

Turn-taking Behavior and Topic Management Strategies of Chinese and Japanese Business Professionals: A Comparison of Intercultural Group Communication

Bertha Du-Babcock
City University of Hong Kong

Hiromasa Tanaka
Meisei University

Abstract

This paper reports the preliminary results of a study that extends Du-Babcock's turn-taking and topic management studies by examining the topic management strategies and turn-taking behaviors of bilingual Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals. The goal of the study is to confirm prior research findings as well as extend the research to the comparison of Chinese and Japanese business professionals.

This study is based on both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data examined the differences between Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals in terms of their turn-taking, speaking time, and number of words spoken. The qualitative data further examined the similarities and differences in their intercultural interaction. The preliminary findings show that there were differences between Japanese and Hong Kong business professionals in terms of their turn-taking behaviors (number of turns, amount of speaking time, number of words) and topic management strategies (socializing, disclosure of opinions, hedging and disagreement). In turn-taking, the Hong Kong Chinese participated more actively than did Japanese business professionals in terms of number of turns taken, amount of speaking time, and number of words spoken. In topic management strategies, the Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese exhibited similarities and differences. In regard the similarities, the socialization patterns (greetings and introductions) were similar. Differences existed in expressing opinions and disagreements. In expressing opinions, the Hong Kong Chinese exhibited an assertive behavior pattern while the Japanese showed a reactive communication behavior. Disagreements were also expressed differently. The Hong Kong Chinese expressed disagreement directly while the Japanese would use hedging to express their disagreements.

Introduction

As business activities have become globalized communicating in a bilingual or even a multilingual work environment is a fact of life for a growing number of individuals. These bilinguals attend meetings, exchange information, and make decisions using a second-language. As a result, non-native English speaking individuals (NNS) in their second-language meetings consequently has a significant and direct impact on global business. Although past research in the area of turn-taking behaviors has laid a solid foundation in examining turn-taking behaviors in small-group, cross-cultural decision-making meetings, little research has yet examined the communication differences between individuals from nations that

share similar high-context cultures, such as Japan and Hong Kong. To fill the gap, the overall objective of the current study is to examine the communication patterns in groups where individuals come from similar high-context cultural backgrounds.

Review Of Literature

Cross-cultural studies on turn-taking (see, for example, Duncan & Fiske, 1977; Ng, Loong, He, Liu, & Weatherall, 2000) have examined the number of turns taken during business group meetings or in family conversations, and found that turn-taking behavior appears to be influenced by culture across all groups. Gudykunst and Nishida's (1994) study also explained that the pattern of turn-taking distribution can be linked to cultural differences: members of "individualistic cultures" distribute turns unevenly, whereas members of "collectivistic cultures" distribute turns relatively equally and stress group sharing and harmony rather than individual gains.

Using cultural individualism and collectivism (I-C) as a construct, Oetzel's (1995, 1998) studies revealed communication behavior differences in culturally homogeneous and heterogeneous small group meetings. Specifically, the studies proposed that differences in the number of turns, the number of initiated conflicts, and the conflict styles in a small group are likely to be influenced by cultural I-C and group composition. These studies seek not only to understand the influence of cultural I-C and group composition on communication processes, but also to predict the relationship between communication processes and group outcomes in culturally homogeneous and heterogeneous small groups.

In Asian contexts, researchers also have found that native and nonnative English speakers exhibited different communication behaviors in intercultural meetings. Bilbow (1992, 1996) investigated the pragmatic aspect of interaction between native English-speaking expatriates and local Cantonese-speaking Chinese in a large multinational corporation and concluded that Chinese are not as verbally active as Westerners in intercultural meetings. Yamada (1990) examined intra-organizational business meetings at a bank. Her study found that (a) turn-taking behaviors differ between collectivistic societies (such as Japan) and individualistic societies (such as the United States) in that American participants distribute their turns unequally, whereas Japanese take short turns and distribute their turns evenly; (b) Japanese distribute their turns more equally regardless of who initiates a topic, while , American participants distribute their turns unevenly, and the participants who initiate topics take the highest proportion of turns in discussing that topic; and (c) Japanese participants are seen to be less active than American participants. In their communication behavior, Japanese monitor the communication of other Japanese in the group so as to communicate in an approximately equal number of turns.

Du-Babcock (1999, 2003, 2005, 2006) examined turn-taking behaviors and strategies of Cantonese bilinguals (Cantonese and English) participating in intra-cultural (Du-Babcock, 1999, 2006) and intercultural decision-making meetings (Du-Babcock, 2003, 2005).

Du-Babcock's (1999) study of intra-cultural meetings involving Chinese bilingual professionals situated in the unique language environment in Hong Kong found that Hong Kong Chinese bilinguals participated more actively when using their first language (Cantonese) as compared to when using a second-language (English) in their intra-cultural decision-making meetings. The results also revealed that Hong Kong bilingual Chinese use spiral or circular topic management strategies in first-language, Cantonese, decision-making meetings and linear topic management strategies in second-language, English

meetings. Du-Babcock (2006) later found that messages in their first language carry more weight than messages in English. The results of Du-Babcock's study indicate a hybrid discourse pattern of Chinese bilingual business professionals in the Hong Kong environment. The findings of Du-Babcock's (2003, 2005) intercultural study on turn-taking behaviors showed that (a) participants from collectivistic cultures not only spoke less than those from individualistic cultures, they also took fewer turns than those from individualistic cultures and (b) participants from collectivistic cultures took more turns and spoke for longer time in intra-cultural than in intercultural decision-making meetings. Du-Babcock's two studies have built on the prior studies and filled a gap by showing and contrasting the communication behaviors of bilingual Chinese in their first- and second-language meetings with fellow Chinese and other Asians, and also by replicating the studies of intercultural meeting communication among bilingual Chinese and Westerners.

