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## Yappari, As I Thought: Listener Talk in Japanese Communication

Haru Yamada

*L'Echo*, yamadaharu@gmail.com

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## ***Yappari*, As I Thought: Listener Talk in Japanese Communication**

### INTRODUCTION

Americans eat sushi, watch anime, and play Nintendo games. Canon, Yamaha, Sony and other brands pass through American hands, making Japan feel more like an old friend than a fourth trade partner to the United States. There is no question that Americans today know Japanese products. But what about the people who design and sell them? What do the consumers of Nikon, Toto or Matsuda know about the Japanese, notably about the way they talk and listen?

As visitors to a foreign country, it is natural to interpret communication as we would at home. For example, we might interpret the public sign that requests cell phones to be put on *Manner Mode* in the Japanese subway accompanied by the small text in English, *Kindly refrain from making calls*, as the Japanese way of saying, *Don't talk on the phone*. After we understand the message content, we can afford to take a step back and ask, Why is it necessary for the Japanese to use such indirect, roundabout or obfuscated language to say the same thing? When we do not have the cultural context, we have no choice but to guess the answer. A popular conclusion is that the Japanese use such language because they are polite.

In this paper, I propose the Japanese abide by their own cultural expectations and communication goals as other groups do but that this can be misinterpreted when there are underlying differences. Revisiting preferences for individual or group interaction as well as opposing orientations towards talk and silence, I explore how entrenched cultural beliefs persist and manifest in new forms in Japanese communication today. Analyzing conversational examples in American and Japanese business meetings, I illustrate three examples of Listener Talk, a listener-driven style of communication introduced in my book, *Different Games* (1997). Awareness of Listener Talk will bring to the fore the little studied role of the listener in communication and shed light on some of the challenges in communicating not only with the Japanese but also with other users of Listener Talk.

### CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

There are many prisms through which we can examine cultures. Here, I compare American and Japanese cultures along the individual-group continuum, not just because heavyweight anthropologists such as Wagatsuma (1985), Lebra (1986) and Nakane (1970) have chosen this dimension as a critical differentiator, but also because of the particular and consequential way in which each culture's preference intersects with the respective communication preferences of talk and silence (Yamada, 1997, 2003). Although the American idealization of the individual and the Japanese focus on the group is not categorical but one of degree, a further number of scholars, such as Hall and Hall (1987), Kondo (1990), and Namiki and Sethi (1988) have noted the same distinction in American and Japanese business organization.

A wealth of research has explored the way in which a model American professional presents him/herself as a self-actualized individual who possesses an acquired set of skills, while the Japanese counterpart presents him/herself as an ambassador who can stand in the place of the organization as if it were family, operating not as one but as a *bun* or part of the company. Conversely, the stigmatized version of an American is someone who seeks constant direction and depends on others; s/he is not a go-getter. Frequently judged as lazy, such an American is as badly viewed as a Japanese who takes action without consulting the group. Such a Japanese is deemed childish at best, and *katte* or selfish at worst.

The different emphases Americans and Japanese place on the individual and the group respectively become apparent in their self-presentations, particularly in introductions. Almost everyone is familiar with the caricatured Japanese business-card exchange ritual where gestures such as bowing and receiving the card with two hands seem so stylized and different that they send alarm bells as must-knows for all going to Japan. Indeed, information on the ritual has become commonplace enough today that it is entered in the back pages of many a tourist guide. However, if business-card etiquette to forego faux pas in the short-term is important, understanding the symbolic significance of an exchange is equally so in the long-term.

No doubt both American and Japanese exchange business cards to introduce themselves as representatives of a company or brand. The card itself usually reflects this, with the business logo and name appearing most visibly in the most colorful, boldest and largest print and the name of the individual introducing him/herself positioned in the middle or to the center right in black. For both groups then, the business card, like its former trade card, presents the individual and his/her business. The card symbolically answers the question: “What’s your job?” or “What do you do (for a living)?”

Answered in an actual verbal introduction, an American answers: “George Hunt, management consultant at Bain,” fronting his name, followed by an occupation, and adding the name of the company last. By contrast, a Japanese more typically states his/her employment in the company only: “*Togin no Yamada desu* (Yamada of the Bank of Tokyo).”

The introductions point to two communicative markers for the respective American and Japanese preferences for the individual and the group. The first has to do with how possessives are structured in English and Japanese languages, and provide linguistic support for the fronting of the individual before the company in American English, but after the company in the Japanese language. In this respect, language illustrates cultural expectations. The second marker is the American use of and the Japanese omission of his/her occupation, showing the reality that for a Japanese, what is important is the very fact of his/her representation of the company, and not the individual skills s/he possesses.

