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ABSTRACT

An essay compares Japanese and American language, reflecting on the fundamental culture-based differences between methods of communication in Japan and the United States. Japanese and Americans have different systems of logic and thought, attitudes, and ways of expressing themselves, all of which are affected by their respective background cultures. Natural environment is one of the major aspects of background culture, and it affects the method of expression, vocabulary, topic of conversation, values, and attitudes. People in Japan tend to express themselves as a part of nature, while Americans express themselves as the center of nature. Thus Japanese sentences often begin with conditions while English sentences start with people. Japanese also tend to use the passive voice more than Americans. In the same vein, the Japanese tend to use impersonal constructions, while Americans often use personal constructions. Natural background is one of the factors that has made Japanese descriptive and concrete and English analytic and abstract. Language is deeply related to background culture and culture is strongly affected by the natural environment. Therefore, language is influenced by its natural background in a variety of ways. (NKA)

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How Does Natural Environment Affect American and Japanese Ways of Expressing Themselves?

Kenji Kitao

The notion that language is deeply rooted in its background culture has been supported not only by anthropologists but also by linguists for more than a century.¹ The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is well known.² Language teachers, too, have supported this idea, and they believe that language should be taught within its culture.³

The purpose of language use is communication.⁴ However, intercultural communication is more difficult than communication among people with the same culture. Knowing other cultures and experiencing them improves communication with the people who have those cultural backgrounds. Culture affects communication indirectly through association. Thus, culture strongly limits the contents of communication. Culture also determines levels of communication, that is, how much speakers reveal of themselves.⁵ The ways of communication vary according to cultures. The Japanese and the Americans have different logic and methods of expressing themselves.⁶ Culture also relates to other means of communication, such as physical contact, time, place, human relations, and sex. Therefore, communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds effectively is very difficult without knowing their covert communication systems.

I conducted four studies in order to find out how well Japanese people understand American culture and how well they are taught American culture in English courses. These studies were 1) an examination of English textbooks in both junior and senior high schools,⁷ 2) a survey of teaching American culture and intercultural communication taken by sixty-three Japanese students in the United States,⁸ 3) the *Test of American Culture* taken by more than two hundred Japanese students in both Japan and the United States,⁹ and 4) interviews with twenty newly-arrived students at the University of Kansas.¹⁰ The results of the four studies show that there is not much foundation for good communication between Japanese and Americans, as I have discussed before,¹¹ that the Japanese students had been taught very little about American culture in English courses at any level, and that they did not understand American culture well. As a result, they had problems understanding Americans and communicating with them.

It is clear that language alone cannot guarantee good intercultural communication but that the cultural backgrounds of the speakers of those languages are important factors. The cultural backgrounds can be divided into three aspects: natural environment, social environment, and traditional heritage. In the following section, I will summarize the existing literature on how American and Japanese natural environment affects their ways of expressing themselves.

Natural environments (climate, weather, geography, etc.) affects people in a variety of ways: their thought, their attitudes, and their language.

Japan is in the monsoon zone, where humidity is nature's gift to man. A plentiful vocabulary accomodates the abundance of plants and

creatures thriving in such a warm and damp environment.¹² The climate varies much, and the people enjoy four seasons, but it is usually mild. The rainy season comes in summer, and it rains a great deal. There are more than twenty different names for rain, depending on the season and kind of rainfall,¹³ such as *ame* (rain), *kirisame* (misty rain), *harusame* (spring rain), *shigure* (a shower in late autumn and early winter), *yūdachi* (an evening shower), *gōu* (a heavy rain), *rainu* (a thunderstorm), *niwakaame* (a shower), *samidare* (early summer rain), *mizore* (sleet), *akisame* (autumn rain), and *bōfū* (a rain storm).¹⁴

Many words deal with climate. Japanese people tend to talk about the weather at the beginning of greetings, particularly in letters.¹⁵ Even major newspapers carry articles concerning climate or weather in addition to weather forecasts. The following are some examples from the *Asahi Evening News*, "Vox Populi, Vox Dei."¹⁶

Sunday opened the week of the spring equinox. Tokyo is already wrapping in spring.