Whereas Du-Babcock's research examined turn-taking behaviors of Hong Kong bilingual Chinese in intra-cultural and intercultural decision-making meetings, Tanaka (2006a) investigated workplace interaction in English in a Japanese chemical company and further confirmed Yamada's (1990) research findings. Tanaka's study also concluded that Japanese participants were less active compared to their US counterparts. Furthermore, his ethnographic analysis revealed that silence in Japanese business meetings could be a sign of attentiveness which was mistaken for an expression of consensus by the French participants, with potentially disastrous outcomes for the meeting.

Tanaka (2006b) took a critical discourse analysis approach to analyzing intercultural meetings involving Americans and Japanese, focusing on power relations among the participants. Analysis of turn-taking patterns showed that the American expatriates' abilities to make strong arguments, to choose and use the most effective words, and to speak quickly to convey more information in a limited time helped them dominate the discussion. Although past research of business meetings showed that turn-taking dynamics were indicators of power, Tanaka's study suggested a bi-directional, two-way relationship between power and frequency of the turn. The data indicated that the number of turns taken in the meeting can affect the speaker's position, or power, both positively and negatively

In Tanaka's 2008 study of Renault-Nissan meetings where English as a lingua franca (ELF) is used, the findings demonstrated the contrast in participation styles between French and Japanese employees and among Japanese employees. In addition to Nissan employees' weak linguistic competence, the Japanese management ideology, in which harmony and solidarity are emphasized, caused Nissan employees to remain silent except for the one who represented the company. The silence was meant to show their solidarity. However, French managers who believe in healthy confrontation in decision making processes misinterpreted the silence as consent to Renault's proposal. The overall findings of the study indicate that specific management practices do not easily transfer to the emerging Asian business discourse in English.

In summary, Tanaka viewed turn-taking frequency in American-Japanese (2006) and French-Japanese (2008) meetings as an indicator of power relations in Japanese corporate contexts. In both cases, Japanese participants in general took shorter turns than their non-Japanese counterparts. The data indicated the Japanese participants' tendency to take less frequent turns disempowered them. These studies illustrated how the local perspectives are marginalized within the power relation potentially generated by their linguistic competences and lack of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) discourse strategies among the Japanese participants, and how the power relation affects their decisions.

Moreover, he found that Japanese engaged in less frequent turn taking in an intercultural business meeting that involved people whose cultural backgrounds were Europe, Asia, Oceania, and North and Central America (Tanaka, 2009). On the other hand, the data of Japanese business meetings showed that turn distribution was related to hierarchical power and topics (see Tanaka, 2010, 2011). Drawing on Ide and Uchida (2001), Tanaka argued that the unequal distribution of turns in English meetings was a result of transfer of Japanese business discourse patterns to multi-national meetings.

Taken together, the overall findings of previous studies show that Asians from collectivistic societies are less active than their Western counterparts from individualistic societies in intercultural business meetings. While these research studies have contributed to the theory of cultures on turn-taking behaviors, these prior studies only examined intercultural communication behaviors of Asians and Westerners in intercultural meetings. The present study examines the communication behaviors between two high-context cultural societies; namely, the topic management strategy and turn-taking behavior of bilingual Chinese and Japanese managers using the methodology that Du-Babcock developed and used in her prior studies. Consequently, this research aims at confirming prior research findings as well as extending the research to the comparison of Chinese and Japanese business professionals and managers.

Research Method

Overview

The current study is based on two data sets that were derived from quantitative and qualitative data collection. The objective of the quantitative data (e.g., turn-taking behavior, amount of speaking time, and number of words) allowed the turn-taking behavioral framework to be operationalized and generalized. That is, the quantitative analysis of the data consisted of performing interaction analysis of the five intercultural decision-making meetings. To capture the essence of what was communicated and how the decision was made between Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese business professionals, qualitative data was also collected. The qualitative data, derived from text-based analysis of transcripts, illustrates and examines the similarities and differences between Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals in the aspects of socializing, disclosure opinions, and use of hedging to express disagreements.

Research Participants

Involved in the current study were 22 Japanese and 17 Hong Kong Chinese business professionals. The Japanese participants were business professionals and managers who were voluntarily signed up to participate in the study in response to the invitation announcement posted on a website. As for the Hong Kong business professionals, the participants were invited to take part by one of researcher. She screened the participants to make sure that their professional backgrounds were at the level to adequately take part in the research. Each decision-making group was made up of seven to eight members consisting of a relatively equal proportion of Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese. These participants assumed the role of a board of directors attending a board meeting. Their task was to respond to a crisis. They had to decide whether the company should recall its product that has caused 30 to 40 deaths in the past five years. The dialogs captured the strategy development of the decision-making process that evolved in the board meetings. Although random assignment was not possible, all of the participants had comparable and adequate English-language proficiency and interactive listening

skills for business related communication. The work experience of these participants varied from individuals working for private firms to educational institutions.

Data Collection

The research sites in the current study are business professionals from Hong Kong and Japan where these business professionals needed to engage in first-and second-language communication. The shift in globalized business has made Asia-Pacific region an important research site. Japan and Hong Kong are increasingly playing an important role in the international business arena and one in which individuals from these countries have been increasingly exposed to, and interact with, the western world.