Is Japanese social behavior, and in particular, its collective orientation, changing? Although the caricatured image of camera-toting Japanese tourists moving around in large *dantai* groups has somewhat faded, the following example of the media representation and the subsequent public reaction to the January 2015 Japanese hostage crisis helps illustrate just how important group cohesion is in Japan today. As a reaction to \$200 million Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had pledged in support to countries affected by the campaign against ISIS, the extremist group retaliated, threatening to kill two Japanese hostages unless the Japanese government paid a \$200 million ransom.

The contrast between American and Japanese media interpretations was striking. American media cast the hostages as two different individuals, the first hostage, Yukawa Haruna, as arguably guilty, and the second, Goto Kenji, as a hero. Yukawa was easy to set up as the fall guy. A psychologically fragile and disenfranchised individual with right-wing tendencies, the English-speaking media told its viewers the back story of a man who had lost his wife to cancer, failed at business, and then became involved in helping foreign businesses militarily defend themselves. While Yukawa had his hands muddied in arms and went into the danger zone despite warning to stay away, Goto was a journalist who returned to Syria for a second time to rescue him. Hero more than martyr, in the eyes of the English-broadcasting media, Goto was the good guy whose life was worth saving—even at the cost of Yukawa’s.

Japanese news media, however, told a completely different story. Following the teary broadcast of Goto’s mother, Ishido Junko, Japanese media televised the clip in which Ishido is seen not only begging ISIS for her son’s life, but also asking for the Japanese public’s forgiveness on behalf of her son for having represented Japan as potentially anti-Islam, and

thereby endangering citizen lives. In the Japanese broadcast, there is hardly a difference between the two hostages. Although Yukawa is cast as a lunatic, Goto is broadcast as the journalist who brought global media attention to the issue, and therefore perhaps guilty of committing an even more unforgivable social evil. The line here falls between the Japanese people and the two who created the crisis. The hostages, Yukawa and Goto, stepped outside the group, and divided it.

Feeding the growing resentment towards both hostages, Japanese media quoted Goto's mother Ishido as condemning her son for leaving his own infant son to go to Syria to save Yukawa. Goto's fate was sealed. Even after both men were beheaded, Japanese social media responded with unanimous support, not for the hostages as individuals, but for the Japanese public: *Goto's and Yukawa's actions were selfish. Each put his interest above the good of the group. Now every Japanese traveller has to worry. Two men endangered us all.*

In sum, American media coverage of the ISIS Japanese hostage crisis was one where an individual focus differentiated Yukawa from Goto, making one the fall guy, and one the hero, while the Japanese media coverage condemned both Yukawa and Goto for putting the terrorist spotlight on the public group. In an individual-focused society, a single person's intentions or actions are what count, but in a collective-focused society, defending the group is more important. From this example and many more, it seems collective orientation is still central to understanding contemporary Japanese society.

The prevalence of the collective voice in Japan today has deep roots in its moral history. Shinto, Zen Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism have long been synthesized to support strong collective socialization in mandatory moral education in schools. Today, moral education is taught once a week in school, taking 35 hours of a student's class time annually. In 2013, copies of the textbook, *Kokoro no Noto (Notes of the Heart)* were distributed in schools (Maruyama, 2013). The 24 keys that will "open doors to the world" are divided into four parts: 1) Oneself (5 keys), 2) Orientation to nature and the spiritual (3 keys), 3) Relations to others (6 keys), and 4) Relations to the group and to the society (10 keys) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology, 2011).

Note that there are twice as many keys that promote group relations, with headings such as "A collective society feels good to live in," and "Make your own strength the society's strength." More interesting still is that even in the keys that appear to be lessons in actualizing the individual, the interpretation reorients the student towards the group. For example, the heading, "Take responsibility for your own action," appears with the subheading, "Your actions might have bearings on others," recalling the abolished practice of *rentai sekinin* (group responsibility) where all students were punished for the failing of one. No doubt Japanese society is evolving as much as any other. However, while the group ethic may change in its manifestation, group morality serves to unify the country.

