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Highlighting hidden knowledge in cross-cultural communication

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This research set out to explore cultural differences that cause communication problems between native Japanese and English speakers. A questionnaire was made and given to Japanese and English participants in business and educational contexts to explore selected theme words (e.g. democracy) that may show different background knowledge. Results of the questionnaire showed a distinct difference in how participants from Japan and the US interpret these types of important concepts. For example, participants from high context cultures valued a more collective socialist approach towards democracy while low context (i.e. US) cultures tend to value individualistic oriented freedoms. It was surmized that this type of background knowledge will lead to a unique way of problem-solving and decision-making in cross-cultural contexts. Further research needs to be done to connect behavior with cultural knowledge however.

schema

Japanese communication norms and values are not well understood in the English speaking world and persistently cause misunderstandings in international business, diplomatic and cross-cultural education settings. When Japanese business people, government officials or exchange students interact with someone from another culture, they use culture specific background knowledge to aid them in interpretation. This background knowledge or "schema" goes unrecognized in the communication process. Thus, both parties can easily have a cross-cultural misunderstanding without consciously being aware of it resulting in negative perceptions or inaccurate decision-making. This research is a continuation of the author's past research (Ryan 2006) exploring how cultural knowledge can affect communication in a cross-cultural context.

The goal of the research is to analyze how our unrecognized cultural background knowledge, or schema, can disrupt communication and decision-making in cross-cultural contexts such as business or education between native Japanese and English speakers. Two modes of thinking developed in psychology have been described (see Kahneman, 2011) as System 1 (automatic, spontaneous, fast, easy) or System 2 (slow, deliberate, effortful). In cross-cultural communication, however, this spontaneous search for an easy interpretation of System 1 is problematic as each person draws off of a unique set of cultural norms and values. Regardless of cultural affiliation, the intuitive heuristic of System 1 is something we cannot turn off and, therefore, goes mostly unrecognized in the dynamic speech event. Thus, there is potential for misperception and misunderstanding to result without either side realizing it and being able to switch to the more deliberate thoughtfulness of System 2.

The cross-cultural questionnaire was originally created and written by the author in English. Afterwards, it was translated into Japanese by a team of two native Japanese speaker assistants. The Japanese results were then translated into English by the same team of Japanese assistants. Both questionnaires were distributed at approximately the same time period in Japan and in the U.S., respectively. All questionnaire participants were either native Japanese or (American) English speakers. AGA methodology was replicated from Linowes et al.'s (2000) and Ryan's (2006) studies. AGA is defined as:

An unstructured method of research used to reconstruct people's subjective images from the spontaneous distributions of their free associations. The aim of the approach is to determine how people actually perceive and evaluate a particular issue or concept, carefully considering the characteristics they consider most important….The basic unit of analysis is the stimulus word, or theme word, which evokes these associations and hence serves as a key unit in the perceptual representational system. (Linowes et al., 2000, p. 75)

For the data presented in the paper as a practical example, AGA methodology was performed on each participants' results, yielding a list of words that the participant spontaneously associated with a given theme word. To perform AGA methodology, a theme word (e.g. democracy) was given to both groups of cross-cultural participants, yielding two correlated response lists (one in Japanese and the other in English) of words that participants associated with it. The full response lists for both groups of participants are given in Appendix A. Starting at the top of each participant's word list, each word was ranked 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1. Participants were asked to associate up to six words for each concept or theme word. Each answer received a point total. A total of six points were given to the first answer associated with the word, five points for the response on the second line, four points on the next line, and so forth. For a word to be included in the weighting, it had to be generated on two or more participants' word lists. Each participant's list of responses was weighted according to the readiness with which the word came to mind (rank order). The weighting was done empirically via differential stability of rank place using the test-retest method (Kelly, 1985). This technique was modeled and adapted after Linowes et al. (2000) and was also replicated in Ryan (2006).

The total response list for each group yielded schemas linked to the theme word to give a "mental map" that measures the "dominant mindset" (Linowes et al., 2000, p. 71) of Japanese and Americans for the particular concept being tested. In addition, the salience of each theme is measured. Each national groups' word list can be totaled, yielding a weighted response list or salience of word associations for a given theme word:

The salience of a theme is the total response score generated by all associations to that theme by all respondents. It is a measure of "meaningfulness," in the sense that it reflects the total magnitude of associations linked to

the theme in respondents' minds and so serves as a measure of what is foremost in peoples' minds. (Linowes et al.,2000, p. 78)

After theme words and their response lists were collated and scored, they were put into a table showing the salience of each category word. The salience of a given theme word can be compared with this cross-cultural counterpart to compare meaningfulness. Because the method is extremely time consuming and the difficulty of obtaining data from companies due to privacy concerns, only a few theme words were chosen to investigate.

