. For Muramoto and Aoki, the meeting would be the culmination of advance planning and talking. Penn's showing enthusiasm to hold a meeting right away is a type of behavior that these participants could logically, based on their own culturally-based reasons, interpret as overly aggressive and direct. The case of Penn, Muramoto and Aoki is not unlike many of the interactions found in my data on American and Japanese business conversation, among which are other cases where the same misinterpretations concerning the purpose or nature of a meeting results in a pragmatic misunderstanding.

As is clear from this example, one unconscious and culturally influenced aspect of communication is the participants' understanding of the purpose or goal of a particular speech event. Researchers in the "ethnography of communication" have stressed the significance of describing the cultural values, norms and expectations individuals have and make about specific speech acts and events (such as Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Bauman and Sherzer 1974 and others). All the participants in the above conversation had experience working daily with the other. Penn had read many of the numerous popular "How to Do Business with the Japanese" books, and was often seen making conscious efforts to behave in what he hoped were appropriate ways; nevertheless, he was still operating along the American model of business meetings in this situation. The Japanese staff had likewise become informed about American cultural values and behavior, but did not recognize that Penn was acting on American assumptions concerning meetings. Yet despite their background training, which was coupled with an abundance of goodwill and group spirit, their unconsciously held assumptions concerning a particular type of speech event nevertheless had unforeseen consequences.

Prevalent in both academic and popular writing are forceful and influential descriptions of Americans as forthright, direct and clear, and Japanese as indirect, non-verbal and ambiguous (Doi 1974; Okabe 1983; Graham and Sato 1984; Alston 1986; March 1982). Perhaps these characterizations and stereotypes are not the result of a simple dichotomy in communicative behavior, but are based on more subtle pragmatic misunderstandings. The type of pragmatic misunderstanding observed here may also occur in American-American interactions, or Japanese-Japanese interactions as well. An important difference, however, is that when they do occur, participants are apt to ascribe the problem to individual or personality traits, while in interethnic encounters the problem is sometimes assigned to often polarized ethnic attributes.

When presenting this research to various groups of both academic and business people, I am often asked why the participants didn't simply start out by explaining to each other what they were doing or what their assumptions were. Why didn't Penn, for example, just tell his co-workers what he felt a "meeting" is for and what one does in one? Why didn't Muramoto just tell Penn that she wanted to do some more nemawashi before making any decisions? It may seem obvious to us, armed with transcripts and

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7 For a discussion of the linguistic and pragmatic bases for indirectness and interpretations of directness, see Miller (1994).
re-playable video equipment, that there are things that can be done to facilitate understanding. Yet to the participants in ongoing interethnic interactions such as these, it is precisely the nature of assumptions and cultural knowledge such as this, the way it is taken for granted and unconsciously accepted as the norm, that lead us to feel that there is no necessity for explanation, and which will consequently lay the ground for recurring misinterpretation. Many studies of Japanese and American interaction, which are based on consciously elicited observations and explanations, may in fact represent a collection of mis-interpretations of a pragmatic nature which are themselves identified as the locus of misunderstanding. Perhaps when we begin to focus on more naturally-occurring interactions we will be able to locate other examples of insidious and unrecognized pragmatic misunderstandings.

References


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