#### *AMAE*: SWEETENED GROUP RELATIONS

If group association provides an individual with a supporting brand, it also provides him/her access to a network. In Japanese terms that network is founded on the connections formed in *amae* relationships. The closest English term to *amae* (pronounced *a-ma-e*) is love. Literally meaning sweetness, *amae* has been translated from the psychologist Doi Takeo's (1971) definition as "the reciprocal feeling of nurturing concern for and dependence on another." The one who indulges him/herself in the *amae* (*amaeru* is the gerund for the indulged) is obliged by the indulger (*amayakasu* is the verb gerund for the indulger). However, neither *love* nor *indulgence* is synonymous with *amae* because *amae* occurs in professional relationships, such as between boss and subordinate as well as in personal relationships such as between parent and child. Loyalty may be a better term for *amae* in the business context

except that *amae* symbolizes mutual co-dependency and contains within it a strong element of affective attachment. Perhaps Queen Mary University of London researcher Tiffany Watt Smith (2015) captures the feeling best when she refers to *amae* as the combination of vulnerability and belonging.

In modern-day practice, *amae* often goes a considerable distance beyond the acceptable boundary of company loyalty for many Americans, delving into the personal and emotional lives of organizational members. A common example of *amae* is an employee who asks the company owner to play go-between in a marriage and preside over the employee's wedding much like the father-of-the-bride does in an American one. Another example of *amae* obligation and co-dependence is a manager who counts on a junior employee to take him home after becoming inebriated at a company event. Overuse of *amae* can be stifling for a Japanese employee, too. As *amae* yields power, it can also be abused.

The influence of Japanese group identity shows up everywhere in today's professional life, sometimes to the chagrin of employees. A bicultural Japanese woman in the legal sector found company obligations in the form of *girichoko* (literally, obligation chocolates) difficult to accept. *Girichoko* is a lost-in-translation Japanese manifestation of the western Valentine's day when female employees give chocolates to male superiors and counterparts with whom they have no romantic affection. This obligation is then returned from male to female workers on White Day, March 14. *Girichoko* is a public display behavior that contrasts with the giving of *honmeichoko* (real chocolates) to the person for whom one has true romantic interests.

As Hino (2014) describes in his article, *Shain wa kazoku desu (Employees are Family)*, the relationships in Japanese companies mirror familial ones. Indeed, the parent-child paradigm reflected in traditional Japanese business still persists in Japanese corporate thinking and vocabulary. Following the Second World War, the conglomerate family-controlled company structures called *zaibatsu* were partially dissolved but regrouped again as associated *keiretsu* structures that supported protectionist cross-shareholding. It is widely viewed that the move from *zaibatsu* to *keiretsu* was one that force-changed vertical relationships to horizontal ones; however, the old *oyagaisha-kogaisha* relationships that literally translates as parent-company-child-company relationships still persist even if it looks more like its western counterparts' main office *honsha* and subsidiaries *kogaisha* (literally, child company). Revealing is the actual word, *keiretsu*. Typically translated as "a system of enterprises," the *kanji* for *keiretsu*, 系列 contains the word, 列 *retsu* or *column*, and not *gyo* for *row*, thus exposing the old parent-child arrangement of companies.

## INSIDE AND OUTSIDE FACES

If a company brings to its members the advantage of inclusion, it also serves to exclude outsiders. Nowhere is this truer than in Japan, where, *uchi-soto-kankei*, or insider-outsider relationship is formalized by several symbolic names for inside and outside faces. Joining a group means you become the face of the group, be it family, company, or school: *kaisha/gakkoo no kao ni naru* (become the face of the company/school).

If *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside) define behavior from a group-relations point of view, *ura* (back) and *omote* (front) do so from an individual's point of view, as do *honno* (true feelings) and *tatemaie* (public display) for feelings. Here again the insider faces of *uchi*, *ura*, *honno* (inside, back, true feelings) occur in both personal and professional worlds as do the opposing outsider faces of *soto*, *omote*, *tatemaie* (outside, front, public display). By contrast, because *amae* occurs in inner *uchi* circles and less so in *soto* outsider relations it is likely first-timers will only see public display faces, and possibly for a long time. Japanese employees are often told in training that this distinction does not exist in what the Japanese

call the *Obei* countries which typically include North America and Europe and sometimes Australia and New Zealand.

If *girichoko* is a misinterpretation of Valentine's day, it conforms to the formalized rituals of Japanese gift-giving. While it makes sense to the Japanese, it can be confusing for Americans because the lines of *uchi-soto* social interaction are drawn so differently. Highly formalized aspects of the Japanese *tatemae* public face exhibited in rituals like gift-giving are often misunderstood. Moreover, *soto* relationships are not synonymous with Western professional relationships, and it is easy to generalize from the initial formal *soto* meetings that future meetings will also be as scripted and stilted. Equally, when the break does come and outsiders become insiders, the meeting may proceed in the unfamiliar go-with-the-flow style Blaker, Giarra and Vogel (2002) describe as frustrating. In-group Japanese business negotiation can be as challenging as display-only out-group negotiations.

