

Covert Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom: Confronting Contrast in Target and Base Mindsets

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A number of years ago, as I was lecturing on Japanese structure to a group of American college students, I had occasion to analyze a complex Japanese verb form. Following my usual procedure, I wrote the form on the board and proceeded to divide it into its component, meaningful parts, explaining—as I drew lines to mark the morph boundaries – what each contributed to the overall meaning. On this particular day, our class had a visitor from Japan who was observing our Japanese program. I still remember the comment he made when we met following the session. He pointed to the analyzed form on the board and said, with a smile, “As you drew those lines, I felt as if I were being violated!”

In recent years I have had occasion to think back to this story frequently. As serious, cutting edge research on Japanese language pedagogy has gradually placed an ever stronger emphasis on the importance of culture in foreign language learning, we have now reached the point where we speak of language *in* culture rather than language *and* culture, and we define foreign language learning as learning to perform a foreign culture. However, ‘culture’ in this context does not refer to the consciously learned, aesthetic culture of art, music, literature, and the like, or to consciously learned, informational culture, which deals with facts about the culture, but rather to behavioral culture, which the native speaker acquires outside of consciousness, as one acquires a native language in the process of being socialized within a society. Unless we understand the cultural framework within which the Japanese interact, we cannot hope to speak or write appropriately, or listen or read with anything approaching full understanding.

Understandably, this cultural emphasis is concentrated specifically on the target ‘language in culture’ (hereafter ‘LinC’)—i.e., the foreign language being studied, in the framework of the acquired culture. But every foreign language class brings together two languages and two cultures¹—i.e., the base LinC (= the native LinC of the learners) as well as the target LinC. While some level of the same target LinC is the goal of all instruction in that LinC everywhere, the base LinC exerts a tremendous influence on how that target is achieved. In an American classroom, particularly at the more elementary levels, the English language as

¹ Many groups of learners include representatives of more than one LinC. However, since this study is dealing with learners studying in the U.S., we can presume that most non-American learners in such groups have some experience with American LinC and can function with it as the base, even if it is not ideal for them.

the base language is constantly functioning as a sieve through which the base native strains the foreign language: “No plurals in Japanese? How do they manage?” “Many different equivalents for ‘I’? Weird!” On the cultural level, the reactions are similar. One’s native LinC is the norm, and for the beginning learner, all deviations from it seem surprising. But even when learners have progressed to the point where they expect and accept differences, their base will continue to exert a strong influence, and the more the instructor understands and acknowledges that base, the more effectively instruction will proceed.

However, such challenges to learning are all related to the target LinC, the deliverable of the foreign language class. The topic I am interested in examining is the culture of the classroom itself—the culture of the delivery system used in bringing the target to the base – using Japanese as the sample LinC. My specific concern is the learning situation that involves native American, adult learners, who represent the base, taught by a native Japanese instructor who has undergone no training in teaching Japanese to Americans or whose training in pedagogy has been based on principles of traditional, native Japanese language pedagogy. In other words, both the deliverable and the delivery system in such situations relate to the target. Unless native Japanese instructors have studied and adopted the widely accepted principles of American pedagogy, which identify the learners and how they learn as the focus of instruction, it can be assumed that their native mindset will prevail as the basis for their instruction, resulting in a methodology that is markedly different.

For almost twenty years, I have been involved in a program that trains Japanese, newly arrived from Japan, to teach Japanese in American colleges and universities. Originally an integral part of the program *Exchange: Japan*, it prepared the participants to discharge their teaching responsibilities in exchange for which they received tuition, room and board, and a small stipend as they pursued a master’s degree in a field of their own choosing. The program’s originator and director arranged all the college/university placements; and it was he who invited me to prepare a curriculum for the teacher training program and assume the role of academic director. After sixteen years of successful operation, during which a surprising number of participants later changed their field of specialization to Japanese language pedagogy and pursued advanced degrees, *Exchange: Japan* came to an end and was reorganized under a new administration. Now called the Alliance for Language and Educational Exchange (ALLEX), it continues the work of *Exchange: Japan*, including the teacher training program, its basic curriculum, and its faculty.

