

How Japanese and Foreign People See Each Other A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Common Misperceptions and Why What We See Is Not Necessarily What We Get

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お互いの認識のずれはなぜ起こるかを社会言語学的に分析する

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〈論 文〉

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Abstract

When it comes to intercultural encounters, Japanese and foreign people tend to view each other through a distorted lens. The culturally based assumptions each makes about the other are, while understandable, often seriously flawed. This can lead to misunderstandings and frustrating failures of communication. It is not so much the things we don't know about each other that cause major problems. Rather, the problem is in the things we "know" which are not true. The purpose of this article is to discuss several key problem areas, examine their background and origin and suggest solutions as to how we may achieve better intercultural communication.

要旨

日本人と外国人が出会う時、お互いに先入観をもって見てしまう傾向がある。そのような文化的な思い込みは、あっても不思議ではないが、誤解の原因になりかねない。最も問題なのは、お互いを知らないことよりも、事実と異なることを「知っている」と信じてしまうことである。本研究の目的は、文化的な誤解のずれが起こりやすい例を検証し、その背景と主な原因をさぐりながら、よりよい異文化間のコミュニケーションへの提案をすることである。

Key Words: assumptions, behavior, cultural background, communication, bias

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1 Do All Caucasian Foreigners in Japan Look Fluent in English?

Several years ago I remember watching a television program on which some famous Japanese comedians, such as Tamori, often appeared. There were also some foreign entertainers, who were very fluent in Japanese. In addition, there were often foreign people in the studio audience. The format of this show allowed for free give and take between the entertainers and the audience. On that particular day Tamori decided to ask a certain foreign member of the audience what he had thought of one of the show's comedy routines. However, the man in the audience could not understand Tamori's question in Japanese. Tamori asked one of the foreign entertainers to translate his question into English for the man. However, when the man was asked the same question in English, he still did not respond. Although the question was rephrased in English for him several times, he was unable to answer. A strange hush filled the studio as the Japanese entertainers and audience couldn't figure out what the problem was. Finally the man, speaking in broken English, said "I am Italian." The entertainers were dumbstruck. Then Tamori summed up their reaction with the following comment. "When we Japanese people see a foreign person, we just assume that he or she is an English speaker." It seems to this writer that a large number of Japanese people probably share this assumption.

Let me next relate the strange experience of one of my former colleagues. He is also American and a long-time teacher of English in Japan. It happened one night when he went drinking in Sapporo. He entered a Japanese *izakaya* type of

drinking shop and sat down at the counter. By coincidence, another foreign man happened to be sitting right beside his chair. Without thinking, he spoke to the man, offering a greeting in English. Strangely, the man did not respond to this. He tried again, thinking perhaps the man had not heard him above the din of the restaurant crowd. Again, the man gave no response. Just as he was wondering what was going on, the man suddenly answered him in Japanese! "*Gomen nasai. Watashi wa eigo ga dame desu. Nihongo de shaberimasho.*" (Sorry sir. I cannot speak English. Let us talk in Japanese.) My colleague sat there for a moment in stunned silence. After he recovered from the initial shock, he and the man began chatting. When he learned that the man was Russian, it dawned on him what the problem had been. As my colleague is also fluent in spoken Japanese, he and the Russian fellow were able to enjoy an extended chat in Japanese. He said he had really enjoyed this unexpected bit of "cultural exchange" He did say, however, that there was one negative to that experience. When the Japanese customers seated nearby realized that the two foreign men were speaking in Japanese, rather than English, they kept giving my colleague and the Russian the strangest glances.

Obviously, the sight of a Russian and an American chatting in fluent Japanese was so bizarre that, for the Japanese people there, it simply did not sociolinguistically compute. Why? It is likely due to a certain assumption which appears to be widespread among Japanese. That is, Caucasian person=English speaker.

This writer has alluded to a similar encounter with non-English speaking Russians

he had in Otaru (McLarty, 2014). He has also mentioned an incident at an airport in Alaska where his former teacher of Japanese was accosted by Japanese-speaking Europeans (Akasaka, 1993). While these happenings were all very much real and do lend support to my theories about sociolinguistic assumptions, I wondered if events of four, five, eight or ten years ago were still indicative of the actual situation out there in the world. At the suggestion of colleagues, I decided to take a survey to check the attitudes of HIU students to ascertain whether they, too, were making the same sociolinguistic assumptions I had come across in Japanese society as a whole.