In short, the Japanese interactional expectation is one that is typically defined by group loyalty, held together in *amae* community, and communicated divergently depending on whether interlocutors are seen as in- or out-group.

#### COMMUNICATIVE CONTEXT: TALK, SILENCE, THE SAID AND THE UNSAID

If insider-outsider group relations and *amae* interdependence provide the pillars for Japanese interaction, communicative context is the glue. Context is a communication metric evoked by the late anthropologist, Edward T. Hall (1977) and gauges a group's inclination to rely on shared knowledge to communicate. In general, the more shared context there is the less need there is for overt content production like talk. Hall's framework describes how high-context communicators like Americans typically use more explicit and direct content than do low-context communicators like the Japanese who tend to bank on shared assumptions.

Inspiring a generation of televised talk shows and Ted Talk speakers, the glamorized use of talk is not just a medium to resolve or work things out, but a courageous act of self-presentation. In her book, *Quiet*, Susan Cain (2012) supports "introverts in a world that can't stop talking," and represents a voice for the quiet in a world where the charismatic leader is seen as someone who is, quite literally, outspoken.

For speak up or speak out, if the opportunity to speak presents itself and a speaker continues to choose to be a listener, the evaluation of that choice is often negative. In American classrooms, a silent student is not paying attention, not trying hard enough, and defiant. In business meetings, a silent professional is underperforming, lacks drive and leadership, or could even be hiding something. At best, a silent person is judged as passive; at worst, s/he is seen as suspicious.

The hit song, *Silence is Golden* may challenge the idea that English-speakers tend to judge silence negatively. However, read the lyrics and it soon becomes evident that the silence in the song is about masking a lie. The song, like the expression, *hush money*, alludes to the belief that speaking is the truth, and silence is dishonest. Silence is, then, not golden at all—talk is.

Language learners often say the Japanese language is the opposite of English. Japanese write up and down, open a book with the spine to the right, and read right to left. It might then come as no surprise that Americans and Japanese harbor opposing views to talk and silence. Instead of "The squeaky wheel gets the grease," in Japan, a bird that sings gets shot: "*Tori mo nakaneba utaremaji.*" Rather than a voice that needs to be heard, crying out when there is no need to talk is overkill. Furthermore, talking singles out an individual and is frequently judged as blabbing or even bragging. The bilingual NHK presenter Sumire said that when she speaks English she is often told she talks too much and sounds conceited.

“*Bigen shin narazu.*” Beautiful speech lacks sincerity while halting speech, considered naïve at worst, is more likely to be judged as honest. This is why initial contact business meetings in Japan that use only a formalized template consider the actual content of talk redundant. *Uchi* insider meetings that begin with trivia and small talk, or what Graham and Sano (1984) call nontask sounding, bring on great frustration to old hands; Japanese business is often borne and developed in a context where less intense, *tsumaranai* boring talk is allowed, and a rapid discussion-based outcome is unlikely.

In part because silence unites, the Japanese promote the romanticized view of silent communication called *haragei* or belly art where idealized *ishin denshin* or heart-to-heart transmission is possible. Like a silent tête-à-tête, the silent communication advocates *a-un-no-kokyuu*, or *a-un breathing*, a kind of scripted turn-taking where one communicator inhales the first sound of a Buddhist incantation, “*a*,” and another knows to exhale the last sound, “*un*” (KotoBank, 2015). In such an ancient view, words are seen as manmade and therefore trivial; silent communication unites.

However, although the ideal of silence binds the group, in today’s world it is impractical. Most interactions require talk, and the conflict wherein talk must be used despite the silent ideal is where Listener Talk comes into play. In the following, I discuss the precursor to Listener Talk, which is the important skill of listener interpretation called *sasshi* guesswork.

#### LISTENER SASSHI AND LISTENER TALK

Children learn the skills of how to listen and to guess feelings from an early age. As they copy adults who teach them how to *sasshi* listen and stand in other people’s shoes, they interpret out loud by calling themselves in the other person’s name. This talking out loud is a kind of baby Listener Talk. The following is an example of a conversation between a mother and her two-and-a-half year old son, Kei, in which the mother talks to Kei from his point of view and encourages him to talk back from the mother’s point of view.

Mother:       *Soo ka. Kei-chan no omeme onaka ga suiteru tte itterune.*  
OK. So Kei’s eyes are saying, (I’m) hungry.