The communication tasks represented in this study required all of the participants to engage in business discussions in a simulated case. The participants shared and presented information from their respective viewpoints. The videoconference discussions were video-and audio-taped and transcribed verbatim for interaction analysis. The data set consists of transcripts of the five intercultural decision-making meetings of Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals. The word count of the meetings ranged between 8,000 words to 12,500 words.

Description Of the Simulated Case

The participants took part in a simulated experiential case exercise (Guffey & Du-Babcock) where each group had to make strategic and ethical decisions based on a 45-minute discussion. The experiential exercise in this study provided the setting for the development of realistic business decision-making dialogs. The simulation was constructed around a medical product considered by experts to be injurious to the health of consumers - even to the point of possibly causing death. These consequences had to be evaluated against the potential economic losses to the company, which would be substantial if sales of the drug were to be discontinued. The decision brings to the surface the issue of dual responsibility in that participants must consider both corporate motivation to operate profitably and the overall interests of society.

The communication task represented in this study required all of the participants to engage in decision-making discussions. The participants needed to share and present information from their respective viewpoints in order to reach optimal decisions. The group members had to interactively integrate inputs and make decisions that not only contributed to the profitability of the entire firm, but also took into consideration the well-being of society as a whole, rather than just make decisions that would improve results in their respective interests. In this connection, the focus of the discussions was on corporate strategy development in five topical areas that the company should adopt in its US domestic and foreign markets.

Data Analysis

Data from five intercultural business meetings were transcribed and subjected to interaction analysis. In intercultural decision-making meetings where English was used, the meetings were transcribed verbatim into English except at the beginning of the meeting during which participants greeted each other in Japanese and Mandarin. Mandarin was used because the Japanese did not speak any Cantonese.

Quantitative data analysis. In this analysis, similarities and differences in the communication patterns were defined by (a) the number of turns taken by individuals; (b) the length of speaking time during which each group member spoke; and (c) the number of words spoken.

Turn-taking behavior analysis. To assess turn-taking communication behavior, the turn-taking framework developed by Sacks / Schegloff / Jefferson (1974) was used together with the specific technique used in an earlier study (Du-Babcock 1999, 2003, 2005, 2006). In other words, a turn consisted of all the speech interactant's utterances up to the point where another individual took over the speaking role. The number of turns taken and the number of words spoken by each participant was codified, counted, and compared. Speaking time was calculated by using a stop watch to measure the exact length of each conversational turn. The length of speaking time for each turn and words spoken were coded according to the designated interlocutors and served as a cross check of meeting interaction.

The quantitative measures of the turn-taking behavior, speaking time distribution, and number of words spoken by each participant are compared by computing (a) the number of turns taken by each individual, (b) the amount of meeting distribution time, and (c) number of words spoken by each participant. As the current study seeks to examine the differences in number of turns, speaking time distribution, and number of words spoken, possible variations in meeting duration and number of meeting participants may adversely affect the accuracy of the statistical test results on the variables being examined. In order to prevent these intervening factors from confusing or influencing the statistical tests and to obtain more accurate results, we controlled and adjusted the factors (that is, to treat them as covariates and keep them constant) by using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tests.

We also divided the meetings into ten-minute units in order to further examine whether the communication patterns are consistent throughout the meetings. Data for each ten-minute segment was calculated and compared.

Qualitative data analysis. In regard to the qualitative analysis, we looked for the patterns that could describe the nature of communication process in the meetings. Our analysis of the transcripts and videos uncovered three aspects; namely, socializing, disclosure opinions, hedging to express disagreements.