The HIU Sociolinguistic Survey

In the survey students were shown four pictures of people of various nationalities. They were asked to indicate which people in the pictures they thought could speak English and which they thought could speak Japanese. In other words, they were asked to make linguistic judgements about the people based solely on their physical appearance. The pictures were all in black and white and, in fact, were an amalgam of parts of different photos cut and pasted together to look like the subjects were in the same place at the same time. The photos were a mix of shots taken at various parties, events and gatherings. They included some of my friends, relatives and former colleagues. The pictures were copied over several times to deliberately make them fuzzy, thus making it impossible for anyone to discern the identity of the individuals. Each picture showed four people, marked simply as A, B, C and D. Students were given a printed form with just two questions to answer. “Which people in this

picture do you think can speak English?” and “Which people in this picture do you think can speak Japanese?” Students were given an answer sheet and instructed to answer only by check marks. They were told that multiple answers, such as A & C or B & D were okay. They were also informed that “All of the above” or “None of the above” were acceptable as answers. The whole point of this exercise was to determine what linguistic judgements students would make about people if the only information they had was people’s physical appearance.

Picture One was of four Caucasian men with two Russians and two Americans. Person A and Person C were Russian, While B and D were American. Let us take a look what linguistic assumptions our students made about these people. Sixty four freshmen took the survey.

Figure 1- First Year Student Results

Which of these people do you think can speak English?	
All of the Above	33%
Persons A,C and D	25%
Person D Only	12%
Persons A, B and C	12%
Person A Only	4%
Persons B and D	3%
Persons B and C	3%
Persons C and D	2%
Person B Only	2%
Persons A & D	2%
None of the Above	2%

Since fully 33% of the freshmen answered ‘All of the Above’ it indicates that around 1 in 3 of our first year students think that most Caucasian-looking people probably speak English. In fact, the two Russians in that photo

(A and C) are sailors. While I don't know either of them personally, it is more than reasonable to presume that they probably have only a smattering of English. Based on my contacts with Russian sailors in Hokkaido to date, that is a fair conjecture. The important point, though, is that 33% of HIU freshmen who took this survey made a judgement that these two men "looked fluent" in English every bit as much as the two Americans in the picture. Of course, what first year students assume to be true may not be indicative of all HIU students. In order to check out this possibility I also administered the same survey to my two classes of second year students. There were a total of seventy two sophomores in this group.

Figure 2 2nd Year Student Results

<u>Which of these people do you think can speak English?</u>	
<u>Persons A, C and D</u>	<u>30%</u>
<u>All of the Above</u>	<u>27%</u>
<u>Person D Only</u>	<u>10%</u>
<u>Person C Only</u>	<u>7%</u>
<u>Persons A & C</u>	<u>6%</u>
<u>Persons B & C</u>	<u>5%</u>
<u>Persons A & D</u>	<u>4%</u>
<u>Person B Only</u>	<u>3%</u>
<u>Person A Only</u>	<u>2%</u>
<u>Persons A, B & D</u>	<u>2%</u>
<u>Persons A, B & D</u>	<u>2%</u>
<u>None of the Above</u>	<u>2%</u>

A cursory look at Figure 2 makes it clear that our sophomores have made linguistic judgements about Picture One that do differ from the freshmen significantly. Whether their judgements are more sophisticated or not, I will leave for readers to decide. However, the fact that the largest number of their positive responses was for A, C and D rather than 'All of

the Above' indicates that their opinions might be slightly more nuanced than our 1st year students. In fact, the best answer would have been B and D, as these were both American men. Interestingly, 3% of the freshmen did choose B and D while not even one of the second year students opted for B and D. Perhaps we should give credit to all students who gave answers besides 'All of the Above' because this is a possible indication that those students are aware that not all Caucasian-looking people necessarily speak English. If we can reasonably interpret the data in this way then perhaps this survey shows, among other things, that sociolinguistic attitudes of young Japanese (and Japanese people, in general, we could infer) are in flux. The linguistic assumptions of Japanese in their twenties is not that of those in their forties or fifties. Regardless of what my students thought of this survey, it is fair to say that their responses have provided a great deal of food for thought. The assumptions made by people of Tamori's generation are greatly changing. The old assumption of Caucasian = English speaker may become outmoded. If that is the case then surveys such as this do actually have a valid purpose. Certainly, this writer would like to believe so.