Kei:            *N. Okaasan isogashii.*  
Yes. Mom is busy.

In this baby Listener Talk, Kei’s mother uses *sasshi* guesswork and vocalizes her interpretation. By saying, “OK. So Kei’s eyes are saying, (I’m) hungry,” Kei’s mother elicits a response from him. Kei obliges, copying her use of seeing things from the other point of view, and communicating that he knows she hasn’t gotten around to preparing him a meal because she has been busy. Moreover, Kei will most likely be able to infer that his mother will make the meal now, and when the meal arrives, he will be rewarded not just with a meal but for having guessed correctly about why his mother had been delayed in making it.

This predictive-style of listener-driven communication I call Listener Talk not only continues to be in use but seems to be gaining momentum with the 2007 hit street expression that is widely used today called KY. KY is the *romaji* acronym for *Kuuki Yomenai*, or *can’t read the air* (Kitahara, 2008). According to my young informant, a KY is someone who “cannot feel out the situation,” or, “can’t get with the program.” In short, a KY is a communicator who has poor competence skills in *sasshi* guesswork and Listener Talk, someone who does not infer well and cannot sense the situation. Conversely, a skillful user of

Listener Talk is someone who can stay slightly ahead of the conversation using predictive-conversation monitoring.

#### LISTENER TALK EXAMPLES

The examples of Japanese Listener Talk in this paper are excerpts taken from 6 bank managers' meetings: 2 intracultural American, 2 intracultural Japanese, and 2 cross-cultural American-Japanese (Yamada, 1992, 1997). Three managers are in each of the intracultural managers' meetings and two in the cross-cultural meeting. I chose to use actual weekly meetings to try and circumvent observer paradox (Labov, 1972), the dilemma an observer faces that s/he can influence the behavior of participants by his/her being there. Instead, I asked the meeting participants to audio-record their own live meetings as they would normally occur.

I used the sociologist, Douglas Maynard's (2005) method of synthesizing ethnography and conversation analysis to play up the strengths of anthropological, sociological and linguistic traditions. Transcribing the conversations, I followed up my micro-discourse analyses with post-meeting interviews with the participants (Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 1984). More recently, I added new observations from a social media forum to provide depth to the revisited findings and suggest avenues for further research.

In *American and Japanese Business Discourse* (1992), I first observed that a representative style of conversation in the internal American meetings was one in which the managers took the lead in conversations, presented their deals, and talked most with the greatest number of turns and with the longest monologues for their own deals. In the in-group Japanese meetings on the other hand, the middle managers pitched talk to the listeners, and distributed talk time with an even number of turns, managing topics with ample silences. When a controversial topic did come up, the manager who opened the discussion provided plenty of negation to distance himself from the emerging contest of talk.

I called the speaker-generated talk, Speaker Talk, and the listener-driven one, Listener Talk. Speaker Talk, elsewhere referred to as The Direct Plan Approach (Victor, 1992), is the predominant style of communication that has been researched. Conversational analysis and ethnomethodological studies on turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974) spawned a number of studies including Fujio's (2014, 2015) research on turn-taking in English cross-cultural communication and Japanese intracultural communication that found that language proficiency and seniority were respectively the most important determiners in the number of turns a communicator took. Speakers who are or were seen as more competent spoke more.

In the intracultural American and Japanese meetings I compared (Yamada 1997), I found that while the American account managers took the most number of turns in the topics each officer verbally opened and closed, the Japanese middle managers distributed the turns more or less equally regardless of who began and ended a topic. None of the Japanese officers of equal rank were seen as individually owning a topic as did the American managers in the American intracultural meeting.

In the following section, I discuss three Listener Talk strategies: 1) mutual silence to shift to new topics; 2) negation and ways of saying, "No" without actually using the word *iie*; and 3) interpreted delivery of a speaker's phrase. Each Listener Talk strategy serves both the communicative goal of prioritizing the listeners, as well as the interactional expectation of *amae* interdependence.

## SILENT SHIFTER

In the intracultural American meeting, each bank manager, Craig, Karen, and Lynn (pseudonyms) closed his/her own topic just as s/he brought up his/her own topic. Excerpt 1 shows an example of each manager's verbal closure.

Excerpt 1: Verbal Closure for each manager in the intracultural American bank meeting

Craig **That's all** I have.

Karen Anyway, I don't know, ah, **that's all** I've got.

Lynn Yeah, uh, so that—**that's it**. It's closed on our books for right now.