The theme word selected for analysis was "democracy" because this concept was believed to hold different meanings to native Japanese and American speakers that could result in consequential misunderstandings.

This collected data from the questionnaire showed the mental representation for the theme word for the two national groups. After balancing the number of participants who responded, we can see that the salience of the theme word "democracy" is higher for Americans (258) than the Japanese (224) indicating the theme word has a higher degree of "meaningfulness" to the American participants. Once individual responses were aggregated into categories, we can see that there are significant differences cultural schema. Americans predictably associated their own country, freedom, voting, equality and their own government with democracy. Japanese respondents, on the other hand, had a completely different schema for the stimulus word of democracy. Most notably, Japanese participants did not associate their government with the stimulus word but rather the sovereignty of people and nation. In addition, Japanese participants linked "socialism" and "majority" with democracy, which failed to show up at all in the American schema. Japanese participants also associated "public" "peace" and "difficult" with democracy whereas Americans did not. We can see that Japanese and Americans, both considered to be democratic countries, consider the term quite differently. This disparate mental representation will inevitably cause unique interpretations to issues related to democracy and the roles of government in society.

Figure 1
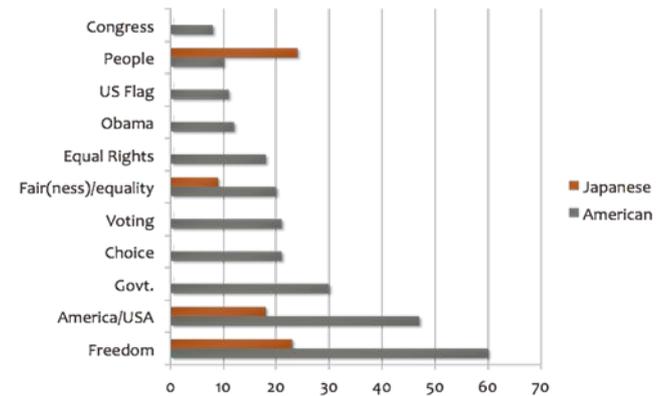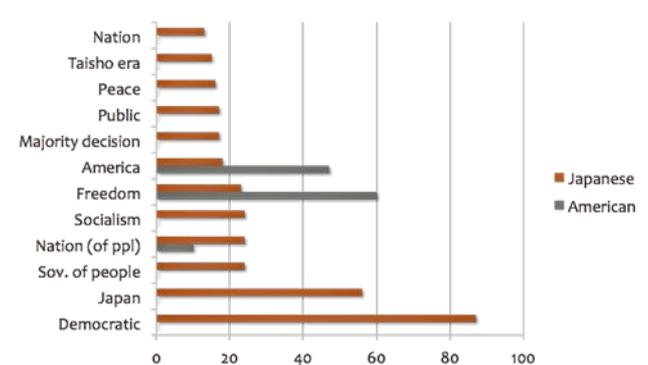Graphical Representations of American Content Categories

Figure 2
Graphical Representations of Japanese Content Categories

The (cultural) group oriented viewpoint of a high context nation-states, such as Japan, tend to view the concept in a more interdependent, collectivistic way. For instance, "sovereignty of people", "nation of people", "socialism" and "majority" are group oriented interpretations that fits well with traditional Japanese culture and clearly influences their world viewpoint. Although these differing interpretations to such a basic concept could have significant ramifications in cross-cultural and diplomatic security or economic negotiations, they need to be linked to practical communication contexts to better understand the hidden biases of culture.

Finally, not all of the collected data (i.e. business themes) from the questionnaire has been analyzed as several large US companies contacted expressed privacy concerns over the type of data the author wanted to collect and compare. This was not an issue for the Japanese companies however. In the future, the author is planning to collect matching data from US company employees to match the data already collected from Japanese sources. Thus, the grant received for this research will continue to show results in the future beyond what has been achieved last year. The research granted also motived the author to pursue this research further

and created contact with numerous international researchers.

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