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社会言語学的な観点から検証する国際化時代における
日本人の外国人への思い込みに関して

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〈論 文〉

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Abstract

Now that we are well into the 21st Century, it is becoming increasingly important that Japanese people improve their abilities to communicate with foreign people. Although the younger generation in Japan has become more knowledgeable than their parents about foreign people and culture, a considerable number of Japanese still look upon the behavior of non-Japanese people with outmoded, stereotyped ideas and assumptions. This article examines some common examples of these stereotypes and suggests ways in which such obstacles to communication can be overcome.

要旨

21世紀がはじまって、すでに十数年が経過した。今日、日本人は外国人とうまくコミュニケーションをとることがますます重要になっている。日本人の若い世代は、親の世代よりも外国人や外国の文化に詳しい人がいますが、古い発想で外国人を考える日本人はまだ多いように思われます。本研究は、その発想を分析すると同時に新しい時代のコミュニケーションの壁を乗り越える方法を提案する。

Keywords: Stereotypes, communication, overcome, culture, exchange, behavior

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1 Do All Non-Japanese People Staying in Japan Look As Though They Are Tourists?

No matter how many years Caucasian foreigners reside in Japan, they never come to resemble Japanese people. Their non-Oriental physical attributes insure that they will never “look Japanese” in the eyes of the Japanese. While this might seem like a statement so obvious as to be almost trite, it has important implications for long-term foreign residents of Japan. For Japan veterans, many of whom are familiar with Japanese customs and fluent in the Japanese language, being mistaken for tourists brings about decidedly mixed feelings. One American businessman and writer, fluent in Japanese from working for many years at several Japanese companies, reported his frustration at being frequently asked if he could use chopsticks (Taylor, 1983). Jack Seward, an author of numerous books on Japan-related topics, tried asking another long-time foreign resident if there was any trick that he could use to show Japanese people (upon first meeting) that he was not a tourist but rather a Japan veteran. The other resident, a man with longer Japan residency than Seward, replied that he knew of no such device, and that all Caucasian foreigners in Japan were doomed to be mistaken for visitors who had just gotten off the boat (Seward, 1982).

It is quite possible that some readers may be tempted to suggest that the Seward and Taylor examples are outdated. After all, the bulk of their Japan experiences came during the 1960s and 1970s. Is it not the case that Japanese people and society have changed sufficiently so that such stereotypes are no longer applicable? Judging by this writer’s research and experiences, the answer is more no than yes. While the number of

Japanese people going abroad has greatly increased and the number of Japanese with significant knowledge of foreign countries has gone up thanks to the Internet, the globalization of the Japanese on a personal level still has a long way to go. Several personal experiences should help to illustrate this problem. I have been in Japan since the 1980s and have permanent resident status. Despite this, I have been mistaken for a tourist on a number of occasions. On one visit to a bank in my neighborhood of Sapporo, a fifty-something aged Japanese man spoke to me while we were waiting in line for the next bank teller. Since he spoke to me in English, I replied in kind and we chatted for about 10 minutes. I told him that I was teaching English at a local university and that I had been in Hokkaido for a number of years. He certainly appeared to understand what I was talking about so it was a pleasant way to pass the time. Just then his number was called by the teller. As he got up to leave, he smiled at me and said, “Have a nice vacation!” While it could be argued that this man’s problem was one of English comprehension, it seems clear that he had a stereotype of foreign people as tourists. My talk of living in Hokkaido for many years had failed to penetrate his stereotype (McLarty, 1997). In case any readers think that this was only one isolated incident, there was another more troubling episode several years later. While attending a national conference of language teachers in Tokyo, I went to check in at the hotel where I had made a reservation. When I reached the front desk, a young lady staff member smiled and said, “Welcome sir!” However, just as I was feeling pleased with the friendly service, she continued with “Sir, please show me your passport.” I stood there for a long moment, dumbfounded. Resident foreigners in Japan are not required to carry a passport, though Japanese immigration law does