While Craig, Lynn and Karen in Excerpt 1 all used the phrase “that's all” or “that's it” to verbally close out their rounds, the Japanese bank managers used silence to shift topics in the internal section heads' meeting.

The silence before the shift serves Listener Talk in two ways. First, silence is shared by speakers and listeners and therefore answers the cultural expectation of the group in addition to the communication goal of silence. Second, silence before a topic shift distances talk ownership and the previously individualized talk, and the longer the silence, the more it moves away from the individual and the closer it approaches the group.

Silences longer than 1.5 seconds (as opposed to short pauses of 1-1.5 seconds) occurred 103 times in the intracultural Japanese meeting in comparison to 20 in the American, amounting to a total of 107.45 seconds of Japanese silences as opposed to 41.2 seconds of American. This translates to 5.15 seconds of silence a minute in the Japanese and .74 American. The longest silence in the Japanese meeting was 8.2 seconds, nearly twice as long as the American 4.6 seconds. To shift topics, the Japanese bank managers used an average silence of 6.5 seconds as compared to 1.7 in the American. Silence therefore occurred more frequently in the Japanese meeting than in the American, and Japanese bank managers used silence more than their American counterparts to shift topics.

Excerpt 2 illustrates how Ikeda, Shimizu and Tanaka allow a silence of 8.2 seconds to expand between the preamble and the first topic of discussion about an upcoming regional meeting. All Japanese examples were originally recorded and transcribed in Japanese but are presented here in English. As with the participants in the American meetings, the names of the Japanese meeting participants are pseudonyms.

Excerpt 2: Silent Shifter in Japanese Section Heads' Meeting

Ikeda: Because in Japan it's a week at the most.

Shimizu: Mhm, it's a week.

**[8.2 second pause]**

Tanaka: This talk is completely different but next time there is again going to be a regional meeting around August.

In localization business briefings where I simulate this dialogue, American clients often express how 8.2 seconds feels unbearably long. Said one: “I'd fill up the silence with talk.” A common action taken by those less tolerant of silence, a communicative event does not have to be cross-cultural for a person to feel like s/he has to fill up space with

conversation if silence is seen as inaction—a waste of time when things could be moved along.

In cross-cultural interaction with the Japanese, the interjection of talk at the end of a topic will likely signal there is more to talk about. If the topic is otherwise exhausted, and a communicator insists on filling silences with talk, the meeting risks continuing endlessly. Worse still is the situation wherein the silence-averse English speaker speaks more than a Japanese communicator, whom Fujio (2014) showed took fewer turns in a cross-cultural event in English. The outcome might be one in which the native English speaker dominates, leaving the nonnative Japanese communicator to feel like s/he could not get in a word edgewise.

For English-speaking cross-cultural communicators navigating topics in Japanese conversation, metatalk about what is going on when silence reaches bursting point is a great way to manage the cultural difference. Like salespeople who frequently use this strategy of Listener Talk to check whether their purchase plans are clear, “*Ii desuka?*” or “*Daijobudesuka?*” (Is it OK?), many experienced communicators meta-talk to topic shift when talking to out-group members such as clients as a way of asking: “Shall we move on?” “Does anyone have anything to add?”

#### SAYING NO TO NO AND NEGATION

The Japanese are often caricatured as overly polite—a people who never say, “No.” Indeed, the casual form of no, *unun*, spoken with a rising intonation is the opposite of the casual “Yes,” *un*, spoken with a descending accent, which can make it sound as if two “Yes”s equal a “No.” *Omoiyari* empathy or *wa* harmony are other common reasons cited for why the Japanese shy away from “No.” This visitor misinterpretation that Japanese are not only nice people but also more so than the average person from another country is further confused by the Japanese since as in-group members they have demonstrated examples of actual empathy in in-group interactions where members play by and enjoy the same communicative rules which may not happen when they interact cross-culturally.

A simpler reason why Japanese do not actually say the word, “No” may be one of communicative motivation: *ie* and *uun* break the communicative goal of listener focus. “No” distinguishes the individual speaker and allows him/herself to speak out. With “No,” a speaker can beg to differ and disagree with a previous speaker, and demarcate his/her own view apart from a previous speaker and/or other listeners.

By contrast, “Yes” plays by the communicative rules of Listener Talk by connecting with the listeners. In part because of this, Japanese listeners provide ample *aizuchi* back-channel listener feedback when following a conversation, frequently vocalizing *un* (uhuh) to show they are listening (S. Maynard, 1986). Japanese back-channel cues are the source of many a misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication where a head nod and “uhuh” are misinterpreted as agreement rather than mere listening signals that say, “I’m following what you are saying.”

