

# Culture Research: A hotbed of myths, folk wisdom, and stereotypes?

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The relationship between culture and classroom learning and teaching practices has become something of a hot potato recently. Numerous published studies contrasting cultures East and West indicate sharp cultural differences that could affect a teacher's approach to classroom management, curriculum development, or making materials. At the same time recent critics have questioned this contrastive approach, arguing that many of these studies do not accurately portray complex cultural realities but instead reduce them to simplistic binary constructs or essences. In this paper the author analyzes several recent language-related cultural studies, on Asia as a whole and Japan in particular, to find out if the claims of distorted, imbalanced descriptions or outright prejudice in EFL/ESL studies on culture are warranted.

Research should serve to confirm or refute myths. It should not merely perpetuate them. But in the field of culture as it relates to EFL/ESL, could it be that faulty research or specious logic is serving to present myths and stereotypes as researched facts? Received wisdom derived from cultural anthropology has influenced much of the manner in which culture is approached in ESL/EFL. Numerous

presentations, research studies and textbooks aim to inform listeners, readers, and learners about cultural differences in an apparent attempt to foster appreciation for other cultures and avoid ethnocentricity. But such approaches have come under question recently. Do they serve to perpetuate popular stereotypes? Rather than acting as bridges of cross-cultural understanding do they merely serve to heighten consciousness of differences between 'us and them'?

Kubota (1999) is one who has critiqued many who espouse this approach, accusing them of fostering a 'colonial discourse' by 'constructing' foreign cultures as inferior 'others'. In response, Sower (1999) characterized Kubota's stance as amounting to an "epistemological nihilism" (p.740), claiming that no amount of description of history as a discourse of power, which he characterizes as an "exercise in word games" (p.743), could undo basic objective truths, namely that research has shown that different cultures have different learning styles that should affect any sensitive teachers' pedagogy and class management.

Or has it? Does the bulk of EFL/ESL research enunciating these alleged cultural differences stand up to scrutiny? Or do they often depend upon faulty premises, faulty cognitive constructs or research prejudices? In order to answer this question I decided to analyze a number of recent EFL/ESL research papers which focused upon descriptions and expositions of the culture

of the Japanese learner of English. Because I am most familiar with Japanese society and English education in that country I limited myself largely to an analysis of research based on that country's language learning habits although some of the original commentary extends to East Asia as a whole, and it could well be that the points made here apply to studies related to non-Japanese/non-East Asian cultures as well. Most of the papers referenced here can be found in journals related specifically to English teaching in Japan, such as *The Language Teacher*, *JALT Journal*, *JACET Journal*, as well as papers related to Japanese culture and learning habits as found in international journals such as *TESOL Journal* and *English Language Teaching Journal*. There are three central questions I have asked when approaching each study:

1. Have the authors relied too heavily upon questionably subjective sociological, anthropological and philosophical discourse as a foundational premise in their inquiries?
2. Have the authors applied the findings of previous studies in a manner that do not resort to artificial dichotomies, *essentializing* or other reductionisms?
3. Have the authors exaggerated or *exoticized* features of a culture or language in order to 'prove' their premises?



### *'Received Wisdom'- Seminal works informing cultural research on the Japanese learner of English*

In studies pertaining to the cultural proclivities of Japanese learners, certain references appear regularly and prominently in the researchers' bibliographies. Foremost among these are Hall (1976), Kaplan (1966), Hofstede (1980; 1986; 1991) and derived from these, Barnlund (1975; 1979; 1989) and Gudykunst (1994). Since they are so foundational to so many recent studies of Japanese culture perhaps a brief description of each of these seminal works would be appropriate here.

The first three researchers above represent an arm of the field of cultural anthropology rather than applied linguistics. Hall (1976) was most influential in his division of cultures into high and low-context. Here, Japan is presented as the prime example of a high context culture in which meaning is more readily understood non-verbally, non-explicitly. This allegedly is represented in the Japanese language where context, according to Hall, heavily determines the choice of features such as vocabulary and verb inflection. Although every language includes notions of register and other situational considerations it is argued that this feature is far more prominent in Japanese.

Kaplan's (1966) main contribution is in the field of writing styles, particularly the study of cultural rhetorical structures known as 'contrastive rhetoric'. Kaplan

argues that different cultures employ different rhetorical structures in order to communicate, structures which reflect differing cultural cognitive orientations. He states that, "Each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and that part of the learning of a particular language is the mastery of its logical system" (p.14). It is not difficult to see that Kaplan was heavily influenced by the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis.