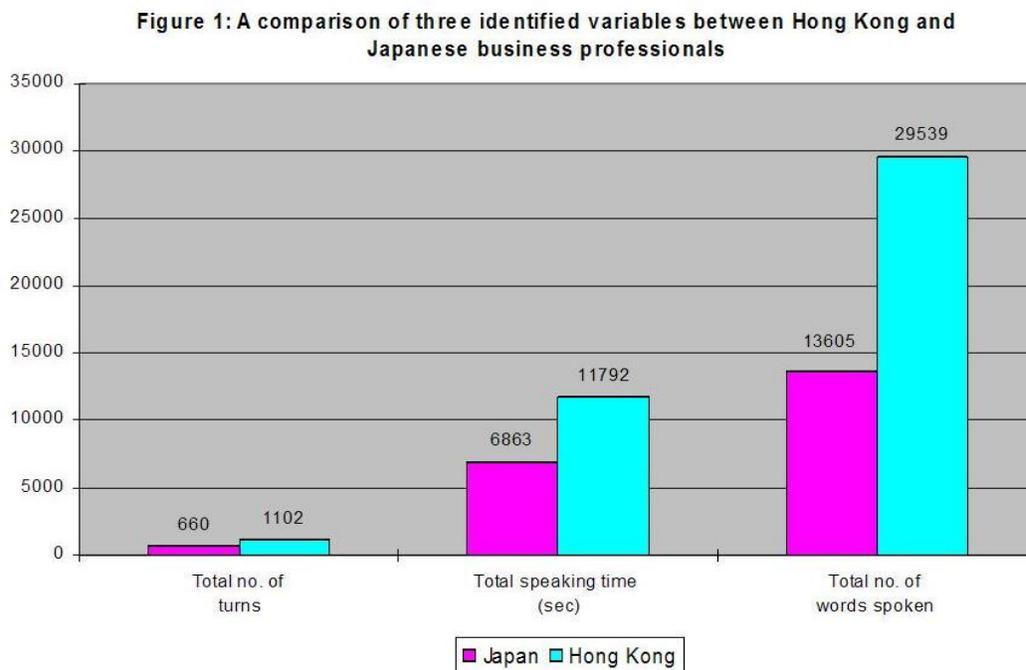
Results And Interpretations

In this section, we describe findings from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The quantitative aspect of the analysis examines whether and how Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals exhibited similar or different communication behaviors as measured by turn-taking, speaking time, and words spoken. The qualitative aspect of the analysis looks into how Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals managed discussion topics in similar or different ways in different time periods of the meetings in three aspects; namely socialization at the beginning of the meeting, disclosure of opinions in the middle course of the meeting, and the relative use of hedging to express possible disagreements.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative aspect of the analysis examines whether Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals exhibited similar or different communication behaviors in intercultural decision-making meetings. For comparison, the total number of turns, speaking time, and words spoken of the five EasyFix decision-making meetings were calculated (see Figure 1). Second, the Analysis of Co-Variance (ANCOVA) test was performed in that the duration of the meetings is treated as covariate to control its effect on other dependent variables. Mean scores and standard deviations for all the variables were calculated and compared. ANCOVA tests were performed to investigate whether there are significant differences in the communication behaviors (e.g., number of turns, length o speaking time, and number of words spoken) between Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals participating in their intercultural business meetings.

Figure 1 shows the total number of turns, speaking time and number of words spoken between the Japanese and Hong Kong groups of the five EasyFix decision-making meetings. The result shows that Hong Kong business professionals outperformed Japanese business professionals in terms of the total number of turns, speaking time and words spoken by nearly doubled of those of the Japanese business professionals.



Aside from comparing the mean scores of the three identified variables, the ANCOVA test was also performed to examine the differences. The result of ANCOVA test shows that Hong Kong Chinese business professionals took more turns, spoke longer time, and used more words to elaborate their expressions as compared to Japanese business professionals at the 0.01 and 0.05 significance level (see Table 1).

Table 1. A Comparison of Three Identified Variables between Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese Business Professionals in Intercultural Decision-making Meetings

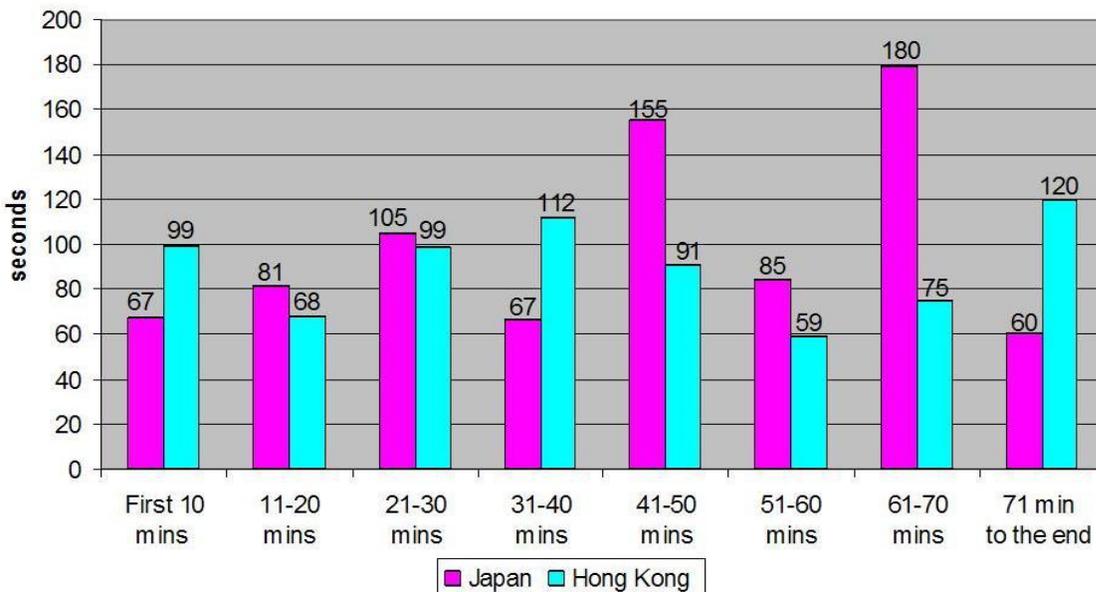
Variables	Hong Kong (N = 17)	Japan (N = 22)	Mean differences	T-value
Average no. of turns per person	65	39	26 **	t=4.000
Average speaking time per person (second)	694	404	290 *	t=3.786
Average no. of words spoken per person	1738	800	938 *	t=20.706