require us to have a foreign residence ID card on our person at all times (Japan Ministry of Justice Guidelines, 2012). For me, going from Sapporo to Tokyo was simply domestic travel, like an American going from Seattle to San Francisco. I had not even thought of bringing my passport! As I stood there at a loss for words, the hotel lady gave me a puzzled look. When I had made the room reservation, I had given the staff my Sapporo address. If they had a Hokkaido address for me, I assumed they would be aware that I was a Japan resident rather than a foreign person coming directly from abroad. Unfortunately, this information had somehow not reached the front desk staff. As the lady staffer went to call her boss, I began to worry that the hotel people might call the police or, heaven forbid, the immigration authorities. In that case, what was I going to do? When the lady returned with her boss, I was in a state of near-panic and blurted out in Japanese”*Sumimasen ga kyo ryoken wo motte konakatta no wa kokunai ryoko dakara na no desu. Chokusetsu America kara kita no de wa naku Sapporo kara kita no desu. Sapporo ni dunde imasu.*” (Excuse me, but the reason I didn’t bring my passport today is because this is a domestic trip. I didn’t come here directly from the U.S. I came here from Sapporo. I’m living in Sapporo.) Then I showed them my foreign residence ID card and there were no further problems. In looking back at that episode, however, one thing seems quite clear. The front desk lady had a stereotype that foreign guests of the hotel are all short-term visitors to Japan. The fact that she asked to see my passport , rather than simply any form of ID shows that she hadn’t counted on the possibility of a foreign guest who was already residing in Japan (McLarty, 1999).

Although my experiences might seem unique, other long-term foreign residents have reported

similar episodes. To give one example, an American acquaintance who has lived in Japan for several decades told me of a strange happening. While he was eating dinner at a small neighborhood soba shop, a Japanese customer seated several tables away smiled and bowed at him upon leaving the restaurant. When the American got up to pay his bill, the restaurant manager said to him, “You don’t need to pay anything, sir. That customer who just left has already paid for your meal.” The stunned American asked why. The manager said, “He probably thought you were a tourist and he wanted you to enjoy your visit to Japan.” The American, a regular customer of the shop, and the Japanese manager just looked at each other and enjoyed a laugh together. Just in case this type of incident is still not sufficient to convince readers of my point, allow me to provide one further example, which happened only weeks before this article was written. Sometimes I go to a certain Sapporo hotel to use its excellent sauna/bathing facilities, which are open to the public. Although I have never stayed at the hotel, most staffers recognize me by now. However, one bellboy may have been a new employee. When I entered the lobby, he smiled and said, “Have a nice stay, sir!” My “stay” was only a 30-minute sauna, but I appreciated his kindness. Lest our readers get the impression that I am pointing the finger of blame exclusively at Japanese people for this stereotype, let us look at one further example. Several years ago, when I took my family to the Sapporo Snow Festival, another Caucasian man came walking toward us. As our daughter wanted to take a photo, I asked him to take our picture in front of one of the snow statues. After he obliged, I asked where he was from. He said he was from the U.S., but had a long-term English teaching job in Sapporo. When he gave his name, I did a doubletake. Immediately, I recognized his name from our

academic circle members' list. He was a veteran Hokkaido resident with more time in Japan than me. How could I have possibly taken him for a tourist? Clearly, I was guilty of exactly the same stereotype.

2 Do All Caucasian Foreigners in Japan Look As Though They Are American?

In the late 1990s there was a popular Japanese television program called "*Koko ga Hen da yo, nihonjin*" (Strange Japanese Habits) It was on every Wednesday night for a considerable period of time. The show featured foreign guests who had long residence in Japan and who were all quite fluent speakers of Japanese. The guests gave dramatic, surprising and sometimes hilarious episodes from their experiences in this country, delivered in candid and often sardonic style. Among the non-U.S. guests, one of their biggest complaints was being mistaken for Americans by Japanese people. One Australian lady reported she had been mistaken for an American so many times that she was totally frustrated. Why is it that considerable numbers of Japanese people assume that, when they see a Caucasian person, he or she is probably American? One possible explanation, of course, is that the United States is, arguably, the foreign country which has had the biggest impact on Japan historically. American scholars of Japan, such as Edwin O. Reischauer (1982) have pointed this fact out on numerous occasions. Another factor might be the fact that, although World War II ended nearly seventy years ago and the U.S. occupation of Japan finished more than sixty years ago, there are still a number of U.S. military bases in Japan. Thus, a large number of Japanese residents of Okinawa, Aomori, Kanagawa and Hiroshima prefectures have come into direct contact with American military personnel. Nevertheless, these factors,

while certainly valid, cannot entirely explain the foreign person = American stereotype. Let us examine this phenomenon with some concrete examples.

