

# The Japanese Communication Style— A Review of Research Literature

Viktória Marková

## *Introduction*

The current situation of Japanese language studies in Slovakia obliges us as a team of teachers of Japanese Language and Intercultural Communication to make our original contribution in the form of a textbook.<sup>1</sup> A four-member team is participating in the project, and in the preparation stage each member has been assigned with specific tasks and topics. Our tasks are structured into four levels, with the following focuses:

- 1) The current situation of Japanese language studies and the conception of the textbook (as briefly mentioned, this step is already completed);
- 2) A review of relevant literature on the Japanese communication style (presented in this paper);

Research on this paper has been made possible thanks to the a grant by the Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republik VEGA 1/0791/10 »Intercultural Communication between Slovakia and Japan and its Sociolinguistic Aspects«.

- 1 We have described the situation and also the conception of the textbook in more detail in a paper presented to the International Scientific E-Conference for Ph.D. Students, Researchers and Young University Teachers in Prešov, Slovakia, in June 2011.

The respective study programme at Comenius University in Bratislava is titled »Japanese Language and Intercultural Communication«, while the four persons referred to by the author denote the whole teaching staff involved—*The Editor*.

The specifics of the Japanese communication style are often discussed and have become a topic of many comparative works. It is necessary to define what is different (in this review mainly for English speakers, in the empirical part of the project for Slovak students) and for which reasons. This is why the relevant literature on Japanese communication is reviewed to summarize differences and prepare a broad framework.

- 3) The Japanese communication style from the perspective of Slovak students; The content analysis of essays and interviews with Slovak students aims to help us understand when they experience difficulties, both in encoding and decoding processes, and which of them appear repeatedly. In order to compare the findings with data from foreign literature, we will survey Slovak students of Japanese to identify the actual problems and experiences they encounter when using Japanese.
- 4) A non-Western view of the Japanese communication style as its explanation. In order to help students understand their experience and to overcome traditional ethnocentric explanations of the Japanese way of communication, we intend to explain them upon the basis of Kim's concept of non-Western perspectives.<sup>2</sup>

On these four levels we attempt to gain a framework for compiling a textbook that would reflect the needs and requirements of Slovak students of the Japanese language. The material is intended to help students learn to communicate effectively in Japanese, and not merely master the lexical or grammatical systems of the language.

*Communication Style  
as a Barrier on the Way to Effective Communication*

Effective communication in a foreign language is the result of the interaction of our general communicative competence (grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, discourse, etc.), our sensitivity to the unfamiliar, the different and new, and our ability to transform these prerequisites into a performance acceptable to the other. Apparently, language knowledge insufficiency is only one factor that may block the way to mutual understanding and lead to communication breakdowns. Gudykunst comments: »Lack of knowledge on the other's culture (not on the other's language), ethnocentric attributions, stereotypes, sociopolitical problems, and unwarranted beliefs of universality are proposed to be some of the major

<sup>2</sup> Kim Min-Sun, *Non-Western Perspectives on Human Communication. Implications for Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA [etc.]: Sage, 2002).

factors causing intercultural miscommunications.«<sup>3</sup> From our experience with studying and teaching Japanese, we believe that a lack of knowledge of the other's communication style is another potential barrier to successful communication.

With regard to communication in the Japanese language, we consider mastering the communication style to be a pragmatic language competence that needs to be harmonized with socio-cultural and intercultural competences, and will use it with this meaning throughout the paper. This means we use language not only for a literal translation of our thoughts and intentions—as an exchange of information—but we are also able to communicate our care for mutual bonds and our interest to continue an interpersonal relationship; we thus master the social aspect of communication—an inalienable part of the Japanese communication style.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, for foreign students the social aspect of Japanese is often more difficult to learn and use efficiently than the language itself.

»The degree to which two cultures are different or similar is reflected in the adaptability of a student to accept new cultural and social phenomena, understand their mutual relations, and effectively use them in communication.«<sup>5</sup> The more distant the culture, the more demanding the way is to master the language, and also the way of communication. The Japanese language, spoken in a geographically and culturally distant area, is a potentially rich source of various communication failures and interferences for Slovak students of Japanese. Non-native Japanese language teachers face a challenge in how to support students in developing their communicative competences, along with supporting their intercultural skills, and their sensitivity to different cultural, socio-psychological and situational contexts. Students should not only be aware of the specifics of the Japanese way of communication, but they also should be able to respect them in both the encoding and decoding processes they go through.