The cherries are already in blossom in some southern districts, but on Sunday Tokyo was hit by an unseasonable fall of snow.

The rainy season front has appeared. Like the "*haru-same zensen*" (spring rain front), and "*hana-no-zensen*" (flower front), "*baiu-zensen*" is a name given by the "elegant faction" in the Meteorological Agency.

"Tanabata," the festival of the weaver, is celebrated on July 7. Before the war, people made *Indian ink* from sticks of ink to write on colored strips in the hope that they would become proficient in calligraphy. These strips were hung on bamboo branches.

This column started today last year with these words: "*The autumn sky is high and the prices are sky-high.*" We must use a similar expression on the same day this year.

Mayako Ikeda, a teacher of Japanese language, has pointed out that most American students wonder why Japanese people talk about weather so frequently.¹⁷ Americans tend not to talk about weather much, because it is considered "small talk," and except for such articles as news stories about destructive tornadoes or hurricanes, newspapers do not carry many articles about the weather.¹⁸

The four seasons are an important part of Japanese life. Japanese people go to see plum and cherry blossoms in spring and hold the star festival in summer, moon viewing in fall, and snow viewing in winter. One American student in my Japanese composition class wrote that if he viewed the moon and offered food and flowers to it, Americans would think that he was crazy.

Nature in the monsoon zone has power and strength, so natural calamities are often caused by storms, heavy rainfall, floods, and typhoons. These are beyond human control; all that people can do is to be receptive and passive. Philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji has stated:

... this humidity typifies the violence of nature. Humidity often combines with heat to assail man with violent deluges of rain of great force, savage storm winds, floods and droughts. This power is so vast that man is obliged to abandon all hope of resistance and is forced into mere passive resignation.¹⁹

The distinctive character of human nature in the monsoon zone, then, can be understood as submissive and resigned. People lack active attitudes toward nature and have little tension of will. They become so sensitive to nature and experience it so emotionally that they grow very explanatory and lyrical.

Japanese people feel that they are controlled by great invisible powers. These invisible powers can be nature or man-made authority.

Such Japanese expressions as "*un-o ten-ni makasu* [leave one's fate to Heaven]," and "*Nagaimono-niwa makare-ro* [Yield to the powerful, (or literally), Allow yourself to be entwined by a long thing]," demonstrate this.

Takeo Doi mentioned that there are many expressions concerned with "higai [damage, injury, or harm]."²⁰ Many Japanese people have delusions of persecution and feel that they are victims in many ways. This *higai-kan* (sensitivity to adversity) creates the attitudes of "*shite-morau* [to receive a favor]" and "*shiteageru* [to do a favor for someone]," which are also derived from the passive and dependent psychology of the Japanese.²¹

Japanese passive sensitivity seems to be well expressed in the Japanese passive voice. Takao Suzuki explains that one tries to bring his or her opinion into conformance with that of the receiver or makes up his/her mind according to others' reactions.²² Reiko Shimonishi conducted a survey of Japanese and American students and found that Japanese commonly use the passive voice, particularly when they are adversely affected by an action and to express a sense of passivity.²³

The unique passive voice in Japanese is called "*meiwaku-no ukemi* [suffering passive]," which can be formed from both transitive and intransitive verbs.²⁴

The suffering passive emphasizes that the speaker suffers as the result of the action described even though he is not the subject of the sentence.

Asobiba-ni ie-o tate-rare-te shimatta.

[A building was built where the playground used to be (and I was adversely affected by it).]

The climate of Britain, on the other hand, is dry in summer and wet in winter. In this meadow type of climate, nature is mild and repetitive. People need not struggle against nature; they have time for their own activities. Human society in such a climate is well developed and more emphasis is given to individuals. Watsuji states that "man is individualist in the extreme; so in addition to segregation there is social intercourse, cooperation within division."²⁵ Consequently privacy, freedom, and rights and obligations of individuals are clear and important there.