Hofstede's (1980; 1991) large-scale longitudinal studies on worldwide cultural similarities and differences are both qualitative and quantitative. He categorizes cultures according to four dimensions: individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity, and assigns numerical values to each. The resulting grid supposedly allows the reader to accurately place a culture on a worldwide scale. It should be noted though that Hofstede's categories are not static. He correctly recognizes fluctuations and variations within a culture (particularly in the dichotomy of individualism vs. collectivism) and sees these features as existing on a continuum, not as fixed polemic opposites, although, as we shall see, this was not always appreciated or understood by those citing him.

The two other common referents are largely derived from the above works. Barnlund's (1979) notion of a collective unconscious in which cross-cultural communication is said to be hindered by unconsciously held cultural mandates that inform the participants'

worldviews, is traceable to the tenets of cultural anthropology but Barnlund applied it more to language and discourse habits. Ishii & Bruneau's influential (1994) discussion on the role of silence in Japanese communication extends from Barnlund, which itself is an extension of Hall's low/high context dichotomy. Gudykunst (1994) extrapolates in detail from the individualist/collectivist dichotomy of Hofstede (1986), again applying these findings largely to discourse patterns.

### *Recent Critiques*

Recently a number of studies have criticized many of the presumptions and conclusions of researchers from the cultural anthropology wing regarding the habits and learning styles of Asian, and in particular Japanese, EFL/ESL learners (see Kubota, 1999/2001; Susser, 1998; Pennycook, 1998). Many such critics claim that much allegedly 'objective' research about so-called 'Asian learning habits' is not objective at all but merely perpetuates a 'colonial discourse' which serves to essentialize a culture by reducing it to a few fixed essences' and thereby 'otherizes' it a criticism informed by Said's (1978) analysis of Western perceptions of the 'Orient'. Zamel (1997) and Spack (1997) add their voices by arguing that such essentialist constructs may effect how teachers view their students, that learners may be reduced to or bound by fixed cultural stereotypes.

Given the force of these criticisms, readers can't help but be confused by what appears to be a large amount of research indicating qualitative differences between Asian and Western learning habits and those who critique such research as being indelibly tinted by a colonialist mentality.

This writer does not share the socio-political perspective of those claiming that much of the research into cultural learning styles represents a type of neo-colonial discourse nor do I intend to pursue the legitimacy of these arguments here. But the influence of received wisdom's contrastive views of culture upon both Japan's popular media and foreign depictions of Japan is undeniably considerable, often adversely so (see Guest, 2002; Rose, 1996; Dougill, 1995; Kubota, 1999). Mabuchi (1995), and Miller (1982) in particular have documented numerous cases in popular media in Japan in which applications of these research 'facts' about Japanese versus Western cultural habits contradict one another and are selectively or inconsistently applied, as well as unquestioned and uncritical assumptions about Western or Japanese culture that often do not cohere with observable behaviours. Given this, the foundations of a contrastive approach to culture and subsequent like-minded studies can and should be critiqued.



## Analysis

### *Uncritical acceptance of 'seminal' scholarship*

The most obvious and fundamental fault I have noted in EFL/ESL research articles that analyze Japanese culture and language is a widespread, uncritical acceptance of the conclusions of works of Hall, Kaplan, Hofstede, Gudykunst and Barnlund. The fact is that these seminal works contain much that is speculative and anecdotal. Hall and Kaplan, in particular, base much of their position upon personal, subjectively interpreted observations. Not surprisingly then, these authors themselves often call for caution in terms of how their theories are applied. For example, Grabe & Kaplan (1996) admitted that his findings were never intended to be applied at the level of language pedagogy. Barnlund (1989) speaks of certain views of culture as taking on the status of a myth, stating that there “may be a substantial gap between cultural clichés and realities”, (p.167). Hofstede’s (1980) cultural categories and assigned numerical values are also based upon much received wisdom about other cultures; they are admittedly not the sole product of rigorous independent research. Surely assigning numerical values is as subjective as grading figure skaters with numbers; Numerical values hardly ensure objectivity.