In the next segment of this report I will deal with student responses to Picture Two of this survey. Picture Two also shows four people. In this picture, however, all the subjects are Orientals, that is all of them are Asian-looking. Person A is Taiwanese, B and D are Korean and C is the only Japanese. Let us move on to the next stage of our discussion.

2 Do All Oriental People Look Fluent in Japanese?

One Japanese linguistic scholar has written that, for Japanese people, language and physical appearance are quite directly related. Japanese speech is expected to come from the lips of people with Japanese-looking faces (Akasaka, 1993). Conversely, people with Caucasian-looking faces are not expected to speak Japanese. Interestingly enough, he goes on to state that Japanese people seem not to think there is anything strange if Chinese, Koreans or other Asians speak Japanese. In fact, many Japanese appear to think it quite natural that other Asians can speak their language. Another Japanese linguistics specialist says that, from the Japanese perspective, Caucasians never look like they know Japanese (even if some individual ones are actually fluent), but other Asians “look fluent” in Japanese even if they actually can hardly speak a word of Nihongo (Suzuki, 1978).

One well-known American scholar of Japan reported having a very strange experience in this connection. As he was a lover of Japanese *onsen* (hot springs) he went there one weekend with a Japanese-American girlfriend. He says that the manager of the hot spring was very kind when they stayed there overnight. Unfortunately, it seems that there was one problem. As a scholar of Japan, the American fellow was fluent in Japanese, but his girlfriend, born and raised in the U.S., could not speak Japanese at all. This made for some communication difficulties with the manager. Whenever the scholar asked the manager something in his fluent Japanese, the manager would turn to the non-Japanese speaking

woman when answering. Of course, the woman could not understand the manager’s answers so she always looked to the scholar for a translation. The frustrated scholar finally figured out a way to make the manager realize his ability in Japanese. He sat down and wrote a series of difficult kanji in front of the manager. At last, the manager realized his Japanese ability. Clearly, the manager had assumed that the Japanese-looking woman understood spoken Japanese while thinking that it was the Caucasian man who would need a translation. In other words, She “looked fluent” in Japanese. He did not (Seward, 1981).

The foregoing episode might sound unbelievable to many foreign readers, but one of my former colleagues, a Japanese-American woman from Hawaii, told me she had had similar experiences while living in Japan. Her parents had always spoken English at home and she had taken only a few Japanese language classes before coming to Japan. In her first year or so in Japan, she could hardly speak the natives’ tongue. This led to some strange episodes. For example, whenever she went shopping, the Japanese saleswomen would speak to her in Japanese (naturally) since she looked physically no different from the other shoppers. But since she couldn’t understand, she tried telling them she was a foreigner by saying, “*Watashi wa gaijin desu. Nihongo wo wakarimasen.*” (I’m a foreigner. I can’t understand Japanese.) The saleswomen, of course, couldn’t (or wouldn’t) believe her at all. Also, when she read American newspapers while riding the bus, Japanese women sitting nearby often said to her, “*Eiji shimbun wo yomeru ne. Subarashii desu ne.*” (Wow! That’s wonderful that you can read newspapers

in English!) It pretty much goes without saying that a Caucasian person would not likely have had these types of experiences.

If many Japanese people have held the assumption that Caucasian person=English speaker, it follows that many might also hold the belief that Oriental person=Japanese speaker. In order to test this hypothesis, I included such a question in the Student Survey. In the following section let us see to what extent, if at all, HIU students hold the same type of linguistic assumptions.

Figure 3 First Year Student Results

<u>Which of these people do you think speaks Japanese?</u>	
<u>Person D Only</u>	<u>36%</u>
<u>Persons A and D</u>	<u>21%</u>
<u>Persons B and D</u>	<u>14%</u>
<u>Persons C and D</u>	<u>14%</u>
<u>Person C Only</u>	<u>6%</u>
<u>Person A Only</u>	<u>5%</u>
<u>Persons A and C</u>	<u>2%</u>
<u>Persons A, B and C</u>	<u>1%</u>
<u>Persons A, B and D</u>	<u>1%</u>

