



Australia and Japan: Cross-cultural Communication Problems

by J. V. Neustupný

More than any other Asian country, Japan is indispensable to Australia. For decades to come the ability to communicate with the Japanese will remain a necessity rather than an option.

In 1976 Monash University started its systematic study of communication in Australian-Japanese interpersonal contact situations. A dissertation by Alice Murie, entitled *Communication Problems in Australia-Japan Business Relations*, confirmed two points of basic importance. First, a wide range of communication problems at an interpersonal level did exist. Secondly, the perception of these problems among businessmen was not necessarily pessimistic. Australian subjects in this study were not, at that point of Australian-Japanese relations, unduly critical of the communicative failures of their Japanese partners. Neither were the Japanese unhappy with the Australians or with themselves. In 1976 business was good and little misunderstandings or breaches of etiquette did not bring clouds to the clear sky.

In other words, communication problems in business are not important on their own. They stand out only when they combine with problems of socio-economic character. When official and corporate relations do not proceed as smoothly as in the 1970's, the lack of competence to communicate — for which usually the partner is held accountable — can be interpreted as a source or a symbol of the lack of good will, and become the ground on which mistrust or hostility grows.

'A widely held stereotype is that the teaching of Japanese and English solves the problem of communication.'

Japanese businessmen tend to be linguistically prepared for their jobs. In the case of other categories of Japanese speakers the problem of interpersonal communication becomes more pronounced. Tourists, convention visitors, and family members of Japanese sojourners struggle with the task to communicate even at a very elementary level. The issue is how to understand and produce messages necessary in order to return to one's lodgings, how to successfully shop or talk to a doctor. Virtually all categories of Australians ex-

perience similarly serious problems when they visit Japan or live in the country. Even if English is spoken, the problem of communicating and understanding remains.

How to remove communication problems

A widely held stereotype is that the teaching of Japanese and English solves the problem of communication. It does not. Language teaching is only one of several contributors which help people to understand each other.

'We shall never communicate cross-culturally unless we learn about the society and culture of our partners.'

First of all, we cannot communicate unless we know who the other person is. Is he the boss or the assistant of an assistant? There may be little sense in trying to convince the assistant concerning a point on which the boss himself decides. What does the other person normally think of the world, of accommodation facilities or of the suitability of food? How productive is it to speak of lamb to someone who hates the thought of it.

Our studies of Australian-Japanese communication have shown that in the 1970's Australian businessmen often possessed only minimal information concerning the structure of the Japanese institutions they dealt with and the role their Japanese partners played in those institutions. The same was true of the Japanese. Yet, how could these people effectively communicate if they in fact did not know who the people they were dealing with were?

We shall never communicate cross-culturally unless we learn about the society and culture of our partners. This knowledge includes such issues as why the Japanese are in Australia, what is the structure of the institutions they represent, how they normally live, what they think about the world, and what they think of Australia. Shockingly little of this socio-cultural information was normally included in traditional language courses of the past, or is included even in those courses that have just been established.

The second factor which is often missing in traditional courses of Japanese is concern about communication rules other than those included in standard grammar books. When we communicate, we unconsciously employ a large number of strategies and rules which decide to whom we speak, what we speak about, how long (and how structured) our communication will be, and many other things. Many such rules differ in different cultures; there are considerable discrepancies between Australia and Japan.

'The most pertinent knowledge they should possess concerns Japanese society and etiquette.'

One type of communication rule which has attracted a certain amount of general interest is so-called 'body language'. The issue is actually much wider than the catch-word suggests and we refer to it normally as the issue of nonverbal communication. In the case of Japan not only gestures and facial expressions may be different. We must know that the way we sit, move or dress is also of great importance. This knowledge is neither generally available nor incorporated into courses of Japanese.

Probably all Australian exchange students who studied in Japan remember their embarrassment when they took out a handkerchief and wiped their nose for the first time. The whole class roared with laughter. People never clean their nose in Japan in public, and the handkerchief is regarded as unclean — as indeed it is.