It might seem unusual to bring native Japanese to the United States to learn how to teach their native language, but the program director realized that traditional Japanese pedagogical training would not prepare them adequately to move into American academic institutions to teach Japanese, in most cases as the only Japanese instructor, without mentors or advisors, and at the same time to fulfill requirements for a graduate degree program. Clearly the participants would need a program that emphasized orientation to American culture, covering all the areas that would touch on their lives. Since the training program aimed at preparing Japanese specifically to teach their language to Americans, it would be important to learn American instructional style, so different from that of Japan in its emphasis on how students learn as the guide to how teachers should teach.

The nine-week, full-time-intensive curriculum originally developed was an expansion and enrichment of the one I had originally devised for a four-week, teacher training workshop offered at Cornell University for a number of years. A key element of the new program was the inclusion of a beginners’ class in Japanese language, which provided a

model for observation when taught by master instructors and served as an experimental lab when taught by the trainees. The textbook² used in these classes was the one the trainees were expected to use in their own programs later. It had been written by a team consisting of a native Japanese linguist, who, as a specialist in student-focused, Japanese language pedagogy, wrote all the Japanese material, and a native American linguist, who handled the linguistic and cultural analysis, presented in English from the point of view of the American learner.

The teacher trainees over the years all exhibited similar reactions to the textbook and to the program in general. During the first 2-3 weeks, they would demonstrate confusion, shock, and, in some cases, even incipient hostility to some features of the methodology. At the same time, they would register amazement at the rapid progress being made by the American learners whose classes they were observing, analyzing, and beginning to teach. This period would be followed by a gradual understanding of this approach that had so surprised them earlier, with a final realization of its overall effectiveness in teaching Japanese to Americans. As they gave their teaching demonstrations to the class of learners, their gradual conversion would become apparent.

Obviously a conversion resulting from only nine weeks of instruction needed further nurturing, in the form of guidance and reinforcement. After moving on to the colleges where they would be teaching Japanese for two years, the trainees were encouraged to transmit, by e-mail to the training program faculty, any questions or problems that arose. Once each year the entire class would re-convene for a two-day, intensive, refresher seminar, during which questions and problems of general interest—as well as success stories—were shared and discussed. In particular, guidance was offered on how to incorporate cultural sensitivity and newly learned teaching techniques into programs based on more traditional textbooks. Each year, at the end of their teaching assignment, those trainees who had decided to change careers and remain in the field would either take positions immediately as Japanese lecturers in American colleges or would enter graduate programs in Japanese pedagogy for further study. Of course there were those who, either by choice or by the requirements of their position, gradually reverted to a more traditional way of teaching Japanese but it is safe to say that even they were permanently affected by their contact with this new way of viewing language pedagogy.

At the conclusion of the first training program offered under the new ALLEX administration in 2005, I asked the trainees to submit their personal reactions to the student-focused textbook they had been using. Any temptation to think that it hadn't mattered very much was quickly dispelled as I read the replies. One of the most analytical claimed that everything in the book was so completely new to him that it seemed like a textbook based on a language other than Japanese. He described the structural analysis and notes as “so elaborate and logical” as to prevent him from having either doubts or questions. He also pointed out the marked contrast with native Japanese grammar, resulting in his viewing his native language in a totally new way. In his words, the textbook had become not only a teaching tool but also a volume to study.

The comments of the participants were striking in the clear indication of their awareness that there was indeed a fundamental difference in an approach to foreign language teaching that focused on how the learner learned. Many mentioned the detailed, carefully ordered analysis of the structure of Japanese that included even the description and marking

² Jorden with Noda (1987), *Japanese: The Spoken Language, Part 1*.

of accent and intonation. It was pointed out that there was pedagogical value in the careful control over the introduction of new patterns without any loss of authenticity. Several mentioned opposition to the use of romanization, which lessened when they realized both the way in which it was being used (i.e., not as an orthography but as a pedagogical representation that served to remind the learners of what they had heard during class hours) and also its usefulness in the analysis of inflected forms. There were repeated references to the rapid progress made by the learners, including their use of complex structures much earlier in their training than the trainees would have expected. But most significant to me were the comments that showed an awareness of a cultural connection – a realization that culture was the driving force in many of the differences in approach. For many of the trainees it was a shock to realize that Japanese was systematic and could be explained. The Japanese “*feel* what is right and wrong,” was the explanation of one trainee, who had never before thought there might be a different way to view a language. For another trainee, it came down to “the logical and systematic approach to language rooted in the Western tradition.”

