



# Looking at cultural difference in movie trailers

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Film clips, short scenes from movies, can bring to the foreign language class clear examples of specific language, social, or cultural points, and because of their brevity, can be used efficiently. Related to film clips are movie trailers, short advertisements created for television and movie theatres to promote films that are about to be released. These commercials are typically 60-150 seconds long. Movie trailers are often partly or completely remade for audiences in different countries, in the same way that advertisements for products and services are marketed internationally. Thus, for example, an original trailer for a Hollywood movie is normally remade or at least revised to make it appealing for Japanese audiences, taking language and cultural differences into consideration. The purpose of this article is to introduce techniques for using original movie trailers and their Japanese versions to teach linguistic and cultural differences. The article presents a class activity that compares two trailers for *The Mighty*, a drama made in the U.S. in 1998.

映画のクリップ(一部)は外国語の授業には有効な教材である。言葉の使い方や、その国の社会や文化をいきいきと描写し、時間が短いので効率よく利用できる。このクリップと同じ種類のものに映画の予告編があり新作映画の予告をテレビや映画館で放映する。予告編は普通60-150秒の長さである。世界で売られている商品・サービスの宣伝と同じように、映画の予告編は放映する国によって一部(または全部)内容を変えることが多い。例えば、ハリウッド映画の予告編の日本版は、日本人を引きつけるために、言葉や文化の相違を考慮して新しく作られるか、少なくとも一部編集されるのが普通である。この論文は、原作の予告編と日本版を比較し、言葉と文化の違いを授業で教える方法を紹介するのが目的である。ここでは、「The Mighty」(1998年米国作のドラマ)の2つの予告編を授業でどう取り上げるかを考察する。

**F**ilm brings language, situations, and overall visual stimulation and enjoyment that other media cannot. Feature films offer a broader range of subject matter than films made for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and encourage a wide range of applications across and beyond the four skills. As Gareis (1997) suggests, “films offer an ideal background for language acquisition as well as endless opportunities for pedagogically sound classroom activities” (p. 20). In contrast to the highly

controlled language presented in coursebooks, the authentic texts in feature films are “a good source of natural linguistic input and are useful in promoting cultural awareness...” (Potter & Lenz, 2001). Indeed, as Sherman (2003) states, movies are “the nearest thing most foreign-language students have to real-life experience of spoken meaning” (p. 13). This reason alone makes film a very valid and necessary component of foreign language learning.

Despite the many advantages that using full-length films offer (Chung, 1995, cited in King, 2002; Fukunaga, 1998; King, 2002; MacGregor, 2005; Ryan, 1998; Stempleski & Tomalin, 2001; Tatsuki, 2000), using them effectively can challenge time and other constraints (Johnson, 2006). Film clips highlighting specific language, social, or cultural points can be used more efficiently. Related to film clips are movie trailers, or previews, short advertisements created for television and movie theatres to promote films about to be released. These commercials are typically 60-150 seconds long and are shown on television and the Internet, as well as in movie theatres before the feature film begins.

Trailers, like their parent movies, contain authentic English, highlighting key concepts, vocabulary, and expressions. With careful selection, teachers can introduce students to a wide variety of useful language and issues different from those offered by coursebooks and varying from the usual presentation of an artificial written dialogue with audio backup common in textbooks. Movie trailers have been used in a number of ways in EFL settings to date (Gebhardt, 2004; Heffernan, 2005; Johnson, 2006, Johnson & Heffernan, 2006). In these cases, the primary focus has been on vocabulary acquisition and content

comprehension. The subject for this paper is unique in its focus on the cultural contrasts between two versions of the same trailer. Movie trailers are often partly or completely remade for audiences in different countries, in the same way as advertisements for products and services marketed internationally. An original trailer for a Hollywood movie is normally remade or at least revised for Japanese audiences, taking language and cultural differences into consideration. It is this point that will form the basis of this article, which introduces techniques for using original movie trailers and their Japanese counterparts to teach linguistic and cultural differences in a class activity that compares two trailers for the same movie. For it to work best, it is obviously preferable to choose trailers for movies that students are not likely to have already seen. Furthermore, it is essential that the teacher does not give information about the film or the trailers in advance.