'Until not long ago many linguists believed that if the language used in a contact situation was English, all participants would accept Australian rules and norms of behaviour.'

Many communication rules of this type have traditionally been called 'etiquette'. They are rules which govern the communication of politeness. Again, in traditional language teaching etiquette has been accorded negligible or no attention. However, the 1976 Victorian Higher School Certificate Japanese syllabus, for the first time in Japanese language teaching, introduced a comprehensive section on etiquette and this has been transferred to the current Victorian Certificate Education syllabus.

Similarly comprehensive components have been available to students at Monash University and a separate course in *Japanese Business Etiquette* has been offered in its 1988 Summer School by the Japanese Studies Centre Inc.

Traditional language teaching thus covers only a small part of the whole process of communication. Most Australians who wish to learn how to communicate effectively with the Japanese will naturally communicate in English and the most pertinent knowledge they should possess concerns Japanese society and etiquette. However, language study must not be underestimated. There is also a need for a very large number, a multiple of the current number, of people who can use fluently the Japanese language, both in speaking and in writing.

It is not difficult to imagine what the pyramid of Japanese language teaching in the future will look like. There will be a variety of short, medium length and full length courses. Unlike at present most of the short courses will concentrate not on the Japanese language but on the knowledge of Japanese society, culture, etiquette, and other rules of communication. On the other hand, at least some of the full length courses must allow students to achieve a much higher level of competence — in all these components and in the Japanese language — than any course offers at the present moment. This includes interaction not only in daily life situations but interaction in the administrative, commercial, educational and other specialized domains.

The distinctiveness of 'contact situations'

Problems of interpersonal communication cannot be understood unless we realize that behaviour in 'contact situations' substantially differs from behaviour in 'internal situations'. The latter are situations in which only members of the same culture participate: for instance only Australians (born in Australia and educated in English in Australia) or only the Japanese. On the other hand, 'contact situations' include participants from at least two different cultures (Neustupný, 1985).

Until not long ago many linguists believed that if the language used in a contact situation was English, all participants would accept Australian rules and norms of behaviour. However, subsequent research has shown that this is not the case. Irrespective of the language used, behaviour in an Australian-Japanese contact situation draws on rules from both the Australian and the Japanese systems, and at present we are still unable to predict what will be expected from participants in individual cases, and what will lead to communication problems.

We know that when Australians and the Japanese communicate in English, the Australians do not require from the Japanese an almost native accent. However, they expect that the Japanese will honour Australian rules of etiquette such as to remember names of people who have been introduced or rules which decide who, at the dinner table, will commence eating and when. We also know that under similar conditions the Japanese stick to their own rules of bodily posture and negatively evaluate the relaxed posture of their Australian partners in semi-formal or formal situations. This means that even when English is spoken, they continue using their own more 'classical' norms of posture, rather than the Australian norms.

'It is perhaps even more important to recognise that behaviour which would not be expected either in English or in Japanese also routinely appears.'

It is perhaps even more important to recognise that behaviour which would not be expected either in English or in Japanese also routinely appears. There are several reasons for this, which cannot be discussed here. However, one important type of this phenomenon is what we call 'pidginization', 'simplification' or 'loss of control'. Participants who pidginize (simplify, or lose control over) their behaviour in contact situations appear to their partners from the other culture to be insufficiently socialized.

An example of pidginization is the failure of the Japanese (when speaking English) or the Australian (when speaking Japanese) to communicate what they actually want to communicate; they simplify what they would normally say or say something else.

'Our research has also emphasized the fact that the large majority of the Japanese in Australia are not migrants but sojourners.'

Foreign speakers in contact situations can appear as 'rather simple' people. Sometimes they cannot control their laughter and are assessed as 'always cheerful' or if they cannot switch laughter on, are evaluated as 'dull'.

