

## FORUM

Richard Mezo has written a response to Kathryn Taylor Mizuno's article, "Micro-analysis: A technique for helping Japanese students of English" (Vol. 5, Oct., 1983). Mr Mezo's response is followed by a reply from Ms Mizuno.

### JARGON, WEASEL WORDS, AND BARRIERS TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In a recent article in the *JALT Journal* (October 1983) concerning "macro-analysis techniques" in teaching oral English, Kathryn Taylor Mizuno speaks of what she calls "the new field of intercultural communication." From the author's comment about the field, I would indeed hesitate to call it new – the coinage of some new terms or the introduction of new jargon does not make a new field. I think that teachers of English to speakers of other languages have been concerned, for quite some time, with the cultural barriers to learning. However, I do not want to argue the point here; I am interested, rather, in jargon itself and in "weasel words" that may be used to cover up problems which need to be faced and solved. It seems that, with increasing frequency, ESL/EFL teachers are becoming fond of jargon and weasel words used to sidestep or avoid some of the unpleasant aspects of life. It is as though some teachers want to avoid the responsibility for noticing and speaking about such things as racial prejudice. Ms. Mizuno's article provides a good example of this problem in the use of jargon and weasel words.

In her article, for example, Ms. Mizuno quotes at length from the work of a "cultural anthropologist" concerning the cultural barrier in communication. It is worth considering the statement in full:

Nakane Chie. . . points out one source of difficulty for Japanese in communicating with non-Japanese. She notes that a basic rule for social interaction for the Japanese is

that there are three basic groups of people; those within one's own group, those whose background is fairly well known and those whose background is unknown. Non-Japanese people fall in the third category. Nakane concludes: "If the Japanese had some general code of manners for dealing with people which did not differentiate [these three categories of people] they might have an easier time approaching or interacting with foreigners."

The statement above is couched in social science jargon – and it is cant of a dangerous and malicious sort. What is Nakane Chie actually saying here? The reality hidden behind this jargon may be stated thus: "The Japanese have trouble communicating with others because they have extreme racial prejudices. If they did not have racial prejudices, it would be easier for them to communicate with foreigners." Then why not come right out and say it? Well, because racism is not a pleasant subject and it may be avoided to some extent by the use of jargon. And how easy it is for a writer to evade his or her responsibility to be honest:

There is one source of difficulty for American southern "rednecks" in communicating with non-white people. A basic rule for social interaction for the American southern rednecks is that there are three basic groups of people: those within one's own group, those whose background is fairly well known and those whose background is unknown. Non-white people (especially blacks) fall into the third category. We should conclude that if the American southern redneck had some general code of manners for dealing with people which did not differentiate these three categories of people, they might have an easier time approaching or interacting with blacks and other non-white people.

And thus we would explain away, in a fog of jargon, the KKK and neo-Nazi groups and other bigots who preach racial superiority and continue to thrive upon racial hatred – and thus we contribute our small part to racial prejudice and discrimination. We could not use terms such as "racial prejudice" for these terms have moral connotations and we are, after all,

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“social scientists.”

Closely related to the use of jargon is the use of weasel words, and again Ms. Mizuno’s article provides a good example of this second problem. Dean Barnlund, who is described as “a leader in the field of intercultural communication”, makes the following statement about the “culture gap” between Japan and the United States:

If one were forced to choose a few words to capture the ethos of these societies they might be these: homogeneity, hierarchy, collectivity and harmony for Japan; heterogeneity, equality, individualism and change for the United States.

But let us consider Mr. Barnlund’s comparisons a little more carefully:

<i>Japan</i>		<i>U.S.</i>
homogeneity	—	heterogeneity
hierarchy	—	equality
collectivity	—	individualism
harmony	—	change

When these words are taken from the context of the sentence and are displayed in paired groupings, it is easier to notice what is wrong here. The writer has not tried to match these words — he has substituted weasel words for more natural, more logical words in his contrast:

<i>Japan</i>		<i>U.S.</i>
homogeneity	—	heterogeneity
authoritarianism	—	equality
conformity	—	individualism
stasis	—	change

I am not suggesting that these are truly the distinguishing characteristics of societies in Japan or in the United States; I am suggesting that they are more logical pairings than those of Mr. Barnlund. And I am saying that the former pairings represent a dishonest attempt to avoid problems rather than an attempt to recognize and deal with them.

I do agree, however, with the thrust of Ms. Mizuno's article to the effect that discussion and debate are essential features of democratic societies and that these are not well known in non-democratic societies. But effective discussion and debate depend upon clarity and honesty; jargon which attempts to cover up problems and weasel words only serve to impede the process of communication. Teachers of English must begin to recognize the problem of using jargon and weasel words before intercultural communication can be successful.