In the 1980s a British expert on Japan made a walking journey from Wakkanai in Hokkaido to Cape Sata in Kyushu. Fluent in Japanese and long familiar with Japanese society and customs, he reported learning much from his length-of-Japan journey. Although he was fond of many aspects of Japan, he said one thing greatly bothered him. In his book chronicling his travels, he complained of being frequently mistaken for an American (Booth, 1985). In addition, a Canadian teacher who was my colleague for several years reported similar experiences. He said he had been asked by Japanese things like "Are you American?" or "Which state of the U.S. are you from?" He reported that he began to answer sarcastically "I'm not from any part of the U.S.!" It is quite easy to understand his frustration and to sympathize with foreign people who have been mistaken for Americans. One Sapporo-based researcher, who also thinks this stereotype is caused by historical factors, says that many Japanese people have a mental image like the following:

Foreign Person = English Language = American
He writes that this equation is etched in the minds of many Japanese (Akasaka, 1993). To provide further proof that foreigners look like Americans, this writer can give two more recent examples. Just a few years ago (2012, by my diary entry) there was an incident at Nopporo JR Station. While I was in the station lobby waiting for the next train's arrival, a male stranger walked up to me, smiled, and right in front of me, began humming the U.S. national anthem. When he finished, he smiled at me again (as if to emphasize it was for my benefit) and, without

uttering a word, walked out of the station, leaving this writer quite speechless. Before I had any chance to ask who he was or why he was “performing this service” he disappeared and I have not once seen him since that time. Attempts to track him down by searching the station’s surrounding area also proved fruitless. Upon relating this incident to HIU students, virtually all of them agreed that this man had assumed I was an American. While a few people asked if perhaps he was a drunkard, I assured them that the man’s manner and behavior were that of someone who knew exactly what he was doing.

In another incident several years ago, my wife and I were visiting Otaru for a bit of sightseeing. We stopped by a small restaurant near Otaru JR Station and, as we sat down, I noticed one other non-Japanese customer in the restaurant. We were about to make our drink order when he raised his hand to get my attention. As he approached our table, I instinctively greeted him in English with, “Hello. What can I do for you?” He hesitated in answering for a long moment. Then my wife and I tried greeting him in Japanese, but he didn’t respond at all. Then, in an instant, I realized what was the problem. He said, in faltering English, “I am Russian.” There it was! My wife and I could only look at each other sheepishly. Clearly, I too was guilty of making the unconscious assumption that this man was American, despite the fact that we had never met before and there was no objective evidence (such as clothing or certain gestures) that would have provided clear clues to back up my hunch.

In the end, the lesson is that we all (this writer included) need to re-examine our thinking concerning this subject. Japanese and Americans both need to keep in mind that there are people of various nationalities to be found in the world

these days and that, when meeting strangers, regardless of their physical appearance, the safest method is to ask them directly (with an open mind) about their background, insofar as that is feasible. That is what I plan to do from now on.

3 Are Foreign People Unable to Learn Japanese? Is The Japanese Language Too Difficult For Them to Master?

One well-known Japanese sociolinguistics scholar has stated that most Japanese people don’t expect foreigners to be familiar with their language. *Gaikokujin wa nihongo wo wakaru hazu ga nai.* (Foreign people are not expected to understand Japanese). He thinks that most Japanese people are not mentally prepared to deal with Japanese-speaking foreigners (Suzuki, 1978). He goes on to cite the specific example of a Belgian priest who was fluent in Japanese. “Father Grootaers is a linguist with an excellent command of Japanese. At a bakery in his neighborhood which he passes almost daily, Father Grootaers is always understood perfectly when he says *Shokupan ikkin kudasai.* (I would like one loaf of bread, please.) but at a downtown bakery he sometimes has difficulty making himself understood even though he uses the same sentence and pronounces it exactly the same way. Furthermore, when he travels through the countryside, he has great difficulty communicating with people just because he looks different. Sometimes people he talks to refuse to recognize that he is addressing them in Japanese.” He also reports that many of the people say *Watashi eigo wakarimasen.* (I don’t understand English) and wave an open hand in front of their faces to indicate a negative response (Suzuki, 1987). This can be extremely frustrating for a foreign person who has taken the time and effort to study Japanese, only to meet with this type of

obstacle to communication. This author can certainly sympathize with Father Grootaers.