However, individualism has not been developed in Japan. Watsuji has explained:

In Japan, the one-ness of the nation was first interpreted in the religious sense; this is a circumstance of primitive society that can be understood only by way of myths. Before man felt or thought as an individual, his consciousness was that of the group; anything disadvantageous to the livelihood of the group restricted the actions of the individual in the form of taboo.²⁶

People are controlled by nature in Japan. They describe themselves as a part of nature. This may be the reason that actors, actions, and people who receive the actions are only parts of nature and so are not the center of description in the Japanese language—where an English speaker might begin a descriptive sentence with "I," a Japanese speaker would begin it with conditions in which he existed. The following are examples:²⁷

Watashi-no sundeirutokoro-wa Tamagawa-no chikaku desu.
(Where I am living is near the Tamagawa River.)
[I live near the Tamagawa River.]

Ie-niwa kingyo-ga takusan iru.
 (At home there are many goldfish.)
 [We have many goldfish at our home.]

Hōkago YWCA-de taipu-no renshū-o shita.
 (After school, at YWCA, (I) practiced on the typewriter.)
 [I practiced on the typewriter after school at the YWCA.]

Impersonal construction is well developed in Japanese, i. e., actors are not important, and if the actor who acted is clear from the context, no noun or pronoun referring to the actor is used.

Sono tōji kimi-wa ano hito-to zuibun benkyō shita-no-desu-ne.
 (It is that, as for you, (you) had been studying very hard with him then, isn't it?)
 [You had been studying very hard with him then, hadn't you?]

Anata-no goshinsetsu-o kansha shimasu.
 ((I) thank (you) for your kindness.)

Chikaiuchi-ni asobi-ni konai?
 (Will (you) come to see me soon?)

The noun or pronoun designating the recipient of the action may also be omitted if the recipient is identified in the context.

Kane-ga hitsuyō-nara ageyō.
 (If (you) need money, (I) will give (it) (to you).)

In English, people describe people as the center of nature. They have conquered it and controlled it. The actor is given primary emphasis in English. This makes personal construction quite important.

Sentences are not usually given an impersonal construction in collo-

quial and informal written English unless incidents are caused by natural phenomena or sudden accidents that cannot be controlled by people.

It rained here yesterday.
 It snows a great deal in Hokkaido.
 It happened to him, unfortunately.

How-ever, it is still possible to use a personal construction to talk about such phenomena.

We had some rain yesterday.
 They have a great deal of snow in Hokkaido.
 He- had an accident, unfortunately.

Conducting a study of values among students from six different nations, Charles Morris found that Japanese students rated landscape paintings higher than other kinds of paintings, while American students selected ones of people or animals.²⁸ The Japanese people like to put stones on sand to symbolize nature and to appreciate signs of nature. The Americans, in contrast, like ceramic animals, portraits, and statues of animals or people in their living rooms. They prefer signs of life.²⁹ This is a philosophical difference between the two nations, as Dr. Sumako Kimizuka suggested.

... the one (the Japanese) insists that nature is the overall universe of which the human world is infinitesimal fragments, while the other (the American) holds that nature is a background of human world.³⁰

The difference shown above is well demonstrated in greetings in two different cultures. The Japanese people usually pay more attention to physical environments than to people. The greeting "Ohayō-gozainasu,"

for example, *lit*erally means "It's early" in English. Weather is a very important part of greetings. In contrast, some American greetings, such as "How are you?" or "How are you doing?" ask about the condition of the person addressed. Here the human being is the focus of attention. Usually when a Japanese person refers to another person's health, it is in the context of weather conditions. For example, "It is cool these days. Please take care not to catch a cold."

Actions and people or objects that receive actions are emphasized next. So, concord of numbers and gender is very important in English. Actors control the following pronouns and actions; actions control objects.

There *is* a book which was written by Mark Twain on the table, and it *is* interesting.

There *are* two books which were written by Mark Twain on the table, and *they* are interesting.

John *thinks* that Mary hates herself.