Communicative pidginization leads thus not only to problems in not being able to convey a particular

message. It also leads to misunderstanding about the intentions and personality of the participants. They appear as someone else. Often people assume that a 'communication problem' is a problem in being able to convey what beverage we require or what type of beef we offer for sale. This type of problem obviously does occur. However, at the same time, communication between Australians and the Japanese also leads to enormous problems of a different kind: problems in communicating about one's intentions and personality, in other words, problems in presenting oneself.

I mentioned above that as long as the socio-economic relations between Australia and Japan are satisfactory, these self-presentation problems may not be of great importance. However, when the relations deteriorate, this type of miscommunication may become a crucial factor.

Some topics in research

The study of interpersonal problems in Australian-Japanese contact situations developed at Monash University in the 1970's as a part of a conscious research strategy aiming at the understanding of one of the most neglected areas of Australian-Japanese relations.

'It is necessary to develop further approaches that include, apart from language teaching, communication teaching and teaching for sociocultural interaction.'

The work started with the study of communication networks of Japanese women in Melbourne in two theses: one submitted by Anne Bolitho (see Bolitho 1975, 1976) and the other by Helen Marriott (see Marriott 1980, 1984). Some of the facts established, for instance the use of certain people as 'connectors' by the women in their dealing with the Australian society and the efficacy of membership in 'activities' networks (sport, culture courses, etc.), could be immediately transferred into the situation of Australian students in Japan and applied at our Monash Japanese Centre in Tokyo.

On the whole, the Australian networks of Japanese women were found not to be very extensive; yet, they were not entirely non-existent either. The Japanese have frequently been accused of 'keeping to themselves' when living overseas. However, this very simple stereotypic image has not been confirmed. Our research has also emphasized the fact



Children at the Morwell Primary School.

that the large majority of the Japanese in Australia are not migrants but 'sojourners'. I shall return to this matter later.

Problems encountered in the acquisition of English by the Japanese who live in Australia have been studied by Helen Marriott, Lesley Kehoe, and Mariko Kubota. The acquisition of Japanese by Australians has received detailed attention in a series of articles published in the *Japanese Journal of Japanese Language Teaching* with contributions by Akito Ozaki, Alina Skoutarides, Kuniko Yoshimitsu, Marika Kubota, Hiromi Masumi-So and Neustupný (Neustupný et al. 1981). This series became seminal in Japanese and other overseas studies of communication problems of foreign learners of Japanese and in the planning of courses at all levels. Particular mention must be made of further pioneering studies on 'foreigner talk' by Skoutarides and of correction strategies applied in the speech of Australians who are acquiring the Japanese language (Ozaki 1985, 1988).

Some studies which have direct bearing on the timely issue of short term visitors to Australia and

Japanese tourists have been *Perceived Interaction Difficulties of Australian Tourists in Japan* by Takako Asaoka, *Japanese Scientists in Melbourne* (Ito 1986), Jennifer Morton's dissertation on *Japanese Academics' Image of Australia*, Robyn Spence-Brown's *Japanese Exchange Students in Australia*, and Takako Asaoka's paper entitled *Communication Problems Between Japanese and Australians at a Dinner Party* (Asaoka 1987).

'Modern language teaching cannot be based on rough assumptions and wishful thinking. It must build on hard data.'

Problems in business communication have received considerable attention. Let me mention just a few studies: Christine Bank's *Reader in Legal and Administrative Japanese*, Masumi-So's study of Japanese used by Japanese businessmen in Australia and Kuniko Yoshimitsu's *Some Aspects of*

Communication within a Melbourne Branch of a Japanese Trading Company. It was on the basis of research such as this that the first postgraduate course in Administrative and Business Japanese could be introduced in the early 1980's and a full MA and Diploma program in Japanese Business Communication in 1987.

A further massive contribution in this area is a project currently being completed by Helen Marriott on problems of etiquette in communication between Australian and Japanese businessmen.

The Morwell community project

Of basic importance is a new project coordinated by the Japanese Studies Centre Inc., which is entitled *The Japanese Community at Morwell*. Morwell, located in the La Trobe valley approximately 150km from Melbourne, has a Japanese community of approximately 200 people. This community was established in 1982 in connection with the brown coal liquefaction project supported by the Japanese and the Australian governments (see Edgington 1987). The community will cease to exist when the project is terminated in 1990.