* P < .05

** P < .01

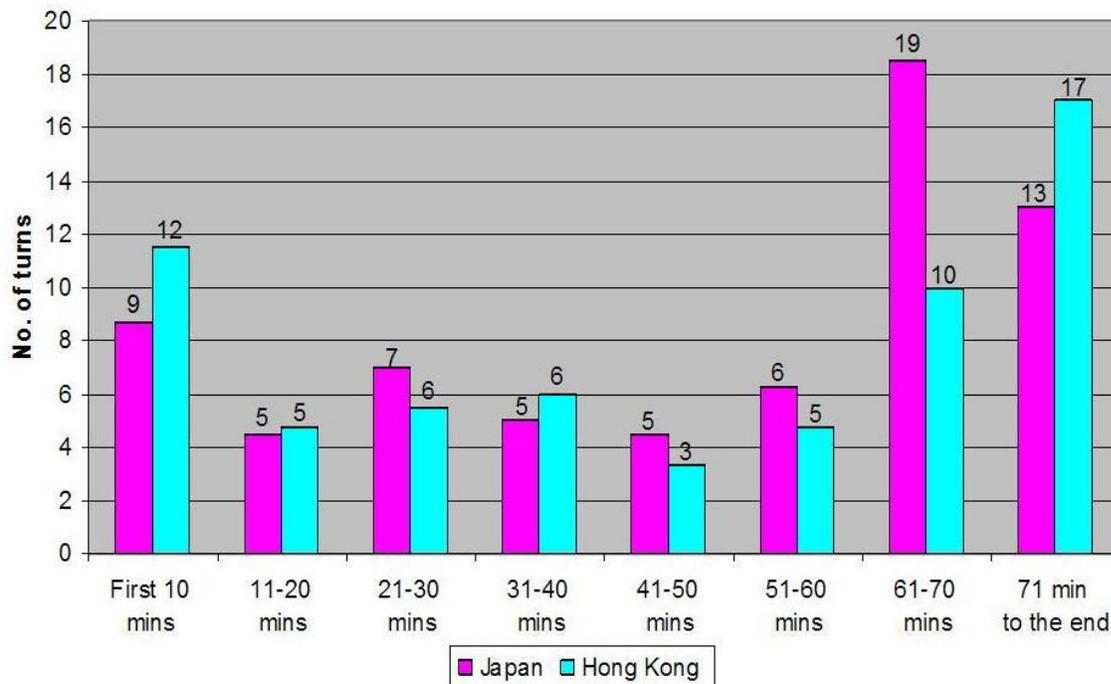
Generally speaking, in examining the communication behaviors, Hong Kong Chinese business professionals exhibited more observable and measurable communication behaviors than did Japanese business professionals as a whole. Nonetheless, when breaking down the whole business meetings into 10-minute units, different communication behaviors emerged. In the next section, we show how we re-analyze the communication behaviors by comparing the number of turns, speaking time, and words spoken in 10-minute units.

Figure 2: A comparison of average speaking time of in every 10-minute unit



Although the average speaking time per person of the Hong Kong group is generally longer than that of the Japanese group in the five EasyFix meetings in English, according to Figure 2, it can be seen that the average speaking time per person of the Japanese groups in the beginning of and the end of the meeting is obviously shorter than that in the middle of the meeting. The similar interaction patterns also were observed in the number of turns taken by individuals. Generally speaking, the Hong Kong business professionals took more turns at the beginning and at the end of the meetings as compared to that of the Japanese business professionals. These results imply that Japanese business professionals might not be as assertive as their Hong Kong counterparts at the beginning of the meetings. However, the number of turns taken and speaking time by each Japanese individual increased once the meetings proceeded to the middle course, and therefore the differences between Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals became smaller.

Figure 3: A comparison of average turns taken in every 10-minute unit

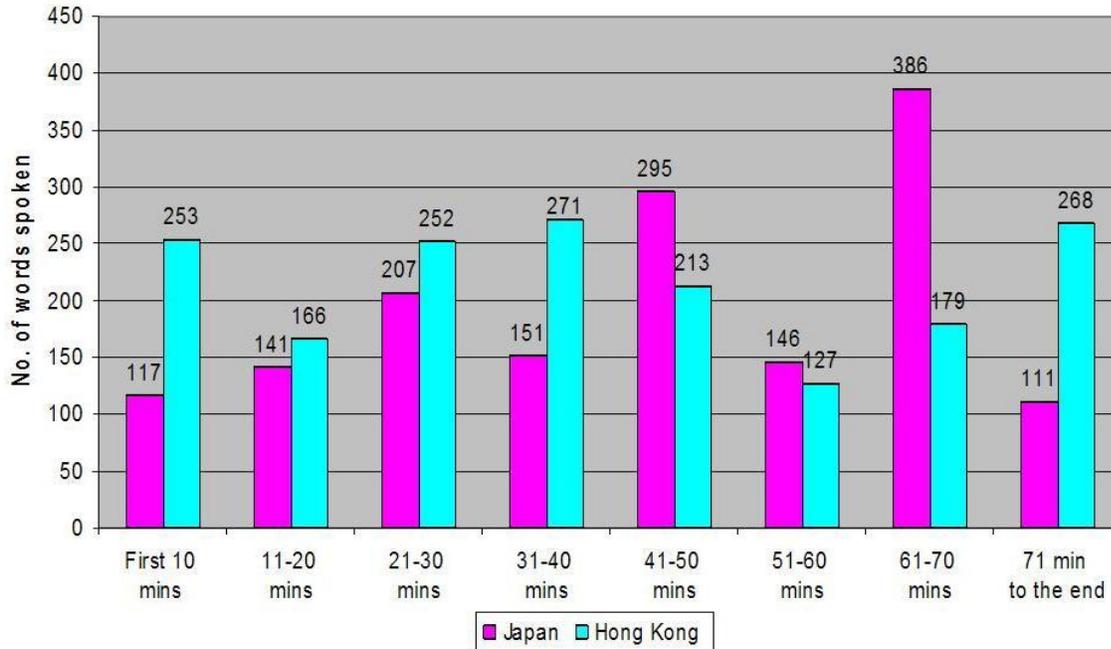


To further analyze the different communication behaviors between Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals, the average number of words spoken by each individual were calculated (see Figure 4). The results show that the average number of words spoken by Japanese group members were fewer than those spoken by their Hong Kong counterparts in the beginning of the meeting, but the number of words spoken gradually increased in the middle of the meeting. However, the average number of words spoken by Japanese business professionals started decreasing when the meeting was approaching the end.