If most Japanese do not expect foreigners to speak their language proficiently, it logically follows that they don't usually think foreigners can understand the conversations of Japanese people (in Japanese) which they might overhear. Sen Nishiyama, a professional translator/interpreter and a well-known expert in the field of intercultural communication, has provided us with an excellent example of this. At a Japanese supermarket in Salt Lake City, Utah, an American customer asked the store clerk in English if they had any canned bamboo shoots (takenoko). The clerk called out to a co-worker in Japanese, *Koko ni takenoko no kanzume wo hoshigaru gaijin san ga iru kara ano furui yatsu wo hitotsu dashite ne.* (There is a foreigner here who wants canned bamboo shoots. Bring out one of the old cans of it.) The American man then spoke in Japanese, *Ano moshi atarashii shohin no nyuka ga arimashitara sukoshi takakute mo kekko desukara atarashii kanzume kudasai.* (If you have any new canned bamboo shoots, I don't mind if those are a little expensive. Could I have one of the fresh cans, please?) The store clerk turned red in the face and ran to the back storeroom and hid. The co-worker brought out a fresh can of bamboo shoots, while bowing and apologizing to the customer (Nishiyama, 1991).

Although we are well into a new century, the idea that non-Japanese people (at least some of them, anyway) might overhear *and understand* conversations in Japanese is a concept which is still quite foreign to many Japanese. This writer had an experience just a few years ago which should serve as an example. While riding a JR train from Teine to HIU one day, I noticed many college-aged young people board the train at

Sapporo Station. Although I was able to sit (since I had been on the train from its departure point) it quickly became crowded so many people had to ride while standing. One young couple happened to stand together right in front of where I was sitting. Naturally, I couldn't help overhearing parts of their conversation. As the train headed towards Ebetsu, they talked about the various classes/lectures they were taking at school. Just before the train reached Oasa, the young man asked the girl about her English class. She made an unpleasant face and said, *Eigo ichi wa Iya da yo. Itsumo eigo de happyo saserareru kara.* (I don't like English One. The teacher always makes us present in English in front of the class.) She was standing right in front of me when she said this so it would have been impossible not to hear it. The amazing thing is that I managed to keep a poker face until she and her boyfriend got off the train. Several pertinent questions could be asked here. Did my presence somehow trigger or influence her remark? Would she have made such an emphatic anti-English comment if she had known that I do comprehend spoken Japanese? The answer to the first question may be outside the scope of this article, but I believe the answer to the second one is probably no. Neither she nor her boyfriend showed any sign of checking my reaction to their conversation, despite the fact that I was looking in their direction the entire time we rode the train. *Gaikokujin wa nihongo wo wakaru hazu ga nai.* Foreign people are not supposed to understand spoken Japanese. It seems clear that that young woman never imagined that I might understand what she was saying. In retrospect, perhaps it would have been better if I hadn't.

Although HIU could be said to have at least three foreign teachers who are, arguably, fluent in the Japanese language, even "fluent" speakers of Japanese can face some peculiar obstacles, if they

are Caucasian, that is. One American scholar of Japan says that Caucasian speakers of Japanese have to deal with what he calls the “Law of Inverse Returns” In essence, “the better you get at the Japanese language, the less credit you are given for your accomplishments; the more fluently you speak it, the less your hard-won skills will do for you in the way of making friends and impressing people.” On the other hand, the less you can do with the language, the more you will be praised by Japanese society in general and by your Japanese friends in particular (Miller, 1982) While this may sound far-fetched to any readers not well-versed in things Japanese, many foreign residents can identify with this phenomenon. Prof. Miller goes on to note that foreign residents who become increasingly proficient in spoken Japanese are often treated with caution while newcomers to Japan are praised as being *johzu* (skillful) even though they can only manage a halting, broken version of Nihongo.

While this “Law of Inverse Returns” may be less evident in major cities, I have personally experienced some elements of it during my travels to parts of rural Japan outside Hokkaido. In one city in Honshu where I spent significant amounts of time, communication in Japanese with the local residents always felt difficult, despite the fact that I had already been studying the Japanese language for over a decade and had a graduate degree in a Japan-related subject. Fortunately, one Japanese friend, a doctor at one of the town’s hospitals, gave me some sage advice. Said he, “Charles, you need to understand that people here are not accustomed to foreigners who are fluent in Japanese. They are not mentally prepared to hear Japanese words coming from the mouth of someone with your face. If you want to communicate better with them, I suggest you speak in simple, preferably broken Japanese.”

After I took his advice, my communication with the locals improved considerably.