Actions are clear, and there are many verbs to describe slightly different forms of actions in English.³¹

cry	wāwā naku
weep	mesomeso naku
sob	kusunkusun naku
humber	oioi naku
howl	wanwan naku
pule	hihi naku
whimper	shikushiku naku

laugh	haha-to warau
smile	nikoniko-to warau
chuckle	kutsukutsu-to warau
ha-ha	wahhahha-to warau
giggle	ihihi-to warau
snigger	nitanita-to warau
simper	ohoho-to warau
grin	niyari-to warau
titter	kusukusu-to warau

As the chart shows, Japanese uses more reduplications than English in describing actions. It often uses onomatopoeia to express actions very descriptively.

The Japanese people usually describe time and place first, then actors, and people or objects which receive actions, and then emotional atmosphere and actions. Examples are shown as follows:

Sakujitsu gakkō-e watashi-wa itta.
(yesterday, to school, I went)
[I went to school yesterday.]

Kyō ie-de watashi-wa benkyō suru.
(Today, at home, I study)
[I study at home today.]

Sonojibun kimi-wa ano hito-to hijō-ni shitashiku shiteita-noda-ne.
(then, you, with that man, very friendly, were)
[You were very intimate with him then.]³²

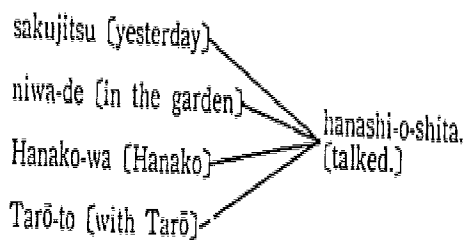
The very last part of Japanese sentences (one word or two from the end punctuation) is the most important, the other parts acting as



modifications and having interchangeable positions, as Takeo Doi has pointed out.³³ This very last part is usually the verb or *ji* (grammatical marker), and they determine affirmation, negation, question, or command, voice, level of politeness, tense and exclamation.

Tokyo-ni (anata-wa) iku. [You will go to Tokyo.]	affirmation
Tokyo-ni (anata-wa) ikanai. [You will not go to Tokyo.]	negation
Tokyo-ni (anata-wa) iku ka? [Will you go to Tokyo?]	question
Tokyo-ni ike. [Go to Tokyo.]	command
Watashi-wa karera-o mita. [I saw them.]	active voice
Watashi-wa karera-ni mirareta. [I was seen by them.]	passive voice
Tokyo-ni sensei-ga ikaveru. [The teacher will go to Tokyo.]	politer
Tokyo-ni sensei-ga ikareta. [The teacher went to Tokyo.]	past tense
Totemo subarashii sensei desu-ne. [What a great teacher he is!]	exclamation

Modifying phrases other than those referring to place and time have no strict order; they are controlled by *ji* and show a relation with the very last part of the sentence. (Even place and time phrases are sometimes placed at the middle or end of the sentence.)



[Hanako talked with Taro in the garden yesterday.]

These four phrases can change positions with one another.

Japanese people have many words to describe situations and emotions with sound effects. The former is called "*gitaigo*" and the latter, "*gijōgo*." Some examples are as follows:³⁴

gitaigo

Sassa-to gakkō-e kaette kita.
[Then I made a *beeline* for the school.]

Furafura-to tachitaku-naru.
[I wanted to stand up.]

(The underlined word is omitted in English.)

Kyorokoro-to atare no mimawashita toki, . . .
[By the time I *felt well enough* to look around, . . .]

. . . me-wa shinkeishitsu-ni kurukuru-to hitotoki-mo ochitsukana-katta.

[. . . his eyes *revolved* nervously and never rested.]

. . . jibun-de katte-kita biru-o hitori-de *guigui* non-de makka-ni natta.

[He drank a tumbler full *in one draught* which suddenly made him become very red in the face.]

Kuro-wa kare-no hana-no saki-kara *pin-to* tsupatte-iru nagai hige-o *biribiri-to* furuwasete hijō-ni waratta.

[Kuro *twitched* the whiskers which *stood out straightly* from his muzzle and laughed hard.]

Ōkina mimi-o shizukani *patapata*-to ugo-kashite-ita.

(. . . was silently *flapping* her huge ears.)