Leki (1991) goes one step further in arguing that applying contrastive analysis to the teaching of rhetoric usually oversimplifies and turns into a type

of prescriptivism. Hymes (1986) explicitly rejects the simple application of cultural dichotomies noting that, “dichotomies do us the disservice of reducing diversity to polar opposites” (p.50).

Nonetheless, in many subsequent studies, these works are regularly cited as foundational premises, lending the credibility of objectivity to the author’s argument. Oi (1999) cites Kaplan (1966) as a source to argue for a distinctive Japanese rhetorical style as well as Hall’s (1976) high/low context dichotomy. Kimball (1996) cites Hinds (1983; 1987) who himself depends largely upon Barnlund as a premise in his study contrasting allegedly different Japanese and English rhetorical styles. Shibata (1996) cites Hall (1976) on cultural perceptions about time, as well as Hofstede (1986), Barnlund (1975) and Gudykunst (1994) on the individualist/collectivist distinction. Cogan (1995) cites Barnlund (1989) in order to advance his East vs. West polemic on silence and indirectness, as do Hazel & Ayres (1998). Yum (1994) cites Hofstede (1980) in order to legitimize his ‘East as collectivist/West as individualist’ premise. Stapleton (1998) boldly and positively describes Hofstede’s (1991) assigned numerical values as, “..tools which quantify behaviour and make it accessible for analysis” (p.80).

Barnlund (1994) himself does not directly cite Kaplan but clearly accepts Kaplan’s conclusions as researched facts. Nonaka (1996) cites Hall (1976)

on the desirability of utilizing contrasts as a basis for investigation and Barnlund (1979) to support her notion of confrontational, individualist rhetoric (English) vs. non-confrontational 'rapport' styles (Japanese). Shaules & Inoue (2000) cite both Hall (1976) and Gudykunst (1985) to support their advocacy of cultural relativism and a research focus upon differences. Oi & Kamimura (1997) cite Kaplan (1966) as support for their description of English as 'linear' but Japanese as 'multi-dimensional' arguing that "previous studies in contrastive rhetoric have presented ample evidence that rhetorical differences exist on the level of discourse" (p.81). Scollon (1999), Flowerdew (1998), and Liu (1998) all start from the highly generalized premise that Asian peoples have Confucian learning habits and thus employ different discourse forms than those found in English or The West, utilizing the methods and findings of this seminal research even if not directly citing them. Long (1999) begins from the premise that "...foreigners have different expectations and discourse norms" (p.29).

Noting all this, one can't help but conclude that speculative cultural anthropology has been miscast into a supportive role for monolithic assertions about culture and language. It appears that the intellectual hubris of a past era is still being treated as a series of established facts lending these studies a pretense of objectivity that may not be deserved. Moreover, since all of these premises are treated as a priori established facts, the

slippery slope towards prejudice can begin.

### *Questionable citations and sources*

Citations completely outside any relevant research framework are also often provided in order to buttress a position. Oi (1999) and Stapleton (1997) both cite a popular '*Nihonjin-ron*' (nationalist theories of Japanese 'uniqueness') tome by Matsumoto (1978) in order to argue for the existence of a peculiarly Japanese intuition and understanding of space and silence. Despite devastating critiques of *Nihonjin-ron's* applicability to academic discourse by Mouer & Sugimoto (1995) and Yoshida (1992), these dubious works are still cited in proof-texting. Kimball (1996) cites former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Reischauer (1988) to support his argument regarding indirectness in Japanese discourse. Stapleton (1997) calls upon controversial social critic Von Wolferen (1989) for support. Cogan (1996) and Clancy (1986) both cite the Japanese social commentator Doi (1974) for backup but, as Kubota (1999) noted, Doi's works are not informed by objective, impartial analysis but are largely anecdotal and subjective.

Citing such authors for reference in background setting is fine, but using such works for proof-texting is highly questionable. In citing these works as fixed premises, it allows these authors to effectively gerrymander the results of their inquiries. Citation



is used to validate highly speculative and subjective anthropological theorizing as if it were hard fact. By treating subjective and selective dichotomies such as linear thinking (West) vs. multi-dimensional thinking (East) as a researched fact and then using it as a tool for further inquiry it is no surprise that the conclusions tend to 'discover' differences between Japanese and English-speaking cultures (see Guest, 2002). The effect is basically tautological; an argument purporting to show that thinking or learning styles are different should not start from the premise that Japanese and English learning and thinking styles are fundamentally different.