When we examine elementary Japanese language textbooks, prepared by native Japanese using a traditional, native Japanese approach and used in many American colleges, we find clear evidence for the original expectations of the trainees. The native avoidance of romanization in the language classroom leads to the introduction, from the very beginning, of the complex native orthography, which uses totally unfamiliar symbols. This precludes any marking of accent or intonation; in fact there is little indication of truly serious concern for developing accurate pronunciation. The exclusive use of the native orthography also complicates the analysis of inflected forms: with ‘American ears,’ the American hears the sequence /*n-o-m-u*/ as consisting of four sounds and can analyze sound by sound, but ‘Japanese ears’ hear *no-mu* and cannot separate out the final *-u*, which is actually the signal of the imperfective. The implications of this complicate the entire analysis of inflected forms.³ And the dominance of vocabulary and topics of conversation over structure becomes clear as new patterns are introduced according to their occurrence in script-driven dialogues, thus accounting for the trainees’ amazement at the newly encountered emphasis on system and on structurally based ordering, which determines the choice of topics of conversation.

On a conscious level, native Japanese who teach their language to foreigners following traditional methods can be expected to rely heavily on their own language learning experience for guidance. This fact has been noted over the years. All Japanese consciously begin the arduous task of learning how to read and write as soon as they enter school. It might seem reasonable then to introduce the writing system immediately in courses for foreigners, particularly since mastery of the native orthography requires an inordinate amount of time and effort. The difference that is overlooked is the fact that the Japanese child who is beginning school is already fluent in the spoken language. Thanks to recent research, we now know the importance of spoken language competence to reading and writing and are even more aware of the vast difference between the beginning foreigner and the Japanese child entering school.

Native Japanese are also apt to rely on their own foreign language learning experience, which in most cases was the study of English, with strong emphasis on a grammar-translation approach and considerably less concern for authentic spoken English. In fact, this approach was further impetus for emphasizing written language over spoken. This

³In some cases, a traditional Japanese pedagogue who otherwise uses native orthography exclusively may revert to romanization for this kind of analysis.

explains the limited concern for accurate pronunciation noted above and the comment of at least one trainee who was surprised and pleased to find truly authentic spoken language included in the learner-focused textbook.

However, what has been surprisingly ignored in studies of language pedagogy is the influence over classroom instruction exerted by the instructor's unconsciously acquired, behavioral culture. I call this type of classroom culture 'covert,' because with all attention focused on the learning of the target LinC; it remains undercover, totally outside of consideration and outside of consciousness. When the instructor is a native Japanese whose pedagogy follows the traditional target model, we have an interesting contrast in mindsets between the native Japanese instructor and native American learners. What can we expect? Throughout a class session, whether modeling the target language, conversing, explaining, analyzing, correcting, praising, or criticizing, an instructor is communicating with the learners and communication is culture-based. According to Hall (1983), communication is 10% verbal and 90% behavioral, the latter being the core culture that drives members of a society. We can certainly assume that neither instructors nor learners leave their unconsciously acquired culture at the door when they enter the classroom. Thus the instruction, delivered in accordance with a Japanese mindset, is interpreted by the American learner according to a very different set of American cultural assumptions.

Most basic to this discussion of differences between Japanese and Americans is the question of their attitudes toward language in general. For Westerners, language is clearly the most precise means of communicating available to mankind and precision in language use is a positive goal of verbal behavior. Rambling, ambiguous speech and writing are avoided by the careful American speaker/writer, who hunts for just the right word and exactly the clearest way to present an argument. But language for the Japanese is very different indeed. It is assumed that language is ambiguous; in fact vagueness and ambiguity are in no sense negative qualities and polite language is regularly more indirect. Actually, for the Japanese, perfect communication between individuals transcends language, occurring through *isin-densin*, unspoken, mutual understanding transmitted by way of the belly, the seat of the emotions for the Japanese. During a research project on Japanese attitudes toward language that I conducted with Professor Mari Noda in Tokyo, we collected reactions to recordings of Americans speaking Japanese. When the competence of one speaker received particularly high praise, the interviewee was asked if he thought this American was capable of any further improvement. He replied, "Oh, no! The next step would be *isin-densin*, and only the Japanese can communicate that way."