Osaka-no hō-no hi-ga *chirachira*-to umi-no mukō-ni mie-mashita.
[The city lights of Osaka *flickered* here and there beyond the sea.]

. . . *giragira* manatsu-no taiyō-ga teritsuke-te-iru.
[The strong sun of midsummer is *shining*. . .]

gijōgo

Jōkyaku-wa un-o ten-ni makase-te *harahara*-shinagara tōrisugiru.
[Their hearts beating fast, passengers speed by such places feeling that they are placing their lives in the hands of fate.]

Watashi-wa *tsuratsura* kangaete-iru uchini. . . .
[I thought and thought]

. . . *issu*-no *ukiuki*-shita chōshi-ga atte
[There is a sort of *light-hearted* and *cheerful feeling*]

Beikoku zentai-no *iraira*-ga sōzō ijō-ni hageshii rashii.
[The *irritation* and *impatience* of the United States as a whole is much severer than expected.]

Sore-wa *tekipaki*-shita gyōsei nōryoku-no hakki-de aru.
[It is the execution of *clear-cut* administration ability.]

Sensei-mo seito-mo *kutakuta*-ni naru.
[Teachers and students became *very tired*.]

These onomatopoeic expressions are not exact copies of real sounds; in fact, the expression used in each of the above situations is the representation or interpretation of what people have perceived with their own sensory organs. Thereby Japanese people try to describe the situation as directly as possible, and they understand the situation and feeling well if the statement includes such perceptually-based expressions. In English, though there are some onomatopoeia which are exact copies of sounds, there is not this type of description of situa-

tions and feelings, and all examples lose their onomatopoeia in the English translations.

Actors are the most emphasized elements in English. What they do and to whom or to what they do it are described next. This makes English more analytic. After the main context, then explanation, time and place follow. Description is from the center to the side, so word order is very important in English. As word order is relatively strict, one word can be used as several parts of speech. Relative pronouns are well developed. Logical expressions are more intellectual than emotional. Any actions and movements can be abstracted.³⁵

In the hall of Petherton's house a scene of welcome was being enacted under the dim gaze of six or seven brown family portraits by unknown masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

[Petherton-ke-no, hiroma-no jūhachi-kyū seiki-no mumei-no gaka-no fude-ni naru tokorono, iro kusanda muttsu-ka nanatsu-wo senzo-no shōzōga-ga uekara bonyari mirososhi-te iru tokoro-de kono enrai-no kyakujin-wa mukaerareta.]³⁶

The word order in Japanese translation is:

[Of Petherton's house, in the hall, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by unknown masters, brown, of six or seven, family portraits, (which) from above looked down absent-mindedly, at such place, this visitor from afar was welcomed.]

Abstracted phrases such as those can be subjects in English, but Japanese expressions are more concrete; movements are described by words and cannot easily be abstracted, and they cannot be subjects.

His four-year stay in the United States made him a fluent speaker of English.

[Kare-wa America-ni yonenkan ita-node eigo-ga jōzuni hanaseru.]

Since he has been in the United States for four years, he can speak English fluently.

Objects come last in English word order, and English sentences commonly end with a noun or an adjective. This final word order may reverse the anticipated meaning of the sentence, producing a typical form of humor in English.³⁷

The proof that women are all alike is that every one of them thinks she is different.

Men with money to burn have started many a girl playing with fire.

The sign on the church lawn announced in bold letters: IF TIRE'D WITH SIN, COME IN. Under it, written in lipstick, was message, "If not, call Park 4-2378."

The Japanese language describes a scene as it is now or as it was at a certain time. The language has only past tense and nonpast tense (future and present). It does not have any perfect form. However, English can be described as more dynamic and active from the fact that it often describes time duration with the third form, perfect. Since present time is emphasized, there is a tendency to describe with the present tense. As a result, the present perfect is often used.

It is possible to express the following statements in the present tense as well as past tense in English, but in Japanese past tense is almost always used.

He is dead.

(Kare-wa shinda.)

(He died.)

Mail is in.

(Tegami-ga todoi-ta.)

(The mail arrived.)

Three people are missing.

(San nin-ga yukuefumei-ni natta.)