It is true that critics of this approach such as Kubota (1999), Pennycook (1998), and Susser (1998) could themselves be accused of the same largely uncritical acceptance of supporting anecdotal, philosophical and subjective works by Said (1978) and Foucault (1980) regarding the role of discourses of power, but it should be noted that these critics cite these authors not as research evidence regarding language and culture per se but simply to share background information with the reader on the socio-political platform they are presenting.

Beyond the question of dubious sources, a number of contrastive studies resort to quoting proverbs and set phrases as support, particularly in the case of the alleged Japanese propensity towards vagueness and indirectness (see Condon, 1984; Lebra, 1987; Scollon & Scollon,

1995; Ishii & Bruneau, 1994; Nonaka, 1998). Rose (1996) and Susser (1998) rightly question this tactic as a meaningful research strategy by listing numerous Japanese proverbs displaying entirely opposing values, as does L. Miller (1994).

Another questionable practice is occasional employment of the insight of the cultural insider as support, the so-called 'emic' perspective that is foundational to so much of the seminal cultural anthropology research. Does an insider informant's viewpoint necessarily have a greater degree of validity? This seems to be an untenable notion for two reasons. Firstly, an acceptance of cultural insiders' accounts would lead to massive contradictions since numerous incompatible accounts would exist across any culture. As Atkinson (1999) notes, "...in some cases such research may depend on the explicit understanding of cultural informants who are not particularly well equipped to provide special insight and guidance in this regard" (p.648). Likewise, Clifford (1992) speaks of the hybrid native who does not necessarily represent an objective view of his/her culture. Littlewood (2000) discusses how natives often represent themselves via popular stereotypes. Secondly, if one is supposed to be unaware of the underlying strains of one's culture, as is often argued by those pursuing a contrastive approach, any interpretation would then surely be suffering from a severe case of cultural myopia.

### *Binary Categories; Reductionism and Essentializing*

This recurring notion of essential differences is also problematic at both the philosophical and methodological levels. The great majority of EFL/ESL studies comparing or analyzing Western culture vis-à-vis Japan tend to do so using set, fixed binary concepts creating a polarity that exaggerates reality. Some of the more ubiquitous dichotomies (some have already been alluded to) are as follows: polychromatic time vs. monochromatic time (Hall, 1976), low-context vs. high context (Hall, 1976), high vs. low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1986), individualism vs. collectivism (Gudykunst, 1994), speaker oriented vs. listener oriented (Hinds, 1987), directness vs. indirectness (Barnlund, 1979). And derived from the above to a greater or lesser degree are: self-select vs. other-select (Hazel & Ayres, 1998), high involvement vs. high considerateness (one of many from Nonaka, 1998), linear vs. multi-dimensional (Oi/Kamimura, 1999), top down vs. bottom up (Liu, 1998), helping/defining (Confucian Asia) vs. challenging/defending (West) in Flowerdew (1998). The list could be expanded exponentially.

Why are such dichotomies so ubiquitous? Atkinson (1999) wisely notes that there is a pre-disposition to creating dichotomies for the sake of research workability but that these could affect the data. Grabe & Kaplan

(1996) and Barnlund (1989) also explicitly recognize that a reduction to binary categories may not accurately express complex realities. Oi (1999) and Cogan (1996) too display an awareness of the dangers of cultural reductionism or essentializing but fail to incorporate this insight into their methodologies as it remains but a footnote in their respective research. Oi & Kamimura (1997), for example, point out (via Leki, 1991) that Kaplan's (1966) research was more intuitive than scientific, but that doesn't prevent them from using Kaplan's 'intuitive' dichotomies as a factual starting point for their inquiry.

Kubota (1999) echoes Said (1978) in the belief that binary logic often acts as a prelude to 'otherizing'. Such a reduction of complex realities to opposing binary concepts is known in logic parlance as a 'false dilemma'. And it is not surprising that when the grid of binary logic is imposed upon a study, the results of that study will form the shape of the binary opposites applied, much like cookie dough will naturally conform to the shape of the cookie cutter.

Thus, employing binary categories enhances the likelihood of tumbling into the pitfall of reducing complex realities to easy-to-control polar opposites. But an even greater danger can be seen in how these polarized dichotomies eventually become entrenched in later research as fixed, set, crystallized facts, not as mere tendencies existing along a continuum. This type of



reductionism is what is known as 'essentialism', the habit of classifying complex phenomena through limited, selective criteria, a pre-ordained set of fixed categories.