4 The Children of Japanese-Foreigner Marriages Are Foreign, Not Japanese

Several years ago I had the good fortune to hear a most interesting story from a Japanese friend, who is a teacher at a Sapporo-area school. It was about something odd that happened at the sports day of a certain elementary school in Sapporo. One of the athletic events, it seems, was the 50-meter dash. Among the entrants in that event was one bicultural boy. As the starter’s gun sounded, the competitors broke out of their blocks and into a dash. The bicultural boy ran a good race, but did not come out the winner. As the winning boy broke the tape at the finish line, shouts rang out from the spectator seats, “Hooray! Japan won! Japan’s the winner!” If this had been an international level competition, I could easily understand the sentiments of those spectators. However, this was nothing more than one Japanese elementary school’s athletic competition. Furthermore, all of the boys in this race were Japanese, including the bicultural kid, who has Japanese nationality. Rejoicing about “Japan’s victory” in an event where *all the competitors are Japanese* seems like puzzling behavior, to put it mildly. How should we go about trying to understand the sentiments of those rejoicing spectators?

Speaking of that particular bicultural boy, his mother is Japanese and his father is Canadian. His father has dark brown hair and, on this point, the son takes after his dad. Although you could identify the boy as non-Japanese from his photo, you might not be able to pick him out of a crowd of Japanese, especially from a distance. Even if you were to watch a video/DVD of that school’s

sports day, you still might not be able to easily locate the bicultural kid. In fact, if nobody told you that there was a non-Japanese child in the group, you might not even be aware of his presence at all. Actually, this boy has lived in Japan nearly all his life, has always attended Japanese schools and speaks fluent Japanese in the Hokkaido dialect with his classmates. Thus, it would be clearly a mistake to simply label him as a *gaijin* (foreigner). Of course, it is quite common in Japan to refer to children of mixed parentage as *haafu* (mixed blood) though this writer feels a very strong aversion to that term as well. For Americans or other native English speakers, ‘half’ means that there is 50% of something. However, using half to refer to human beings seems downright rude to this writer. A person being called half might even get the feeling that they are only considered to have 50% of the value of people who are not of mixed race.

This discussion reminds me of a pertinent letter to the editor which I saw printed in one of Japan’s English language newspapers. It was written by a foreign wife of a Japanese man. She reported that her child hated being called *haafu* by Japanese kids at school. She insisted that kids of mixed parentage ought to be called ‘double’ because they possessed two cultural backgrounds, not just one. In one other letter to a different newspaper, the daughter of a Japanese-African American couple said she was bullied because of her race. Fortunately, her mother gave her strong support by saying, “You are not half of anything. You are double because you have two cultural heritages. Have confidence in yourself.” (Life, 1999).

Conclusions

The 21st Century presents Japan with unprecedented opportunities to deepen its

relations with foreign countries and improve its global communication with non-Japanese people the world over. While this task will require tremendous and sustained energy, I firmly believe that Japanese people are equal to the challenge. Unfortunately, many Japanese are still held back from satisfying cultural exchanges by the persistence of stereotypes about foreign countries/peoples left over from the previous century. Before Japanese and non-Japanese can achieve truly heart-to-heart communication, it is imperative that these outmoded ideas be identified, analyzed and debunked. Then and only then can Japanese people be free to reach their maximum potential as global citizens. In this regard, I believe that long-term foreign residents of Japan (such as this writer) are in an excellent position to support our Japanese friends. We have seen firsthand how deeply rooted stereotypes can impede communication between people of different cultural backgrounds. We are the ones who are qualified to serve as facilitators of better understanding.

Why have I chosen the four categories above as the basis of this article? While there are numerous other possible stereotypes which could have been included, I believe the four dealt with in this paper are the most common (and least well understood) of the impediments which get in the way of better , smoother communication between Japanese and non-Japanese people Nothing would please this writer more than if such obstacles could be totally and completely eradicated. Unfortunately, long-held stereotypes die hard. Human psychology is such that prejudices of the mind cannot be altered in days, weeks or months. Rather, it requires years or even decades to change. Sociolinguists know that their work must be undertaken as a life-long project. They also realize that their work will bear little fruit unless

they maintain a positive stance and have plenty of forbearance. This writer is also fully aware that the same requirements apply to him.

As a veteran friend and ally of the Japanese people (and one who has spent fully half a lifetime in this nation) it behooves me to do everything possible to facilitate more effective communication between Japanese and those in other countries. I firmly believe that the first step is identifying our common obstacles to communication. This article has treated four problem areas, and will hopefully invite further discussion. In addition, I strongly believe that such a discussion, in and of itself, means that we are now progressing toward possible future solutions. My experience has been that the human mind is capable of remarkable creativity when exposed to a variety of new and stimulating opinions. Let us keep this discussion going. Let us make certain that communication continues to flow more smoothly and more freely. I dedicate myself from here on out to helping Japanese people achieve the intercultural communication which will enable them to smash old prejudices and take their place in the 21st Century as the global citizens they deserve to be.

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