In summary, the examination of the communication behaviors between the Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals in the three aspects has revealed very consistent patterns that Japanese business

professionals took fewer turns, shorter speaking time, and spoke fewer words at the beginning and at the end of the meetings. As the meeting proceeded in the middle course, the differences became smaller.

Figure 4: A comparison of average number of words spoken in every 10-minute unit



Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis looks at three aspects; namely socializing, disclosure opinions, hedging to express disagreement.

1. Socializing. In first ten minutes, the participants seem to be consciously grounding their harmonious relationship by inserting a little piece knowledge of the partner’s language (utterance 14 and 26) while introducing themselves. The data confirm that Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese, both being members of ‘collectivist cultures’, internalize value systems that emphasize interpersonal harmony.

Excerpt 1: December 17 meeting (ABC, Japanese, and DEFG, Chinese)

- 14. G: I'm Cecilia, Dou Zo Yoro Shiku.
- 15. A: Hahahaha....
- 16. F: Hi I'm Sandy, as you see here, Sandy Yang, nice to meet you.
- 17. A, B: Nice to meet you, Sandy.
- 18. D: Hi I'm Natalie, er... nice to... meet you all.
- 19. N.A.(Silent)
- 20. A, B. Yea... nice to meet you.
- 21. N.A. (Silent)

22. A: Okay, I'm Iyoda, I'm working for the ai... Engineering Department, so nice to meet you too.
 23. N.A. (Silent)
 24. B: And er... 我是 Takano.
 25. All: Laughing
 26. B: I'm Takano, I know a little bit only Chinese ar... 你們...很漂亮,
 27. All: Laughing
 28. F: Thank you.
 29. B: Ok, thank you.

In most of the meetings, groups' interaction styles did not differ much in greeting and self-introduction sequences. It should be noted that code switching from English to Japanese by Chinese participants and English to Mandarin by Japanese participants is used for achieving convergence as we see in another study of Chinese and Japanese business interaction (Poppi, 2010). Since the Japanese participants did not speak Cantonese, Chinese was the only resource for them to use during strategic code switching. Although harmony-seeking is said to be one of the attributes of collectivistic culture, caution is needed when asserting that the two groups share collectivist cultural values. Pre-meeting small talk is often observed in Western individualistic settings as well (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). The convergence could be motivated by the need to understand each other and continue with the proceedings rather than for ideological reasons (harmony seeking) specific to collectivists. Further examination of the data highlights differences between the two collectivistic cultural groups.

2. Disclosure of opinions. Topic management strategies employed by Hong Kong participants and Japanese participants were different. All of the five intercultural business meetings, HK participants disclosed their opinions first.

Excerpt 2: December 16 Meeting (ABCD: Japanese, EFGH Chinese)

43. B: And... Shall we exchange our... own opinion first?
 44. G: Ya, that will be good.
 45. B: Yea, so... each... each one by each one?
 46. G, H: Okay.
 47. B: Yea?
 48. H: Yes.
 49. G: Maybe we start with the ladies. Maybe... ladies first. Hahaha...
 50. D: Okay, ladies first.
 51. G: Ok, so hum...So for the US market, because we have to make decisions ar... about what will we do for the US market and the Asian market, and ar for US market, ar because we can rate ae on the scale from 1 to 7 for each option, and then... for me, option A, I take ar 3... 3. and then...

The participants negotiated who would start to talk from 44 to 49, then at the end D, a Japanese participant suggested that women start. Since all the Hong Kong participants in this meeting were women, and Japanese participants were men, B's suggestion was that Hong Kong participants started first.

Excerpt 3: December 17 Meeting (ABC, Japanese, DEFG, Chinese)

80. B: Um... first I think first we [’d] better show our idea what do you think about this issue. And then, second step, we will um confirm our um common and the bottom of sense, common an

idea. And then, um lastly, we will check this ar item list, what is our decision, to ar this each ABCDE to both area. Are you ready?

- 81. F: Okay okay.
- 82. G: Okay, yap.
- 83. NA: (Silent)
- 84. B: Okay... so... Takashi... so... who should be the first that showing your opinion? Huh...
- 85. F: Haa... okay, I will be the first. Er...

These two similar patterns (Excerpts 2 and 3) could be interpreted that Japanese prefer to know what the other party might say before they disclose their opinions. Kameda (2001, quoting Motokawa (1988) surmises that, "If other people come to the same conclusion as the one I have in mind, then we can share the conclusion and we are happy in harmony." Kameda claims that in order to minimize conflict, Japanese speakers tend to share the contextual information first and express their opinion or judgment at the very end of the interaction. This behavior is based on the assumption that sharing contextual information will lead to a shared opinion, thus ensuring interactional 'harmony'.