Movies offered on DVD often include a selection of trailers, which are also widely available on the Internet. One set of trailers that has been used with Japanese university students and will be discussed here is for *The Mighty*, a drama made in the U.S. in 1998. Both trailers are included on the DVD version available in Japan (Chelsom, 1998).

This activity has been successful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it uses film, a medium in which most students are already interested (Gebhardt, 2004). Secondly, trailers spark the curiosity of students in a form to which they may have previously paid scant attention. Thus, this activity introduces a new way of using film to study English. Finally, it engages all students to watch and pick up clues that will help them complete the activity. Because of the range of elements for

which they need to watch, every student can contribute, regardless of their English level. This kind of personal success is both rewarding and motivating for students.

Key elements that are part of most trailers include visuals, sound, music, film dialogue, voiceovers, and screen text. The worksheet for *The Mighty* asks students to consider all of these when they think about what is different, and later, why. This activity requires students to think about and describe the key elements of the trailer in English. Since language acquisition is not the primary goal, this activity adds variety to an EFL programme: while exposing students to authentic English, it challenges them to think about cultures and how they are different. At more advanced levels, students can extend the discussion to also think about consider the reasons these cross-cultural differences exist.

### Procedure

**Step 1:** Begin the lesson with a short introduction of movies and movie trailers in general.

**Step 2:** Distribute the student worksheet (Appendix 1) but do not give information about the film or the trailers. While the worksheet for *The Mighty* was made specifically for this movie, it is possible to use a general worksheet that can be applied to any set of trailers. A sample template for examining only one version of a trailer can be found in an activity book by Stempleski and Tomalin (2001).

**Step 3:** Explain the worksheet.

**Step 4:** Show the Japanese trailer a few times with time between for students to fill in the sheet.

**Step 5:** Show the original trailer in the same way.

**Step 6:** After giving learners plenty of time to think and write, conduct group and/or class discussions and replay the trailers as necessary. A teaching guide is provided in Appendix 2 to help teachers facilitate discussion and understanding.

### General observations about original trailers and the Japanese remakes

While it is difficult to generalize the elements of movie trailers, the following attempts to summarize typical contrasts between Japanese and original, in this case, western trailers. For the purposes of this discussion, western cultures include the United States, Canada, and western, northern, and southern European countries (Collins COBUILD, 2001). It is essential to keep in mind, however, that it is far beyond the scope of this paper to present cultural theory to address and explain in detail each point discussed. Therefore, the basic differences found between the two types of trailers will be identified and to qualify them, the word "tendency" is used to emphasize that these are generalizations based on the author's observations of movies, trailers, and Japanese society.

*(i) Japanese trailers use reviews and cast track records to endorse the film, while western trailers rely on the film contents alone.*

As is apparent from their particular attraction to designer labels, reliability, quality, safety, and conformity are key concepts that Japanese people tend to value, and this trait is recognized world-wide. Japanese tend to feel socially more secure by following the status quo, which favors what has been publicly endorsed in some way. Movies are no

exception. Trailers establish credibility for the movies they advertise by including:

1. Film reviews from the country where the film was released.
2. Cast introductions that give the title of another film well-known in Japan in which the actors have appeared.
3. Reviews or screen text that predict an Oscar or other film award.

On the other hand, for western viewers, while publicly acknowledged credibility (awards, actors' track record, reviews) is important, people are perhaps more confident about making up their minds by themselves. They tend to be concerned more with personal preference than conforming to a norm.

*(ii) The mood or atmosphere of Japanese trailers tends to emphasize pathos and sadness, while western movie trailers focus more on the positive, uplifting aspects of the film.*

Japanese trailers for dramas, and even comedies, tend to emphasize sadness, pathos, suffering, pain, or death, using tearful scenes and sad or solemn music. In contrast, original trailers for dramas tend to be positive in tone, and for comedies, funny. Three examples illustrate the existence of these kinds of contrasts.