However, this general knowledge about specific aspects of Japanese communication does not help much in the process of teaching Japanese. To assess as systematically as possible these features of the Japanese communication style—which is different or difficult for speakers of Slovak to such a degree that

3 William B. Gudykunst, *Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication* (London: Sage, 2003), 58.

4 For more details on socially and information-oriented communication, see Haruo Aoki and Shigeo Okamoto, *Rules for Conversational Rituals in Japanese* (Tokyo: Taishukan, 1988), 3–10.

5 Jana Pekarovičová, *Slovenčina ako cudzí jazyk* [Slovak as a Foreign Language] (Bratislava: Stimul, 2004), 31.

it may significantly affect the flow or the goal of communication—we decided to examine and summarize these features in our paper.

### *Japanese Communication Style—Review of Literature*

Communication studies as a discipline does not have a long history, but a wide variety of studies have been conducted since its advent. Comparative studies of communication in diverse cultures increased significantly in the last decades of the 20th century. Most cross-cultural research concentrated on the United States. According to Gudykunst, differences and similarities between North American and Japanese communication were the main focal point of the comparative studies in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Abundant material on the Japanese way of communication should enable us to obtain a rather comprehensive picture of its nature. However, this coin has two sides and the ethnocentric approach evident in many works can distort the image we gain about Japanese communication.

In order to avoid being ethnocentric as much as possible, but to make this review as extensive as possible, we intended to gather original comparative studies written by either Japanese authors or authors from other than North American or Western European regions, mainly those geographically or culturally close to Slovakia. However, as Takai says, the majority of research from Japan compares their communication behaviour to Americans, »perhaps reflecting the extensive number of domestic researchers who have received academic training in these countries«. <sup>7</sup> Moreover, many Japanese authors build their theories and conceptualizations on theoretical frameworks with questionable cross-cultural validity.<sup>8</sup> Studies by other groups of authors (non-Japanese, non-Western) published in English or Japanese are not available to us, so our original intention to be extensive failed.

How do experts characterize the Japanese communication style? What are the typical features that may distinguish it from others and which are viewed as potentially difficult for foreigners learning Japanese? Our attention throughout the review of literature is not focused on the linguistic aspect of communication,

6 William B. Gudykunst, »Introduction«, in *Communication in Japan and the United States*, ed. by William B. Gudykunst (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 6–10.

7 Jiro Takai, »Current Trends on Intercultural Communication in Japan«, *The Annual Report of Educational Psychology in Japan* 42 (2003), 240–254.

8 For a further elaboration see Takai, »Current Trends...«; and Kim, *Non-Western Perspectives on Human Communication*.

but on those aspects which reflect the influence of the Japanese culture and social reality of the way speakers use the language.

Gudykunst and Nishida select a few phenomena of the Japanese communication style that may cause communication breakdowns or significantly impede the flow of interaction between English speakers and Japanese speakers.<sup>9</sup> Speakers from individualistic and low-context cultures (North America) with dominant analytical thinking tend to experience difficulties with the indirectness typical for collectivist high-context cultures (Japan), where the skill of reading the situational context and decoding what has not been explicitly verbalized is indispensable.

Further, though not systematically, Nishida and Gudykunst mention in-group and out-group distinction, determining the degree of politeness and communication behaviour (speech acts like requests, refusals, conflict management, etc.). Information transmission, persuasion strategies, topic management, turn-taking, back-channeling, the role of status in a conversation, and the use and meaning of silence in a conversation are also pointed out as characteristic aspects of the Japanese communication style.