(Three people disappeared.)

In summary, because any language is strongly related to its background culture, culture is very important for verbal communication. Culture also affects verbal and non-verbal communication indirectly. It restricts the contents of communication, and decides levels and methods of communication.

Japanese people and Americans have different systems of logic and thought, attitudes, and methods of expressing themselves, all of which are affected by their respective background cultures. This makes the communication between them difficult.

Natural environment is one of the three major aspects of background culture, and it affects method of expression, vocabulary, topic of conversation, values, and attitudes.

The Japanese use the passive voice more frequently than Americans, especially when they are adversely affected by an action. Japanese people tend to express themselves as a part of nature and Americans, as the center, so Japanese sentences often start with conditions and English, with people. Also, the Japanese tend to use impersonal constructions, but Americans often use personal constructions, except in cases which they cannot control. Concord of numbers and gender is very important, because the actor controls action and the following pronouns in English. Since actions are secondly emphasized, many verbs were

created in English. Japanese people try to describe situations and emotions with sound effects and have created a great number of "gitaigo" and "gijōgo."

Natural background was one of the factors that made English analytic and Japanese descriptive. English is abstract and Japanese is concrete. Japanese seldom indicates duration of time.

Since I do not have much data of languages in both the monsoon and meadow-type climate countries, this discussion is limited to Japan, Britain and the United States. However, as have discussed in this paper, language is deeply related to background culture and, of course culture is strongly affected by the natural environment where it developed. Therefore, language is affected by its natural background in a variety of ways.

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- 19 Tetsurō Watsuji, *A Climate—A Philosophical Study*, (Tokyo: Printing Bureau, Japanese Government, 1961), p. 19.

- 20 Takeo Doi, *Amae-no Kōzō [Anatomy of Dependency]*, (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1971), p. 153-154.

- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

- 22 Takao Suzuki, *Kotoba to Shakai [Language and Society]*, (Tokyo: Chuōkōronsha, 1975), p. 180.

- 23 Reiko Shimonishi, "Interference of Culture with Foreign Language Learning: A Contrastive Analysis in Terms of English and Japanese Passive Based on Japanese Culture." Unpublished Master's Thesis (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas, 1977), pp. 66-67.

- 24 "Meiwaku-no ukemi" is discussed in various papers, such as:

Doi, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

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Journal-Newsletter of the Association of Teachers of Japanese, Vol. 6 (1969), p. 41.

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Minoru Umegaki, *Nichi-Ei Hikaku Gogaku Nyūmon [Introduction to Comparative Study of Japanese and English Language]*, (Tokyo: Taishukan Shoten, 1961), pp. 84-85.

- 25 Watsuji, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

- 27 These examples with translations are taken from the following book and literal translations are given by the writer in parentheses.

Tōru Matsumoto, *Matsumoto Tōru Eisaku Zenshū Vol. 1 [Tōru Matsumoto Series of English Compositions]*, (Tokyo: Eiyūsha, 1968).

- 28 Charles Morris, *Varieties of Human Values*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 151.

- 29 Sae Taba, "Teaching Culture in the Foreign-Language Classroom through Audio-lingual Instruction," Unpublished Master's Research Paper, (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas, 1972), p. 4.

- 30 Sumako Kimizuka, *Teaching English to Japanese*, (Los Angeles: Anchor Enterprises, 1968), p. 117.

- 31 Umegaki, 1961, *op. cit.*, p. 251 & p. 265.

- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

- 33 Takeo Doi, "Some Psychological Themes in Japanese Human Relationships" in *Intercultural Encounters with Japan: Communication—Contact and Conflict*, ed. by John C. Condon and Mitsuko Saito, (Tokyo: The Simul Press, Inc., 1974), p. 23.

- 34 All examples and translations here are cited from the following:
Hasegawa, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-215.

- 35 Umegaki, 1961, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

- 37 Tadatoshi Ōkubo, "Eigo-no Warai • Nihongo-no Warai (Humor in English and Japanese)," *Eigo-Kyoiku*, Vol. XXII, No. 8 (October, 1973), p. 23.