In his discussion of Japanese culture, Hall (1983:95) points out that "the pull of Japanese culture as a whole is to the heart and not to the mind, whereas in the West it is the opposite." Of course when the subject is mathematics or any of the physical sciences, the Japanese mind is in control and precision becomes crucial, but language for them is a different domain. The Japanese visitor who observed my dissection of an inflected form as personal violation was watching the methodology of science imposed on a non-scientific entity that was very close to his heart. I was performing linear analysis on an item that should have been viewed as a single unit. Even entire sentences should not be dissected but should be understood holistically.

We can hardly be surprised at the reactions of the trainees to a curriculum for Japanese that stressed the language as a system that could and should be subjected to rigorous analysis if it is to be understood by American students. With 'simple before complex' and

'frequently used before rarely used,' as basic principles, an order for the introduction of grammatical patterns is determined that perfectly meshes with an American learner's mindset. This contrasts strongly with the random ordering, determined by occurrence in script-driven texts, expected by the trainees.

Imagine, too, the reaction of the trainees to the use of romanization as a teaching tool. The emotional connection the Japanese have with their writing system is indeed 'heart': their language is the orthography and the orthography is the language. Although Japanese regularly use romanization to input their language into computers, this is a purely mechanical use that transforms the material into 'real' Japanese, i.e., Japanese in its native orthography. A Japanese linguist who has long lived and taught in the United States once remarked, "I hate romanization, but I am Japanese and my students are not. For them it is useful." In the course of their program, the trainees, too, gradually began to understand its value as a learning tool for the learners, even if it remained emotionally unappealing to them.

In his division of cultures into high-context and low-context, Hall (1983) classifies Japanese as a clear example of the former and American as an example of the latter. The result is very different communication styles. The meaning of every occurrence of language depends on the context in which it occurs. Thus we say that a word means what it means in the sentence, the sentence means what it means in the discourse, and the discourse means what it means in the culture. For the high-context Japanese, the cultural context plays so important a part that much is assumed to be understood and goes unstated. For the low-context American, who prefers to have all the conditions of the discourse spelled out in detail, the Japanese seem vague and imprecise. Frequent breakdowns in communication and misunderstandings are the result.

This has widespread influence on language pedagogy. Japanese, classified as a "truly foreign language native to a truly foreign culture" in American language circles, is extremely different from any Indo-European language and culture. This obviously means that low-context American learners require extensive, detailed explanations if they are to understand the intricacies of this LinC that is so foreign to them. In the explanatory material of a textbook, linguistic terms must be precisely defined and English translations and equivalents must be accurate and consistent. However, the high-context, traditional Japanese instructor is unconsciously making different assumptions. Grammatical explanations can be very brief and are best linked to English patterns, in spite of significant differences in meaning and use. Lengthy lists of vocabulary in isolation need no further explanation than English glosses to become part of a learner's target language repertoire. Familiar English grammatical terminology can be used without explanation or definition, on the mistaken assumption that everyone knows what these terms signify in Japanese on the basis of their use in English. Actually, in the America of today, many young learners have little knowledge as to what words like 'adverb,' 'subject,' and 'object' mean even in English, further adding to the confusion. Most surprising is the omission of any reference to what is probably the most distinctive feature of Japanese, namely the fact that there are no stylistically neutral utterances in the language. Also missing are discussions of hierarchy or of in-group/out-group identification, so basic to the culture and so crucial to the determination of stylistically appropriate language use.