Aoki and Okamoto make a distinction between information-oriented and social-oriented modes of communication.<sup>10</sup> Both of these modes exist in every language, but one usually prevails or prevails in certain situations. To become a competent speaker of a foreign language means to master both modes. In other words, one is able to translate information from their mother tongue adequately (in quantity), truthfully and relevantly with regard to the given topic. At the same time (and this is the case for Japanese, which the authors view as a prevalently socially-oriented language), one is able to express care about the other and interest in the relationship and express themselves in a polite and considerate way that does not hurt the other's feelings.

Donahue also mentions the social orientation of the Japanese and he stresses the influence of social status on the communication style.<sup>11</sup> The key aspects of the Japanese way of communication which contribute to its social orientation are interdependence (*amae* 甘え), politeness, gender factors (male and female speech), honorifics, relational identity (self-identity versus in-group belongingness) and *aizuchi* 相槌 ('back-channeling').

9 William B. Gudykunst and Tsukasa Nishida, *Bridging Japanese/North American Differences* (Thousand Oaks, CA [etc.]: Sage, 1994), 39–83.

10 Aoki and Okamoto, *Rules for Conversational Rituals in Japanese*, 3–10.

11 Ray T. Donahue, *Japanese Culture and Communication. Critical Cultural Analysis* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998), 119–154.

Akasu and Asao, on the basis of the work of the Japanese linguist Mizutani, define dimensions influencing the linguistic behaviour of the Japanese:<sup>12</sup>

- properties of a speaker—the influence of an identity on the speech—gender, age, social status, educational background, and occupation.
- properties of a dyad—the nature of the relationship between the partners in a communicative situation: belongingness (psychological distance, formality, and *uchi/soto* distinction), power (distance) or vertical relations (superior-inferior in a workplace but also between siblings) and horizontal relations (level of intimacy), and roles.
- message—what is being communicated—facts or emotions?
- ingress—the degree to which the speaker enters the personal territory of the listener or, in other words, the degree to which our speech act is a burden to the other person (impolite questions, requests) closely related to the degree of self-disclosure.
- Context-dependence as a linguistic dimension (based on *enryo* and *sasshi*) and interdependence as an interpersonal dimension (based on *amae*, *wa*, individualism and collectivism).

An expert on Japanese sociolinguistics, Leo Loveday uses the term ‘semiotic schism’ for »a dissension between interactants’ readings each other« occurring in many intercultural encounters.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Japanese-Western interactions, the semiotic schism arises mostly due to differences in the verbal system (expressions of agreement or disagreement, addressing, and politeness strategies), in the vocal system (the pitch, speech speed, voice quality, volume, laughter, and extralinguistic physicalness), and in kinesic signs (gestures, posture, mimics, and proxemics) and also rhetoric patterns (structuring of interaction—norms of speech and silence quantity, *aizuchi*, turn-taking and timing of turns, conversational rituals and formulæ, structuring of verbal content—vagueness, indirectness, incompleteness, hesitations, and topic selection).

Yashiro and his co-authors deal with basic differences in communication.<sup>14</sup> As the first one, they mention spiral communication or indirectness, »without verbal self-assertion and emphasis on their opinion, the speaker, explaining various circumstances, conveys their feelings and expects the partner to guess

12 Kaoru Akasu and Kojiro Asao, »Sociolinguistic Factors Influencing Communication in Japan and the United States«, in Gudykunst, *Communication in Japan and the United States*, 88–122.

13 Leo Loveday, *Explorations in Japanese Sociolinguistics* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 97.

14 Yashiro Kyooko 八代京子 & al., *Ibunka toreningu. Boodaresu shakai wo ikiru* 異文化トレーニング。ボーダレス社会を生きる [Intercultural Training. Living in a Borderless Society], rev. ed. (Tōkyō: Sanshusha, 2009), 83–90.

the conclusion without telling it.« In other words, in the Japanese style of communication both the speaker and the listener are simultaneously active participants in the communication process and they co-create it.

Hall's concept of high-context and low-context cultures is another specific aspect of the Japanese way of communication.<sup>15</sup> Yashiro et al. stress the degree of explicitness in Japanese, which is very low compared to Western languages. Implicit messages where little is said and much is understood from the context is a typical feature of Japanese. The last point making Japanese difficult to master is a respect towards interpersonal relationships that is reflected in the use of ritual phrases. The speaker needs to consider the situational context before choosing appropriate expressions (e.g. *arigatoo gozaimasu* ありがとうございます vs. *gokuroosama deshita* ご苦労様でした), and through this simple sentence the social obligation of paying respect to the other person's status and mutual relationship is fulfilled.