First, in the American comedy, *Wonder Boys* (2000), the pathos and bad fortune of star Michael Douglas are emphasized in the Japanese trailer, while the original trailer emphasizes the comedy of the film, showing Douglas' bad luck as humorous. Thus, the Japanese trailer triggers the empathy of the viewer while the original trailer prompts laughter.

In the American drama, *Life as a House* (2001), the terminal illness of Kevin Kline, which is the underlying thread of the film, is presented as the key point in the Japanese trailer. The original trailer focuses instead on the father-son struggle and conflicts in other relationships, as well as the courage and determination of the man to achieve his goals, both of which are in the foreground plot. The Japanese trailer again emphasizes the emotional undertones of the film while the original trailer emphasizes the intense dialogue. This focus on emotions rather than words is typical of Japanese communication, which tends to rely more on context than content. In contrast, the original trailer is word-based and direct.

In *The Mighty*, the emotionally charged friendship and heartwarming aspects of the film are emphasized in the Japanese trailer along with the sadness of Kevin's illness and inevitable death in the background. This leads viewers to believe that this is a sad movie. In the original trailer, the focus is on the foreground reality of Max and Kevin's lives and how they cope with their problems. The middle-ground King Arthur theme emphasize their heroism, indicating that this is a positive, upbeat film about life, not death.

*(iii) Japanese trailers contain a great deal of basic information about plot and background, and often even the ending.*

Knowing the storyline tends to appeal to Japanese viewers, because with this knowledge they can focus on the visuals, the subtitles, and the emotions expressed. Trailers are thus constructed in the same way as magazine and television previews, which summarize the complete storylines of TV serial dramas, including the conclusions, even before the first episode is aired.

For the same reason, Japanese trailers also make more use of screen text and voiceovers to summarize the story, to establish the mood of the film, and to seal the impression that viewers should have. For example, taglines at the end cap the emotional appeal noted above and put the film in a nutshell. The tagline for *Life as a House* is "一緒に建てお" [Let's build it together; this and subsequent translations mine]. The tagline for the drama set in France, *Mr Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran* (2003), is "ほら、人生はすばらしい" [Look at that, (in spite of, or because of, great hardship and sadness), life is wonderful.].

In Japanese trailers, the story is presented simply, though the rationale, other than what has already been discussed, is not clear. There are fewer references to things sexual, risqué, or otherwise controversial that may overcomplicate things. Instead, they give emotional cues in the form of tearful scenes, images of sadness, and dark, solemn, or sorrowful background music, as noted in the teaching guide for *The Mighty*. Charming, cute images are sure to appear where appropriate to give a heartwarming impression. The Japanese trailer for *The Blue Butterfly* (2004), an American drama set in the Costa Rican jungle, contains a number of close-ups of centipedes and other insects and birds. These are not central to the story (and do not appear in the original trailer), but their cuteness is appealing to Japanese viewers.

In original trailers, film footage in context tells the story instead of screen text or voiceover narration. The storyline, therefore, may not be clear to viewers, leaving more for them to figure out for themselves. Western audiences tend to prefer more to be untold in order to enjoy the film. Furthermore, taglines and voiceovers in original trailers are much less

frequent. These absences let viewers decide for themselves, rather than be told what to think. Charming imagery as described above is not a necessary feature.

## Conclusion

Using movie trailers to show cultural differences is one of many ways that films and film-related materials can be used in the classroom. Teachers can extend this activity as they like. For example, it could be preceded by language and vocabulary study. Instead of, or in addition to, discussing the trailers in class, writing tasks could be assigned. After introducing the procedures in class, students could choose different movies for individual or group writing or presentation projects. Cultural theory could be more rigorously pursued, as well as a study of trailers as advertisements. Other related resources such as movie reviews and movie posters could be examined, as well as the wealth of online materials, which include movie trailer sites, such as the Apple Movie Trailers page (<[www.apple.com/trailers](http://www.apple.com/trailers)>) and sites for EFL learners (English Trailers <[www.english-trailers.com](http://www.english-trailers.com)>; The English Learner Movie Guides <[eslnotes.com/index/html](http://eslnotes.com/index/html)>). Regardless of the media or method, it is essential in comparing two or more versions of the same movie materials that students consider not only what is similar or different about the two pieces examined, but also why they are similar or different. The ultimate goal is for students to gain a greater awareness of cultural differences.