However, if a direct “No” is rule-breaking in most Japanese group encounters, there are still many ways of turning down a proposition, for example, *sore wa chotto* (that’s a little) means, “No,” and it can be made stronger by adding the qualifier, *muzukashii* (difficult). Excerpt 3 is a nonexhaustive list of some other ways of saying, “No” in Japanese. In Excerpt 4, the manager, Yamashita uses numbers 2, 7, and 9 to cue that he is saying, “No.”

Excerpt 3: A Few Ways to say “No” in Japanese

1. *Sore wa chotto [muzukashii ka mo shiremasen]* (it) might be a little difficult

2. *Nnn* Hmm often accompanied by chin drawn in and nodding
3. *Kento sasete itadakimasu* (we) will study (it)
4. *Kangaete mimasho* Let (us) think about (it)
5. *\*Zensho/Doryoku itashimasu* (I) will try my best
6. *Maemuki ni kangaesaseteitadakimasu* (we) will try to think about (it) positively
7. Conditionals
8. Stretch Talk
9. Intake of breath between the teeth
10. Lowered or Closed eyes

Translated, Excerpt 4 begins following Fukuda's suggestion to bring on an American broker to collaborate on their project. Yamashita shows his disagreement by sending three common negation cues of (9) sucking in air, (7) conditionals, and a very vocal (2) *Nnn*. Until the moment of Fukuda's challenge to Yamashita's disagreement when he asks, "Why?" everyone is playing by the rules of Listener Talk.

Yamashita, Fukuda, and Kanda have worked together in the San Francisco office for two years and have known each other for all of their careers. They have also participated in cross-cultural development training sessions and are therefore not only aware of communicative style differences between Americans and Japanese, but also of the possibility that the meeting will likely be used for study. The ensuing comedy of negation provoked by Fukuda is about how Yamashita finds it difficult to disagree even when Fukuda goes outside Listener Talk and directly challenges him using a style Victor (1992) calls the *Direct Plan*.

#### Excerpt 4: Going Against the Grain

- [5 seconds]
- Yamashita: [Sucks in air]  
*Nnn*. (Hmm.)
- Fukuda: Why?
- Yamashita: Well, uhhm, I would not say I wouldn't say that it's not that you know, it's definitely out of the question. So in other words, I want to say that it is not that it wouldn't happen. I couldn't say that [laugh]
- Fukuda: What's that? You yourself [3 seconds] are even laughing (at your own torturous sentences).
- Kanda: [laughing] No way. What [2 seconds] That's a big minus for you, Yamashita-san. It would be really bad if you did something like that (in a meeting with Americans). [laugh]

In tears from laughing by this time, the other members of the group, Fukuda and Kanda, tease Yamashita for his reluctance to disagree, laughing not only because they can imagine the trouble he would get himself into in doing so in a meeting with American counterparts, but also because of Yamashita's abuse of the Japanese language where he grammatically deploys six negatives in two sentences to appear as if he is not disagreeing. There is no doubt that Yamashita's flamboyant use of multiple negations is in part engineered by Japanese grammar that places the verb at the end of a sentence and negation at the end of the verb. Unlike English, a Japanese speaker's position to an argument can be stalled and back-loaded at the end of his/her turn, thus endorsing the mechanisms of Listener Talk so that speakers can do and undo agreements and disagreements at the end. However, he can also do so because of the three executives' assumptions about their own style of talk, and their knowledge that it is different from that deployed in the *Direct Plan*.

Misunderstandings of a Japanese “No” taken for a “Yes” are numerous. Among the notorious is former President Nixon’s interpretation of then Prime Minister Sato’s comment, “*Zensho itashimasu*,” (Excerpt 3, Number 5), which when translated as “I will do my best” for the import of textiles was understood as a “Yes” when Sato had actually meant “No.” Taking the promised effort as a positive affirmation, neither Nixon nor his translator apparently knew to look for cues beyond words.

In sum, the Japanese “No” is not a definite point in affirmation or negation, but more of a progression. In English translation Listener Talk “No” is a “not really,” a “leaning towards a No,” a dot, dot, dot, or a “90% No.” For cross-cultural communicators, active listening that includes nonverbal listening will go a long way into interpreting negation in Japanese communication.