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#### A RESPONSE TO RICHARD E. MEZO

I welcome this opportunity to respond to the comments made by Richard E. Mezo about my article in the October, 1983 *JALT Journal*.

I agree with Mr. Mezo that clarity and honesty are essential for a meaningful discussion, and that the use of jargon and imprecise language prevents this. I would like to point out here, though, that I believe that in neither of the two instances he cites are the authors quoted guilty of dishonest use of language in order to, in Mr. Mezo's words, "sidestep or avoid some of the unpleasant aspects of life." I would like to suggest in addition that Mr. Mezo's use of language seems to me to reflect some of his own biases and misconceptions of what is being said by the two authors he quotes and by myself in my article.

First, he condemns Nakane Chie for her "dangerous and malicious" use of "social science jargon" to describe what he calls "racial prejudice". While the patterns of interpersonal communication in Japanese society described by Ms. Nakane

in the passage cited (Nakane, 1974), p. 131) may provide an explanation for racial prejudice as it may exist in Japan, Ms. Nakane's analysis is based on a study of the way Japanese interact *with other Japanese*. The "third category" of people includes other Japanese as well as non-Japanese, so that race is not the central issue. Mr. Mezo's use of the term "racial prejudice" here is thus inappropriate.

In citing Ms. Nakane I was trying to illustrate how differences in basic cultural values can be a barrier to communication among people of differing cultural backgrounds. Observers of Japanese society – professional and non-professional, Japanese and non-Japanese alike – agree that the strong orientation to group is a dominant influence in interpersonal relations in the culture. People of the dominant culture in Japan tend to see others as either being members of one's group or not – as either insiders or outsiders. I intended to show in my article that there may be serious miscommunication in an encounter between a typical Japanese and a typical American, where the Japanese views the American as an outsider while the American views the Japanese as another individual with whom he can communicate on an equal basis. If a discussion of the sort that is common in the English speaking world is based on thesis and antithesis, the premises of which are "parity and confrontation on an equal footing" (Nakane, 1970, p. 35), and the Japanese does not view the non-Japanese as an equal, there may be miscommunication unless both parties in the discussion are aware that there are those basic differences in their world views.

I concur with Mr. Mezo in deploring the 'preaching of racial superiority and thriving on racial hatred' that are the result of severely ethnocentric attitudes. I also have a concern, however, for a much more subtle form of ethnocentrism which Mr. Mezo's article itself seems to me to reflect: the assumption that one's own values are superior to those of others. This seems to be an unconscious attitude at the base of Mr.

Mezo's criticism of what he calls the "weasel words" that Mr. Barnlund uses to describe Japanese society (Barnlund, 1975, p. 161).

Mr. Mezo shows a clear cultural bias in his choice of "more logical" words to substitute for those used by Mr. Barnlund. He has changed Barnlund's neutral terms to words implying a negative value judgement on his part. To be consistent would it not be "more logical" to pair terms that both imply negative value judgements, such as the following?

<i>Japan</i>		<i>U.S.</i>
homogeneity	—	heterogeneity
authoritarianism	—	anarchy
conformity	—	egotism
stasis	—	restlessness

To counterbalance his list of terms for Japanese society as it might be seen by a critical non-Japanese, this is a similar list of terms for the U.S. that might be used by a critic of that society. Or one could choose terms with more positive connotations for both societies:

<i>Japan</i>		<i>U.S.</i>
homogeneity	—	heterogeneity
social order	—	egalitarianism
loyalty to group	—	self-reliance
traditionalism	—	progress

Barnlund has attempted to describe each society in as objective terms as possible, but he recognises the "difficulty of making any comparative statement without implying, or having attributed to it, some sort of cosmic judgement. No matter how careful the research it must embody the assumptions of some culture; no matter how objective the conclusions, they must be stated and read from some cultural perspective. Although the effects of cultural biases can be resisted, they can never be totally eliminated" (Barnlund, 1975, p. ix). Thus, read from Mr. Mezo's apparent cultural bias, Barnlund's terms for U.S. society seem positive, and those for Japanese society seem to be dishonest, deceptive "weasel words".

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What we must strive for in order to communicate more effectively with people whose values differ from our own is not to be value-free, but to be aware of the cultural relativity of our own values, so that we can seek to understand how they may differ from those of others. Barnlund states in his conclusion, "The boundaries of our countries are no longer the borders of our minds. It is vitally important – perhaps even a matter of survival – that we come to comprehend and appreciate what other peoples feel and know. This kind of interpersonal empathy can enlarge human perspectives and multiply opportunities for personal and cultural growth" (Barnlund, 1975, p. 173).

As long as we teachers of English as a second language ignore this we will be imposing our cultural values on our students, rather than discovering through meaningful communication with them how our ideas and attitudes may differ, thus developing better understanding between us.

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