Judging from the favorable responses to the activity described herein from my students, it is well worth the class time and the effort required for preparation. Furthermore,

the activity can be modified or extended to suit various classroom contexts and student levels. As advertising tools, as art forms, and as teaching and learning devices, movie trailers are worthy of our attention.

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## Appendix 1: Student Worksheet

### Comparing Japanese and original movie trailers

**The Mighty (1998; drama)** Watch the trailers and fill in the chart.

Question/Analysis criteria	Japanese trailer 1'57"	original trailer 2'17"
Screen text (including reviews)		
Effect?		
Movie dialogue: amount? effect?		
Voiceover (narration): amount? effect?		
Do knights appear? How many times? Effect?		
Content differences		
Music: fast? slow? quiet? energetic? / instrumental? vocal?	clip #1 (Christmas carol)  clip #2 (instrumental)  clip #3 (vocal & instrumental)	clip #1:  clip #2:  clip #3:  clip #4:
Overall mood: happy? sad? other?		
Other information		
What do you think the story will be about?		
Why do you think the two trailers are different? Explain in detail. Also, comment on the effect of the different titles (The Mighty vs. マイフレンドメモリー).		

## Appendix 2: Teaching Guide

### Comparing Japanese and original movie trailers: Possible Answers for The Mighty

Question/Analysis criteria	Japanese trailer1'57"	original trailer 2'17"
Screen text (including reviews) Effect?	3 cast names (katakana) reviews with key words highlighted 友情の物語 [story of friendship] "Sharon Stone sure to win Oscar." other text: この冬。。。温かい涙と感動を贈ります。[this winter we bring you warm tears to touch and move you] as sales pitch. Effect: works on emotions, name value to sell film.	all main cast names + "From the Bestselling Novel." all cast have name value (including Gena Rowlands, Gillian Anderson). no reviews (trailer usually made pre-release).
Movie dialogue: amount? effect? Voiceover (narration): amount? effect?	a little; tells the story a lot; explains what the movie will be about; ends with マイフレンドメモリ、二人は消して忘れない。[The Mighty, an unforgettable story] to seal emotional impact.	a lot: entertainment value; hints at the story. a little; theme: "courage comes in all sizes."
Do knights appear? How many times? Effect?	do not appear; simplifies story	appear 3 times, underlining chivalry theme, central to the film; teaser: connection to Max & Kevin?
Content differences	only Kevin and Max in credits	humor (Wizard of Oz joke); "From the novel..." (narrator); bullying;"special" hospital; "magician" father issues; full cast introduced.

Music: fast? slow? quiet? energetic? / instrumental? vocal? Effect?	clip #1: (Christmas carol) Silent night (solemn; serious) clip #2: (instrumental) military music clip #3: (vocal & instrumental) sacred music (Latin chorale) Effect: serious/sad mood	clip #1: piano (quiet; for drama) clip #2: orchestra (fairy tell/Star wars fantasy type) clip #3: rousing knight music clip #4: upbeat theme song (pop vocal - Sting) Effect: positive/encouraging
Overall mood: happy? sad? other?	sad/heavy drama, sealed by clip #3; film is about death, parting, sadness	happy/positive, sealed by all clips; film is about life, not death.
Other differences:	Kevin is Max's tutor ("teacher-student" stability); Kevin's physical collapse (turning pt.) is high pt. of emotion (evokes sympathy, curiosity of J viewers); Kevin has 1 year to live (sympathy); ends with sky, two on bench stills (sympathy, emotion); Wizard of Oz joke subtitles not a joke: "we can do anything together;" Kevin's mom, Max cry (emotion). None of above in original trailer.	Max & Kevin both outsiders; both bullied, both abnormal and that's why they are friends; chivalry theme (not just a kid story).
What do you think the story will be about?		
Why do you think the two trailers are different? Explain in detail. Comment also on the effect of the different titles (The Mighty vs. マイフレンドメモリー).		