The project is important for at least two reasons. First, the Morwell community represents the largest concentration of the Japanese in Australia outside the capital cities (where the patterns of daily life are, of course, different). It provides an excellent opportunity to establish how to communicate with Japanese and how to incorporate them into local Australian communities.

Secondly, the Morwell Japanese are an example of a *sojourner* community, which is typical for the Japanese overseas. Unlike migrants, sojourners return to the country of their origin or proceed to a new overseas location.

In Australia we have so far paid almost exclusive attention to migrants and migrant communities. However, the number of sojourners and sojourner communities must be expected to grow in the future.

As I mentioned above, if we want to understand the problems of Australian-Japanese communication we must accept that most of the Japanese in Australia are 'sojourners' and study their social behaviour and communication. Morwell provides an excellent opportunity for such study. The project coordinates at present the work of seven researchers, including a visiting Japanese sociologist.

Conclusions

I have outlined a few principles which can guide our approach to Australian-Japanese communica-

tion problems at the interpersonal level, and provided some information on research conducted in the area so far.

The research has confirmed the existence of a large number of interpersonal communication problems. Some of them remain at present covert, but many are overtly present and call for removal and future prevention. It is necessary to develop further approaches that include, apart from language teaching, communication teaching and teaching for sociocultural interaction.

One important condition of success is the combination of language studies with a social science approach to Japan. This has been found at Monash, the University of Western Australia and Griffith University.

Another condition is the development of research into Australian-Japanese communication problems. The major justification for language teaching is the need to remove communication problems. However, modern language teaching cannot be based on rough assumptions and wishful thinking. It must build on hard data.

Further research into interaction and communication problems is one of the major tasks of the development of Japanese studies — and Asian studies in general.

Bibliography:

- Asaoka, T. Communication Problems between Japanese and Australians at a Dinner Party. *Working Papers of the Japanese Studies Centre* 3, 1987.
- Bolitho, M.A. Communicative Problems of Japanese Women in Melbourne. *Linguistic Communications* 15, pp. 1-94, 1975.
- Bolitho, M.A. Communicative Networks of Japanese Women in Melbourne. *Australia Talks*, ed. by M.G. Clyne, Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, pp. 103-111, 1976.
- Edgington, D.W. A Short History of the Brown Coal Liquefaction Pilot Plant at Morwell, Victoria. *Working Papers of the Japanese Studies Centre* 10, 1987.
- Ito, Y. Japanese Scientists in Melbourne. *Working Papers of the Japanese Studies Centre* 7, 1986.
- Marriott, H.E. Written Networks among Japanese Women in Melbourne. *ITL* 49-50, pp. 137-146, 1980.
- Marriott, H.E. *English of Japanese Women in Melbourne*. *Papers of the Japanese Studies Centre* 12, 1984.
- Marriott, H.E. Introductions in Australian-Japanese Contact Situations. *Working Papers of the Japanese Studies Centre* 4, 1985.
- Neustupný, J.V. et al. Gaikokujin no nihongo kyooiku no jittai (The current situation of TJFL). *Journal of Japanese Language Teaching* 45, pp. 30-114, 1981.
- Neustupný, J.V. Problems in Australian-Japanese Contact Situations. In J.B. Pride (ed.), *Cross-Cultural Encounters: Communication and Mis-Communication*. Melbourne: River Seine Publications, pp. 44-64, 1985.
- Ozaki, A. Requests for Clarification: A Study of Correction Strategies. *Working Papers of the Japanese Studies Centre* 2, 1985.
- Ozaki, A. *Requests for Clarification in Conversation between Japanese and Non-Japanese*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics 1988.

Professor J.V. Neustupný is Chairman of the Department of Japanese at Monash University. He has recently published a general introduction to Japan and Australian-Japanese communication under the title *Communicating with the Japanese* (Tokyo: The Japan Times 1987).