All communication reflects an unconscious assessment of information shared by the participants, which in turn informs the speaker/writer as to what needs to be expressed and what can be assumed to be understood. Too much information is insulting but too little

interferes with comprehension. In a cross-cultural setting, these assessments become significantly more difficult since so many are culture-based. In a foreign language teaching setting, a traditionally oriented target native presents analyses and explanations of the target language in a style and to a degree assumed to be appropriate. However, the base native is operating under a different cultural system, and when that target-based system is 'truly foreign,' confusion and misunderstanding may result. Consider the American learners who are introduced very early in their course to *ikimasita* simply as the equivalent of '[he] went.' Their American culture-based assumption is that this word can of course be used in speaking to anybody about anybody. The Japanese instructor knows that this is only one of many ways to say '[he] went,' all of which reflect the relationship between the discourse participants and involve hierarchical and in-group/out-group distinctions. Since it would be pedagogically unthinkable to teach all these equivalents immediately to a beginning learner, the decision is made, without any explanation, to use the alternate considered most generally appropriate for foreign adults with limited Japanese competence. This is a clear example of miscommunication. Of course the Japanese instructor has made the appropriate selection and of course beginners should not be taught the many different ways of expressing 'went' at the beginning of their course. However, a word to them about the overall system and where *ikimasita* fits in that system would prevent consternation and re-learning later, when they learn the reality and realize their frequent errors that could have been avoided.

Another area of frequent miscommunication relates to authenticity, which, for American learners, is a positive concept. They assume they should encounter the target language just as it actually occurs in a given context. They also assume that the Japanese material in any textbook written by native Japanese is authentic—that is, a sample of accurate Japanese language. However, the Japanese make different assumptions. Bearing in mind their conviction that their language is difficult for Americans to learn and their desire to be considerate to these foreigners who, after all, are making the effort to try to master it, they often alter the language in an attempt to make it easier. There are frequent examples of sequences that are indeed Japanese, but not the Japanese that would occur in the given context. In many cases the changes make the Japanese closer to English. An example is the overt expression of the subject of a sentence in contexts where it would regularly occur in English, but definitely not in Japanese. Another example is the practice of choosing lesson topics on the basis of subject matter, regardless of the structural implications. Thus, we often find introductions chosen as the most appropriate topic for a first lesson. As a result, the authors are required either to write authentic material that includes many structural patterns too difficult for Lesson 1, or to write stiff, overly simplified, unnatural Japanese. They usually choose the latter. Authenticity is also abandoned in many suggestions for supplementary practice in which students are encouraged to produce conversations or written material far beyond their capability. As the pedagogical linguist Hector Hammerly once pointed out, "Practice does not make perfect; it makes permanent." The more learners practice 'funny' Japanese, the longer it will persist.

Of course it may be that many features of the language are considered so unique to Japanese that, as in the case of *isin-densin*, American learners are assumed to be unable to handle them. Rather than introducing concepts that are totally foreign, it is perhaps thought to be more considerate to the learner simply to use just one style throughout an elementary course without any explanation, even in contexts where it lacks authenticity. A conviction, held by many Japanese, is that the Japanese language in *every* respect is uniquely difficult and

all but impossible for American learners to truly master. This conviction accounts for the surprise expressed so often by the trainees, that the learners they were observing progressed so rapidly and actually were beginning to use complex grammatical patterns with understanding and growing assurance.

Learners learn what they are taught and as they are taught, but with an influential underpinning of their own, native LinC. Most American learners conform uncritically to the approach used by their Japanese instructors, assuming that this is *the* way this truly foreign language is learned. In general it is only those American learners with more background in language learning or linguistics who may challenge their instructors with more probing questions. However this unquestioned acceptance ends when learners transfer to another program and are exposed to a different methodology. At this point, the American learner becomes aware of the importance of pedagogy and compares the outcomes of each approach. Listening to the comments of such learners can be a learning experience for the instructors. .

As the importance of acquired, behavioral culture in foreign language learning becomes increasingly evident, there is need to expand related research beyond consideration of the target LinC itself and examine the culture of the classroom. Instructors are no less representatives of their culture when they are instructing. Research into traditional Japanese-style courses and learner-focused courses that compares every phase of instruction, from curriculum design, goals, participating instructors, and classroom activities to student reactions and outcomes, would be extremely informative. In the past fifty years, we have learned a great deal about the importance of language in culture, as opposed to language alone, in Japanese language pedagogy. It is now time to begin the serious study of 'pedagogy in culture.'

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