

A STUDY OF NONVERBAL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN JAPANESE AND AMERICANS – FOCUSING ON THE USE OF THE EYES

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to identify various characteristics in eye behavior between Japanese and Americans. There are many characteristics common to both cultures but there are also many differences between them. Japanese and Americans have different levels for acceptable amounts of eye contact and different rules for when it should occur. It seems desirable that both Japanese and Americans should acquaint themselves with important aspects of eye behavior in order to improve and promote intercultural understanding.

本論文の目的は日米間の視線情報伝達行動の特徴を明らかにすることである。人間はそれぞれが所属している文化によって視線行動が異なる。日本人の視線行動は日本文化を反映し、アメリカ人の視線行動はアメリカ文化を反映している。視線行動を考察することによって、よりよい異文化間コミュニケーションの方策を試みる。

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Introduction

Many misunderstandings in intercultural communication between Japanese and American are due not only to linguistic problems, but also misunderstanding of nonverbal behavior patterns. Nonverbal messages are as important as verbal messages, for they tell us how verbal messages are to be interpreted; for example, nonverbal messages can indicate whether verbal messages are to be taken seriously, jokingly, or whether someone is lying.

A most promising start in studying nonverbal communication is to choose one important nonverbal area and to concentrate on understanding this special area. I have chosen the area of eye behavior. There are two reasons why I have chosen it. One is that "Eye behavior, alone, appears to be the most important regulator of personal interaction." (McCroskey and Wheelless, 1978). Another reason is that there are many differences in eye behavior between Japanese and Americans, and these can give rise to misunderstandings between the two cultures.

People should pay attention to and recognize the importance of eye behavior, and should also know that knowledge of culturally specific eye behavior helps to avoid misunderstanding between different cultures.

1. Japanese and American Eye Behavior

Eye behavior varies according to cultural background. Kanayama (1977) says that in Japanese culture, the amount of gaze is very slight during a conversation, especially when having a conversation with a superior, a Japanese looks slightly downward. Some Japanese even close their eyes when listening. Compared to the Japanese, Kanayama says that Americans think that it is insincere or a sign of weakness of character to avoid eye contact.

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LePape (1980) analyzed Yasujiro Ozu's movies and reported that in Ozu's movies, people sit side by side when talking to each other and rarely hold a mutual gaze. He says that it is painful for a Japanese to have a constant gaze while talking, so the Japanese gaze moderately. If a Western person keeps on gazing during a conversation, a Japanese might feel uncomfortable. Concerning the direction of gaze in Japanese people, Sato (1977) says that mutual gaze means to see through each other's mind, and is one of the most basic ways to show mutual reliance. But the Japanese feel comfortable without a lot of eye contact and can maintain lively conversation while avoiding eye contact most of the time. Itami (1973) emphasized the importance of eye behavior and said that when the actor assimilated the role, his gaze direction is exactly where it should be. LePape used Tada's theory (1978), indicating that since Japanese aren't accustomed to looking into other people's eyes, they feel pressured when they find nothing to look at apart from the other person. When a Japanese has a guest in his home, the host must have some place that the guest can look at. For example, looking at the *Kakejiku*, a long vertical hanging scroll with a painting or calligraphy on silk or paper, helps to cut down mutual gaze between the host and the guest. LePape also says that the Japanese attachment to flowers, birds, the wind and moon are related to eye contact. Such things could be the best targets of gaze during a conversation when a Japanese wants to avoid mutual eye contact.

It can be said that Japan has a hierarchical and collective society while American society is based on social equality and individuality (Barnlund 1975, Nakane 1984, Hattori 1985a). Kobayashi (1982) says that in a hierarchical society, people of lower status always have to behave modestly; modesty is shown by averting one's gaze and looking down. Morris (1972) says that the bow has a soothing effect not because it shows a humble attitude but because it represents

a symbolic avoidance of invading another's space. Japanese usually avoid mutual gaze, so this could be one reason why the bow has become very common in Japan.

Japanese children are taught by their parents that looking into other people's eyes is immodest. One of the most popular books on manners in Japan, *Ogasawara-Ryu Reihou Nyumon* (1984), states that one should look between the eyes and the chest when facing another person, instead of looking right into the eyes. American children are taught to look at other people's eyes during conversation. Their parents teach them to look at the eyes when their parents are talking to them. There is a different regulative consciousness behind eye behavior in different cultures (Hattori 1985b).

2. Characteristics Common to Both Japanese and Americans

We have seen that eye behavior varies according to cultural background, but we can find characteristics common to different cultures. I observed patterns of conversation between Japanese and Americans at Joetsu University of Education according to my 12 observational guidelines (see Appendix). The subjects were two Americans from Iowa, male, aged 43, and female, aged 40. All conversation was in English. Japanese subjects included 42 undergraduate students, 21 graduate students, 5 faculty members and their families at Joetsu University of Education. The observation was carried out over a period of exactly two weeks.

There were characteristics of eye behavior found to be common to both Japanese and Americans.

- One looks more while listening than while speaking.
- When one is just about to start speaking, one looks away from the interlocutor.
- At the end of an utterance, the speaker always looks at the interlocutor.
- When the speaker looks at the listener, the listener

looks back at the speaker's eyes and gives signals of various kinds.

- One looks away when one is thinking or organizing one's message.
- One looks less when topics of conversation are not interesting.

These indicate that both Japanese and Americans use eye behavior as a method of obtaining feedback from the interlocutor.

3. Differences in eye behavior between Japanese and Americans

Many Americans regard a person as being a slightly suspicious or shifty character if he does not make a certain amount of culturally prescribed eye contact with his partner when talking face-to-face (Argyle, 1967). Japanese children are taught in school to direct the gaze at the region of their superior's Adam's apple or tie knot (Morsbach, 1982).