In order to maintain harmony Japanese tend to be indirect, and expressions are less verbally explicit (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993). When disagreement is expressed, it tends to appear much later in the interaction (Ide & Uchida, 2001; Ide, 2006). An interactant may not feel qualified to show disagreement without first acquiring all contextual information and weighing its implications. Thus, Japanese interactants often wait until the end of a conversation before showing disagreement. In case, agreement and disagreement, Japanese speakers need contextual grounding of their conversation flow. The Japanese participants' turns, speaking time and word counts generally increased as the meetings going for 20 to 40 minutes. There were ten-minute period that Japanese participants spoke more than Chinese participants in three out of five meetings.

The following analysis is applicable to the above discussion. When Japanese participants feel they sufficiently understand the context of the discussion, they speak out their opinions. The word counts comparison confirms this tendency, the Japanese participants' word count in the third period is always larger than their second period word count. Considering that about half of the first ten minute period is used socialization, the tendency of increasing word count from the second to the third indicates increased contextual knowledge let the Japanese open their mouth.

3. Hedging and disagreement. It is quite noteworthy that while the Hong Kong participants show direct disagreement, Japanese business professionals tend to express their disagreements indirectly. Utterance 58 is an example.

Excerpt 4: December 16 Meeting (ABCD: Japanese, EFGH Chinese)

- 58. H: Yes, US first. And, for me, hum... personally... actually... hum... I prefer hum... option E. I think maybe hum... slightly... diff... actually is quite different from Christy. I think hum at this moment, it might be better to ar... we should take more legal action to arm... to prevent the FDA from banning us. Arm... on this option, I suggest to liaise with FDA, because hum... I found that actually hum those researches, state we have problem maybe due to the inappropriate use of drug.
- 59. D: Yea

The Japanese participants' disagreement is generally indirect and takes interrogative forms.

Excerpt 5: December 16 Meeting (ABCD: Japanese, EFGH Chinese)

77. B: Er... so far, what I understand from the conversation, so, ar... stopping the promotion or ar... taking some actions to the... to the government, ar... we... I think ar... we all agree, but ar...the important point for me is, do we con... do we still continue to sell the product? or, to stop it? And, so far, what I understand is ar continue selling, is... ar... is no problem for... for you guys. Is this understanding correct?
78. G, H: Yes!
79. B: Orr, yea, we will not stop selling it.
80. H: Yea, we will continue selling it.
81. E: We will... not... we will not stopping, but we will continue to sell.
82. D: Ok, even though there is ar death case? Of 20 person? Or 30 person per year? Do you prefer continue to sell it?

The two questions by Japanese participants both indicate negative side of continuing to sell the drug this company produces. However, neither group asserts its disagreement with the previously argued idea of continue to sell the product. This could be interpreted that the two used interrogative forms because they did not want to confront their Hong Kong counterparts directly. In addition, it may have been considered more polite and respectful to suggest through inference.

The data could be interpreted as evidence for relatively stronger concerns for harmony within Japanese participants than Hong Kong participants.

Excerpt 6: December 17 Meeting (ABCD: Japanese, EFGH Chinese)

252. E: I'm I'm just I'm just allowing this option to continue, well like I said, if the doctor think(s) the doctor know best than we know the doctors, if the doctors know that hey this is more dangerous than the other one, then, the doctor would definitely will will will will suggest to the patient, hey, take the substitute one. But if the doctor says hey, you can't take the substitute one, but you can neither take ours because of certain requirements of cateria. And if we recall that, which mean is that that patient will... will lose the opportunity to get well as well. Well I'm just saying, it's not up to us to say okay, which one is the best and that I'm not prioritizing human life over profit. So human life are definitely the first thing, but the death, that is that that
253. B: But the... instead instead ar... in such cases, if patients need to face some dangerous options, I mean he predict ar... our medicine, then, in case he died, what will happen? What will happen? What will be popular? What will people think?
254. E: Like I said, it's something we need...

B does not agree with E's opinion to continue selling the product. Here again, B asks a question to him instead of directly disagreeing with E. However, less indirectness is observed among the participants in the February 24, meeting (see excerpt 7). This excerpt shows the moment after the three Hong Kong Chinese participants disclosed their choices were all D, C, and B, clearly show that their opinions are different from the Chinese participants.

Excerpt 7: 24 February Meeting (ABC: Japanese, DEF Chinese)

80. C: Alright, er... actually what er you... you people you as er... as er... option C, but option C for me is 2nd choice. First choice is er option D.
81. F: Option D.
82. C: Yes er... we should continue the [manufacture and the market support even for er... on the growth...] until FDA actually banned. Because er right now as you... how... you mission... see er... drug itself may not be the the die cause of the death... of the people... 20 to 30... and actually... in my idea, my feeling is most of the American citizens er... pretty much... not careful of er... the er... the... volume consider... with the product, say... easily over to... overdose ar the... medicine. So that... er... for example... a couple of er... example... right with with er... [it must hire to... rubby star's death, years to years, those people actually er... overdose the er... medicine... so that er... many people foreign sea er... behaviours... er... it... on other hand... the the lots of... the er... death... death that caused by the medicine, lots of product, er... that's why the er...] I'm still considering option D is most prior choice. And option C is er... the 2nd prior choice. How about the...
83. F: Okay.
84. F: Okay... how about... Yuki?
85. NA: (Silent)
86. B: Ar... that's very interesting case ar... D was my... both choice... and... C is my 2nd choice as well. Er... my 1st choice is E. Take legal and other necessary actions to prevent the FDA from banning EasyFix. As a pharmaceutical company, we have to make sure this um... drug is not be banned. We... we want this... medicine survive in US market. However, we thought of course we have to do research... safety research to realise what happened, what caused and... we even don't know the er... we know 20 to 30 unnecessary deaths we had this year, but we still don't know er... other information, for example, how many patients prescribed totally, and what mortality rate was... represent we don't know these kind of information. So... we also have to do clinical and non-clinical research... to... during during this kind of research, we have to make sure the FDA allows this measure, and we have to make sure the FDA will wait... our research report... before... they make the final decision and we withdraw the US market. So we have to to... the legal actions and other necessary actions immediately towards FDA, then we will do the research, so er... I chose er E.