Unfortunately, much 'soft-science' academic discourse is naturally pre-disposed to distortion in this respect. Precisely because we tend to view knowledge and expertise as involving a greater ability to classify and distinguish categories more delicately, academic research is pre-disposed to discover and accentuate differences if only to maintain its legitimacy. In fact, if one took any two random collections of people, collected specific data on behaviour and habits of the two groups, the results of would almost by necessity, reveal differences between them. Our desire to classify these results would then allow us to treat these differences as fixed entities, as discrete, definable 'essences' of these two, randomly selected, groups.

I do not, of course, intend to deny the existence of cultural differences, but rather wish to warn that much research is pre-disposed to exaggerate them. Moreover, as we shall see, EFL/ESL research also tends to reduce entire complex cultures to singular, monolithic entities, containing little shading or variation. Monolithic constructs such as 'Western culture' or 'Japanese culture' may have a certain discursive value in common parlance but when employed in allegedly 'objective' culture research such terms tend to obscure or completely blanket any cultural shifts, nuance or subtleties.

### *Exoticizing and the 'Other' Language*

Pinker's (1994) treatment of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis contains a sharp critique. Pinker takes Whorf to task for his questionable characterization of the Hopi concept of time as 'revealed' in the forms of Hopi language. Whorf (1956) used the Hopi language as an example to allegedly prove how different languages produce different types of thinking in peoples and translated some samples of Hopi directly into English for this purpose. When Hopi is translated literally into English it comes across as rather awkward, as direct translations are apt to. Whorf though sees this exotic translation as a clear manifestation of the Hopi mind, and its apparently different understanding of temporal categories. But Pinker astutely points out that the 'exotic' translation is merely a product of Whorf's prescribed beliefs about Hopi thinking, since Whorf has already determined that the Hopi concept of time must be different from that of an English-speaker. Pinker rightly points out the tautology inherent in this argument.

Here, I would also accuse Whorf of exoticizing. Rendering a foreign tongue directly into English and then pointing out its exotic differences is not an uncommon practice in culture research. For example, Scollon (1994) argues that the first person singular pronoun is considered largely unacceptable in Confucian/Taoist/Buddhist writing because it allegedly places the individual before the collective identity.

Once again, a pre-conceived cultural notion, this time about collectivity, has been 'proven' by appealing to its appearance in language forms.

Another questionable practice common to the contrastive approach is claiming to find exotic points of contrast in another language, points that actually have clear parallels with English. This is nowhere more apparent than in the treatment of the allegedly 'Japanese' rhetorical pattern known as '*ki-sho-ten-ketsu*'. *Ki-sho-ten-ketsu* is one formulaic pattern which Japanese writers can use to compose an academic paper (for examples of other approaches to academic writing in Japanese see Ochi [2001] on the 'CARS' model's applicability to Japanese culture or Oi's [1999] description of Japanese as employing a general-specific rhetorical order while Americans are said to follow a specific-general pattern). The parts correspond roughly as follows: *ki*=introduction of topic; *sho*= background discussion; *ten*= the new input of the researcher; *ketsu*=the conclusion. It is not the default rhetorical style, but rather a recommended one. And it is limited to academic papers; it is not equivalent to the 'Japanese writing style', a singular, monolithic construct that does not exist. And it is certainly not equivalent to 'Japanese thinking' although some authors appear to want to make this categorical leap into generalities. *Ki-sho-ten-ketsu* seems to be a pet topic for those intent on 'discovering' different essences between Japanese and English because

at first glance it appears to represent an exotic, 'Oriental' formulae begging to be contrasted with standard English-language forms.

Backing up such claims of rhetorical exoticism in Japanese discourse are the works of Lakoff (1985), Clancy (1986), and Hinds (1983) who all employ a dichotomy depicting Japanese as receiver/listener oriented (thus putting the interpretive onus on the listener, which cultivates vagueness, intuition and indirectness) and English as speaker-based (which puts a premium on explicitness and directness). These claims however are largely derived from Doi (1974) and Hall (1976), whose interpretations are more subjective and speculative than scientific. In contrast, Hinkel (1999) claims, "according to Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist precepts associated with writing, the writer is perceived to be the champion of truth that he or she announces to the reader" (p.92).