Morsbach (1982) quotes comments by Mr. Wagatsuma, a Japanese who has lived in America for many years:

I am notorious for my habit of looking straight into a person's eyes when I am talking to him. This, I have been told, annoys or makes the person feel uneasy or threatened in Japan. I therefore try not to do that so often when talking to Japanese as I do talking to Americans. Older people, like my father, try not to look at the Emperor's eyes too long (when being presented to him), which means they look slightly downward, psychologically lowering themselves before him.

According to Barnlund (1975) Japanese in general prefer an interpersonal style in which aspects of the self made accessible to others, the "public self," are relatively small,

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while the proportion that is not revealed, the “private self,” is relatively large. Americans generally prefer a communicative style in which the self made accessible to others is relatively large while the proportion that remains concealed is relatively small. This suggests that what an American knows about himself is more readily shared with others and one manifestation of this principle is the greater eye contact of Americans.

The following data are compiled from surveys given to 45 bilingual and bicultural students who had lived in the United States. They came from four high schools which have special courses or classes for students returning from foreign countries. Data was taken from 72 students, but only 45 could be chosen as being truly bilingual and bicultural; these students had lived in the United States for at least two years and used English to communicate with their friends. All returnees who had studied at Japanese schools only had to be omitted, no matter how long they had lived in the United States; through interviews with them I came to realise that they were neither bilingual nor bicultural.

The questions and answers are summarized as follows:

- *Do you think you gaze more when compared to your Japanese friends who have lived only in Japan?*

a great deal more	11%
much more	40%
a little more	36%
about the same	13%
a little less	0%
much less	0%
a great deal less	0%

- *What impression did you have of Japanese who avoided making eye contact with you during the conversation?*

<i>friendly:</i>	
extremely friendly.	0%
very friendly	0%

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somewhat friendly	7%
neither friendly nor unfriendly	24%
somewhat unfriendly	42%
very unfriendly	18%
extremely unfriendly	9%
<i>polite:</i>	
extremely polite	0%
very polite	2%
somewhat polite	2%
neither polite nor impolite	22%
somewhat impolite	18%
very impolite	36%
extremely impolite	20%
<i>respectful:</i>	
extremely respectful	0%
very respectful	0%
somewhat respectful	11%
neither respectful nor disrespectful	36%
somewhat disrespectful	20%
very disrespectful	20%
extremely disrespectful	13%

From this survey, we can say that bilingual and bicultural students gaze more than Japanese students without significant foreign experience, and also have negative impressions about avoiding gaze. There appear to be two reasons for this. One is that when these students first went to the United States, they had difficulty in understanding English. They had to catch as much information as possible from their interlocutor therefore the amount of gaze increased. The second is that it is 'natural' to maintain eye contact while carrying on a conversation in the United States, so the students got used to looking at others during the conversation.

I observed the English Conversation Seminar held at the Education Center in Kanagawa prefecture. The participants

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were eight American Monbushou English Fellows (MEF, native speaker assistants who teach English in junior and senior high schools in Japan), one American exchange teacher, 26 Japanese high school English teachers, and three English teachers' consultants. The observation was carried out over two days, for a total of 15 hours using the same twelve observational guidelines. This observation at the Education Center confirmed the results of observations at Joetsu University of Education, and additional characteristics were found as well.

- Americans react by eye language much more than do Japanese.
- Japanese use more verbal feedback than Americans. Words like "Yeah" and "Uh-huh" were used by Japanese approximately 20% more often than by Americans.

It is true that Americans sometimes have difficulties in communicating with Japanese because of the lack of eye contact. But we have seen that Japanese do use eye behavior in communication. It can be said that Japanese and Americans have different rules for when it should occur.

Conclusion

In this paper, cultural influences on eye behavior have been discussed. There was a difference in eye behavior between Japanese and Americans, but we were also able to find many characteristics common to both cultures. This means that much eye movement consists of messages to which both Japanese and Americans attach similar meaning. For both Japanese and Americans, eye behavior helps verbal communication and plays a very important role, even though some eye behaviors take place quite unconsciously.

Today's increased intercultural contact may bring additional misunderstanding, friction, and tension; the impact of non-

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verbal communication in different cultures needs to be recognised. Eye behavior undoubtedly helps to avoid misunderstanding, not only between different cultures but also within our own culture.

Appendix

Knapp (1978) proposed a system of categories for a global analysis of observing human interaction. It is designed to furnish a general framework for looking at interpersonal transactions and gives a feeling for the type of judgements that need to be made when observing communication. On the basis of Knapp's categories, and in collaboration with another observer and the communicators themselves, a set of guidelines was evolved: (1) Is there generally a lot of visual contact, or not very much? Why? (2) Do one or both participants seem to stare or extend eye contact beyond normal limits? Why? (3) Do one or both participants seem to avoid eye contact beyond normal limits? Why? (4) In what circumstances does one person look away? Why? (5) Where do they look when one person is not looking at the other person? Is there any identifiable pattern? (6) Is there any excessive blinking by one or both parties? When do they blink most? (7) At what point is gaze most evident? Not evident? Why? (8) Do communicator and listener have relatively consistent eye behavior? When does eye behavior change? (9) Are they communicating attitude or emotions with their eyes? (10) Were there gross changes in eye behavior at certain points in the conversation? (11) Were there times when one person's eye behavior elicited a similar or opposite eye behavior response from the other person? (12) What effect does eye gaze, or lack of it, seem to have on the other participant?

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