The Excerpt 7 shows that the micro-managed and socially-organized nature of ELF discourse. While the Japanese participants are all male engineers from an engineering company in Japan, the meeting participants were more diversified. B is a female employee of a Japanese pharmaceutical company, in other word, a specialist in the subject matter under discussion, and C was a Japanese-Canadian educated in Canada. Their background made the discourse patterns different from the previous meetings.

Discussion And Conclusion

The current study examines the communication behaviors between two high-context cultural societies; namely, Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals. We present a preliminary analysis of the data from the study. Our overall findings indicate that in spite of the presumed cultural similarity between Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese (both high-context cultural societies), distinctive differences were observed in turn taking behaviors and topic management strategies. In general, the Hong Kong

Chinese participated more actively than did Japanese business professionals in terms of number of turns taken, amount of speaking time, and number of words spoken. Since the Hong Kong Chinese had higher English-language proficiency than did the Japanese, the Hong Kong Chinese found it easier to communicate in the meetings. We observed that Hong Kong Chinese consistently used English language patterns while the Japanese participants sometimes transferred first-language (L1) discourse style to their second-language use in the meetings.

Two Japanese participants exhibited different communication behaviors. One was a Japanese-Canadian who had native-like fluency in both English and Japanese, and had been exposed to Western culture. The other also had high English-language competency gained through studying in Australia as well as having subject matter expertise. We speculate that the relative language proficiency and cultural exposure of these Japanese participants could have affected their communication behaviors.

However, when the meetings were segmented into ten-minute units, the results showed that the participation rate between Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals narrowed in the middle sections of the meetings, and the differences only existed at the beginning and the end of the meetings. Once the Japanese felt more comfortable they were able to participate at a higher rate in the middle part of the meetings. At the end of the meetings, the Japanese again were less participative. This lack of participation could be attributed to them agreeing with the group decision and not feeling the need to verbalize this agreement. This interpretation would be consistent with the Japanese cultural communication style of communicating through silence. On the other hand, the Japanese could have disagreed with the group decision and did not want to disrupt the group harmony by verbally expressing their disagreement.

The Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese exhibited similar and different topic management strategies. In regard to the similarity, the greeting and introduction were the same. Both groups reflected their high-context cultural orientations. They both strived to achieve an atmosphere reflecting group harmony. In disclosing opinions, the Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese exhibited differences. The Hong Kong Chinese always put forth their opinions first, while the Japanese waited for the Hong Kong Chinese to do so. The Japanese had a tendency of giving the floor to Hong Kong Chinese. To generalize, the Hong Kong Chinese exhibited an assertive behavior pattern while the Japanese showed a reactive communication behavior. So, the Hong Kong Chinese were behaving in a style that represented a low-context style of communication, while the Japanese were practicing a high-context communication style.

Disagreements were also expressed differently. The Hong Kong Chinese expressed disagreement directly while the Japanese would use hedging to express their disagreements. Thus, the communication behaviors of the Hong Kong Chinese represented low-context communication behavior and the Japanese, high-context communication behavior. We speculate that the Hong Kong Chinese have been more exposed to Western cultures, and thereby lowering their context level. For example, the Hong Kong Chinese would say: "This is my opinion, and here's the reason why." To contrast, the Japanese would paraphrase what the Hong Kong Chinese had previously said and imply that there could be slight variations in the meaning. This strategy by the Japanese was to gradually move the Hong Kong Chinese towards an agreement that represented a consensus.

In contrast to the findings from existing studies, when Hong Kong Chinese are compared with Americans, Hong Kong Chinese show identifiable attributes of a collectivist culture (Du-Babcock, 2003, 2005). In the

current study, Hong Kong Chinese individualistic behavior was observed when interacting with Japanese. The overall findings of the current study challenge the widely accepted use of concepts such as “collectivist-individualist” or “high context-low context” as dichotomies. Our analysis indicates the possibility of understanding these categories as located on a continuum rather than working as opposites. Nevertheless, we recognize that a number of variables, for example linguistic competence, and subject matter knowledge in addition to cultural backgrounds, are likely to affect the participants’ turn taking behaviors and topic management strategies. Further research on intra-Asian interaction will be needed to move towards a better understanding of intercultural business communication.

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BERTHA DU-BABCOCK is Associate Professor at City University of Hong Kong where she teaches Intercultural Business Communication. She received the Kitty O Locker Outstanding Researcher Award in 2008 and the Meada Gibbs Outstanding Teaching Award in 2004. She also received Outstanding Article Awards in the *Journal of Business Communication* (2007) and *Business Communication Quarterly* (2001). Contact her at enbertha@cityu.edu.hk.

HIROMASA TANAKA is Professor at Meisei University, Tokyo and an independent consultant/trainer for business corporations. Previously he was managing consultant of SNNO Institute of Management where he participated in corporate change initiatives and training curriculum development projects in Japanese and non-Japanese companies in Japan, Korea, China, and the United States. Contact him at tanakahi@eleal.meisei-u.ac.jp.