## INTERPRETED DELIVERY

Interpreted delivery is a listener-driven communication style encouraged in medical counseling (Maynard, 1991). Commonly referred to as “good bedside manners,” today, it is part of a physician’s ability to diagnose illness and deliver difficult news. While the physician is most likely the person who will give the prognosis, there are times in which a patient’s family or carer will have to do so. With vested interest, s/he is likely to try and deliver the news by paying attention to how it will be received by the patient him/herself.

Although this level of empathy may seem foreign in the adversarial world of business, there are countless instances in which intermediaries are called upon to sound out clients and collaborators on behalf of more senior professional members. Excerpt 5 is the beginning of such an instance in which a Japanese middle manager, Kamiya, and an American consultant, Brian, are actively clarifying their mutual understanding in a cross-cultural meeting. Prior to the excerpt, Brian has proposed the idea of giving cash incentives to executives who increase the bank’s profitability. Brian uses the Direct Plan and asks if Kamiya understands point blank. Kamiya then answers, expressing his interpretation.

### Excerpt 5: Interpretation

Brian: You understand what I mean?  
 Kamiya: You’re saying that we should ignore this year in our calculation.

In a post-meeting conversation, Brian told me it was important that Kamiya understand his proposal because “Kamiya is the guy who can push it [the proposal] through.” For Kamiya too, it was important he fully comprehend what Brian meant because he was the one who had to deliver the proposal to senior management and would not want to appear misinformed.

In continuing the conversation in Excerpt 6, Brian corrects Kamiya’s interpretation with a direct disagreement that becomes catalytic in Kamiya’s reinterpretive pitch for senior management.

### Excerpt 6: Reinterpretation

Brian: That’s not what I meant here.  
 Kamiya: I see.  
 Brian: That’s one reason why I wanted to talk.  
 Kamiya: So **you have** this five-year period, to build from a **5.5** to **14**. And then **you’re saying**, from achieving from **5.5**—even though **14** is just an **average**, because

**we**'re so **below** market, **average**, that to get there is **extraordinary**, **right?** But **your point is**, so, **therefore** people deserve **extraordinary** payments. **High bonuses**.

Kamiya verifies his understanding of Brian's proposal for a second time, using verbal checkpoints like, "you have," "you're saying," "right?" "your point is," and "therefore," indicated in bold in Excerpt 6. He then changes the pronoun, *you* to *we* to restate what Brian is talking about to what he will be preparing to tell the senior management together with Brian, which he reiterates is about improving performance from below average, highlighted in green, to extraordinary, highlighted in red.

Interpreted delivery is like a leveraged Listener Talk that packages information after it checks, "Is that what you meant?" In this example, the interpreter, Kamiya, is setting himself to be a kind of hinge, to first understand Brian's proposal then to deliver it to senior management.

In a follow-up conversation, I learned that Brian's proposal was being considered. Whether Kamiya's role as "the guy" had anything to do with it is conjecture, but if it did, perhaps his Interpreted Delivery helped towards the implementation of performance pay. It should be noted too that although individual performance pay is not a traditional practice in Japanese business, the bank in which Kamiya was employed had mixed American and Japanese senior management, and the conversations had taken place in a time when new and riskier propositions were undertaken.

Moreover, while Interpreted Delivery is common in Japanese chain of command, it is not foreign in American communication either. Indeed, all of the Listener Talk strategies explored here occurred in the American meetings, albeit to a lesser degree. It goes without saying, then, that further attention to listener interpretation and speech with the listener in mind is welcome and necessary in the interdisciplinary fields of business, sociolinguistics, and communication, not only to develop theoretical constructs but for application in corporate and other professional sectors, particularly medicine, social work and therapy.

## CONCLUSION

This paper explored Listener Talk, a style of interaction that combines the Japanese cultural preference for interdependence and the communicative goal of pitching to the listener. Silence as a topic-shifter, saying and reading a Japanese "no," and interpreted delivery are but a few strategies of Listener Talk that can introduce communicators to a listener-focused style of moving through a conversation by collecting information and interpreting and reinterpreting, or even disagreeing with it.

Although Japanese frequently use Listener Talk, neither the style nor the strategies displayed here is exclusive to the group. Other styles such as those used by women (Tannen, 1994) and by medical practitioners in perspective display (Maynard, 1991) share features of Listener Talk, as do direct style communicators who collaborate (Walker and Aritz, 2014).

The concept of Listener Talk is simply talking with the listener in mind. A predictive interpreter based not only on words but also on cultural expectations and communicative goals, Listener Talk checks for listener cues to match the next part of the conversation. *Yappari* (As I thought) is the Listener Talk motto: That's what I thought you were going to say.

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