Sasaki calls the Japanese way of communication "relation-oriented" rather than "purpose-oriented", which is similar to the information-oriented *vs.* social-oriented modes defined by Aoki and Okamoto.<sup>16</sup> He pinpoints *ma* 間 as an important concept making the Japanese communication style different from the Western way of communication. Sasaki says: »Without *ma*, the communication process would lack effectiveness and harmony.«<sup>17</sup> He relates *ma* closely to *enryo* 遠慮 and *sasshi* 察し, and on the basis of *ma*, he characterizes the Japanese way of communication as involving space, taking time in order to involve all participants, aiming at harmony, allowing ambiguity, incorporating nonverbal behaviour, and employing indirect verbal expressions.

To summarize what has been reviewed here: the social dimension of Japanese communication is emphasized throughout, whereby the social and situational contexts significantly affect the flow and final effect of an interaction. The speaker, having their goal in mind, communicates in a way that takes the expectations of the partner into consideration. In order to do so, the range of communication strategies (hesitance, incomplete statements, indirectness, etc.) offers a considerably large space for manoeuvring.

We believe it is necessary to draw students' attention to them throughout Japanese language classes in order to make them aware of their meaning and function in Japanese communication. By helping students become more sensi-

15 Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 105–117.

16 Teruyoshi Sasaki, *A Study of the Japanese Communication Style. Some Cross-Cultural Insights into ma* (1987) <ci.nii.ac.jp/naid110007324488/en> (last retrieval June 15, 2011).

17 Sasaki, *A Study of the Japanese Communication Style*, 195.

tive and mindful, we provide them tools to decode communicated messages more accurately and communicate more effectively. A lack of this knowledge produces and reinforces negative stereotypes and other consequences that are stumbling blocks on the way to mutually satisfactory communication, and they are hard to overcome.

Students are also advised to understand the psychological, social and cultural background of these differences in communication. These are closely related to determining factors such as age, status, gender, the mutual relationship, the character of the message and roles in communication. These factors point at what must be considered when a person enters into interaction with a Japanese person. For speakers of Japanese, this is an internalized process they are usually not aware of, but the foreigner needs to consciously think about the circumstances to avoid misunderstandings or errors.

#### *Conclusions and Points for Further Research*

It should be emphasized that it is usually the formal mode of communication which has been analyzed in the selected works. On an intimate level of communication, fewer limitations and rules and more spontaneous behaviour enable communicators to use a wider range of means of how to reach understanding so the cultural borders become less visible. However, many negative experiences have been reported by students after interactions on formal occasions. Often they feel manipulated by the use of the language. They complain that something was said (the literal translation of the words), but that something different was meant (the hidden message). It is their own acquired, culturally determined communicative behaviour that prevents them from getting the cue. We believe that by understanding specific aspects of Japanese communication, we are also able to see what makes the Slovak communication style distinct. Or better to say, only by being aware of our communicative behaviour may we become sensitive to another one.

As mentioned earlier, most works examined Japanese communication with reference to English (particularly its North American variants). Our cultural background differs both from North Americans and Japanese, so we need to verify whether the characteristics of the Japanese communication style (with an emphasis on mutual differences) are valid also for speakers of Slovak. With this review we have prepared the groundwork for a Slovak–Japanese comparison upon which we aim to build further empirical research on specific aspects of the Japanese communication style.



For further research, we suggest distinguishing decoding and encoding processes in examining the Japanese way of communication. There are aspects in the Japanese communication style that may be difficult to reproduce correctly (*keigo*, *aizuchi*, and various nonverbal signals), and there are others which are hard to 'read' (unfinished sentences, indirect messages) or maybe hard both to produce and read. Therefore, in the following steps of research we shall concentrate on identifying which problems Slovak students face specifically in encoding and decoding messages into and from Japanese.

*Comenius University in Bratislava, Department of East Asian Studies*