Although, Rose (1996) notes that Hinds (1987) treated these characteristics as tendencies, not as hard rules, Kimball (1996) nonetheless cites Hinds to engage in such exoticism by describing *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* as being 'topsy-turvy' in relation to the logical order of English. Without evidence he claims that in English academic writing the conclusion is presented at the beginning. This is highly ironic in that Kimball's own study places its conclusion at the end as do most academic journals, as is mandated by the widely used APA format. He



also alludes to alleged differences such as *ki-sho-ten-ketsu*'s habit of introducing multiple topics in the middle sections, but surely this is no different from the standard academic English tradition of bringing in various background issues in which to ground one's claims. It seems that Kimball is so intent on characterizing Japanese rhetoric as entirely 'other' that he has mischaracterized or failed to accurately note the characteristics of his own language. Moreover, it should be apparent that *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* as a rhetorical pattern is thoroughly linear, a fact quite at variance with Kimball's presentation of Japanese rhetoric as being essentially vague, indirect and circular. Any description of Japanese thinking or writing processes as multi-dimensional, fuzzy and vague that goes on to represent this way of thinking via such a set, orderly, linear formula is clearly self-contradictory.

But people often seem to be oblivious to features found in their first language describing the same features as essentially 'other' when becoming conscious of them in learning or teaching a second language. For example, Oi (1999) claims that Japanese people do not use warrants, data and claims like Americans do, yet her argument to this end is backed up with, you guessed it, warrants, data and claims. The 'discovery' of exotically 'oriental' traits when contrasting languages seems to be particularly strong in language learning texts. For example, Aoki & Okamoto (1988) treat minimizing

the other's loss of face by using circumlocutions as a peculiarly Japanese cultural trait even though Brown & Levinson (1978) show that this strategy is regularly employed in English too. Yamada (1997) displays a clear awareness of the dangers of exoticizing another language (particularly in terms of the direct translation of Japanese politeness forms) but nonetheless treats the Japanese affirmative response '*hai*' (which is used as an '*aizuchi*', a back channeling/listening marker, as well as a marker of explicit agreement), as being based upon the questionable cultural presumption that Japanese is essentially listener-based, even though corpus-based works such as Carter & McCarthy's (1997) clearly indicate that the English 'yes' is used in the same discursive manner. Cogan (1996) and Nonaka (1996) likewise comment on a lack of '*aizuchi*' in English (Nonaka even notes the *absence* of *aizuchi* in English) even though corpus studies of the spoken language regularly indicate that this type of back channeling is standard. In opposing those who claim that Japanese demands a greater use of intuition in discourse, Rose (1996) points out that Gricean maxims show that we *all* in fact engage in the intuitive interpretation of meaning, that there is nothing mysteriously oriental about such linguistic behaviour.

The desire to ascribe general cultural attributes to the allegedly different rhetorical style of another language may be a powerful one but it should not serve as a

default explanation.' As Pinker (1994) showed, the English phrase 'he walks' could conceivably be rendered as, "As solitary masculinity, leggedness proceeds" (p.61), yet one would never use the latter phrase to indicate the 'exotic' thinking inherent in English speakers.

In many of these studies, Confucianism is presented as a primary factor in understanding differences between learning habits East and West. Much of this derives from Holliday (1994) who advocates pegging pedagogical practices to alleged cultural traits of learners. But what exactly are these traits? Flowerdew (1998) mentions the 'Confucian' values of cooperation, face, humanism and harmony in advocating a pedagogy sympathetic to the learners' alleged cultural values, but aren't cooperation, humanism, harmony and maintaining face valued in *all* cultures? Surely the number of scholarly works dealing with 'face-saving' and 'cooperative ventures' in English would have something to say about this! Yum (1994) argues that many Asian languages would be exempt from Gricean maxims such as 'be direct' because, he argues, directness is less of a cultural value in Asia. That Grice (1975) was not being prescriptive about proper language usage but merely outlining how implicatures are generated, which is something that applies to *all* languages, seems to have escaped Yum in his zeal to exposit exotic differences between East and West.

## Critical Literature; Alternative Voices

Interestingly, numerous other studies appearing within the same journals do argue explicitly against monolithic constructs of culture, binary constructs, essentialism and questionable hand-me-down stereotypes. Within these articles, many further studies are cited which contradict the findings held to be self-evident or established truths by those using the contrastive approach. Kubota (1999) and Susser (1998) have already been mentioned in this regard with Susser, in particular, citing a large number of contradictory or opposing findings. McVeigh (1997) questions the validity of using myth-oriented research such as '*Nihonjin-ron*' literature in culture research. Woodring's (1997) study counters many of Barnlund (1979) and Kaplan's (1966) dichotomies, indicating greater similarities between American and Japanese students in terms of power perceptions and relations. Rose (1996) counters claims of Japanese indirectness and vagueness with research showing that situational and generic factors can indicate great directness and explicitness in Japanese discourse, a finding corroborated in Beebe & Takahashi (1989) who conclude that despite the stereotype of indirect, avoidance-seeking Japanese, the Japanese can be *extremely* blunt, direct, and even rude, depending upon situational factors. Interestingly, Kubota (1999) attributes this behaviour to an over application of alleged English directness by Japanese speakers of English who may well regard English as



being relentlessly direct precisely because of the results of contrastive cultural research. This serves as a poignant example as to how polarized dichotomies can lead to the internalizing of unacceptable behaviours into practices that actually serve to increase interpersonal or intercultural friction.

Ozeki's (1995) study indicates a variety of Japanese learning habits to the extent that monolithic constructs such as 'the Japanese learning style' seem ridiculous. Porcaro (2001) argues against uniform constructs of 'Japanese education' citing examples of variety and creativity that challenge the stereotype. Littlewood's (2000) research brings into question Liu's (1998) and Flowerdew's (1998) assertions about Confucian culture and related assumptions that Asian learners will be obedient and passive. Sargent (2001) takes Shaules & Inoue (2000) to task for creating, in his view, an artificial dichotomy between relativism and universalism, claiming that Shaules & Inoue use Bennett (1993) as support in a way that he never intended to be interpreted.

Noting all this, one might be inclined to state simply that incompatible conclusions extend from the bulk of the research, much in the same way that Sower (1999) argues that Kubota's (1999) citation of papers that appear to debunk certain essentialist notions about Japan is at least matched by the number of papers that support these essentialist arguments. But I believe that there is

more to it than that. Critics of those who propagate the contrastive approach with its monolithic, binary constructs are well aware of both the research methods and content of their ideological adversaries and regularly make direct reference to them. But those who propagate a contrastive approach seem to be either oblivious to their critics and instead simply rely on received wisdom as apparently self-evident truth or merely dismiss critical research as a footnote. Of those who are oriented towards a contrastive approach only Atkinson (1999) shows a well-rounded and consistent awareness of the critics and their research and a willingness to deal with them directly.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have identified numerous common fallacies and methodological inconsistencies in the literature pertaining to the relationship between Japanese or Asian culture and language learning. Among these we have noted:

- an uncritical acceptance of speculative and subjective 'received wisdom' as fact.
- an application of this received wisdom in forms that the original authors did not intend.
- a propensity to reductionism, particularly to binary opposites, thereby creating false dilemmas.
- a propensity to reduce complex cultures to a few essential cultural pegs for the sake of easy

interpretation.

- a tendency to exoticize and thus inaccurately represent foreign language features as representative of wholly 'other' cultural traits.
- an unwillingness to deal with, or ignorance of, critical research or research that has led to opposing conclusions.

All of this is not to argue, of course, that cultural differences do not exist. Nor am I arguing that valuable insights into the relationship between culture, language and cognition have not arisen from contrastive literature. What I have tried to do here is not to wholly refute their findings but rather to point out some of the fallacies and inconsistencies that bring their conclusions into question. Based on my findings, I call for a more

rigorous analysis of the previous literature as well as the methodology employed by the researcher. I believe that researchers should not so readily accept questionable notions such as determinism uncritically nor gloss over the mechanics of causality; because culture is nebulous, dynamic, fluid it does not lend itself well to easy analysis. I call upon researchers to resist the urge to reduce cultures to binary opposites which produce false dichotomies, distort realities and easily lead to the stereotyping, exoticizing, or essentializing of a culture. Researchers should be agents of discovery not transmitters of previously held dogmas and prejudices. If we hope to accurately portray the culture under study and truly help teachers and learners to absorb this understanding in ways beneficial to the classroom, it is the least one should do.

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