The data clearly shows that the largest number of students thought D was the only person in the picture who was likely to be a speaker of Japanese. In fact, D was a Korean man in his thirties. Perhaps he “looked Japanese” to some of our students. The second most frequent answer was A and D. In point of fact, A was a Taiwanese man in his twenties. The best answer would have been ‘Person C Only’ because that gentleman was the only Japanese person in the picture. Thus, we can safely say (I believe) that he is the only one of the four people shown who speaks Japanese. Admittedly, we cannot completely deny the

possibility that the Taiwanese man, the Korean man or the Korean woman may have somewhere actually studied the Japanese language. However, judging by the numerous non-Japanese Asian people I have known up to now, it is fair to say that that possibility is relatively remote.

One interesting result to note here is that only 6% of first year students answered ‘C Only’ From this we could even draw the conclusion that at least 94% of these students could not pick out correctly which person pictured was Japanese. If that is the case, it is reassuring to this American, who has never found a reliable way to physically distinguish Japanese people from other Asians. True, being able to physically distinguish Japanese from other Asians is not likely to be a skill our students will need in their future working lives. The reason I have pointed it out is that several of my Japanese educational colleagues have claimed they have this ability, despite my consistent skepticism. Whether these particular colleagues know something I don’t is not clear. Let us, however, leave this discussion for exploration in a future article.

Figure 4 Second Year Student Results

<u>Which of these people do you think speaks Japanese?</u>	
<u>Person D Only</u>	<u>39%</u>
<u>Persons C and D</u>	<u>21%</u>
<u>Persons A, C and D</u>	<u>12%</u>
<u>Persons A and D</u>	<u>12%</u>
<u>Person C Only</u>	<u>11%</u>
<u>Person B Only</u>	<u>3%</u>
<u>Persons A and C</u>	<u>1%</u>
<u>Persons B and D</u>	<u>1%</u>
<u>None of the Above</u>	<u>0%</u>
<u>All of the Above</u>	<u>0%</u>

When comparing the results of our freshmen with those of our sophomores, there are several figures which might be significant.

Firstly, more of the second year students chose 'D Only' than the first year students, by 39% to 36%. Also, fewer freshmen than sophomores opted for 'C and D' by 14% to 21%. Perhaps, though, the most interesting difference was that, while only 6% of freshmen answered 'C Only' 11% of the sophomores chose that response. As I have noted on the previous page, Person C was the only Japanese in the picture. This leads us to the possible conclusion that our second year students might have better abilities at figuring out who in the picture is Japanese and who is not. Overall, though, I think we should give credit to both our 1st and 2nd year students for the fact that, on this question, not a single one opted for either 'None of the Above' or 'All of the Above'. This indicates a degree of nuanced judgement, at least in the sense that many of them showed an awareness that one or several people in the picture might not be Japanese (or Japanese speakers) That said, it is time to move on to the next phase of this report.

3 When Japanese People Walk With Foreigners Do They Look Fluent in English?

Some years ago when I was teaching part-time at a different university, I had a peculiar experience which, I believe, has a bearing on language issues pertaining to this report. At that time I was living at the same apartment complex as several of the students who I knew from that school. As we were living at the same place there were many chances to chat informally and, not surprisingly, we got to know each other quite well. In fact,

we often walked either to school or home from school together. One day one of the Japanese students seemed to be all smiles as he walked home with me. He commented, "Walking with McLarty-sensei is really fun!" He seemed so happy about walking with me that I asked him why. What he said next gave me some food for thought. He replied, "It's because when I walk with you I look to other Japanese as though I can speak English." The look of disbelief on my face must have been funny because the other students nearby burst into laughter at this. Still feeling skeptical about his comment, I asked the students nearby one by one the following question: "When he walks with me, does he really look like he is fluent in English?" To my astonishment, every one of them nodded and answered, "Yes, he does." All I could do was scratch my head like someone who is in a quandary. Come to think of it, however, the strangest part of that episode was thinking about the young man who said he looked fluent in English when walking with me. In fact, he and I had never once spoken English! We always spoke in Japanese when walking home.

Recently, I had occasion to recall that incident. It seemed to contain an important element of linguistic truth. Thus, I decided to ask some Japanese friends in Sapporo if they agreed with that young man's opinion. Every one of them agreed with him. On a whim or, perhaps, out of a desire to test out one of my theories, I decided to ask the same friends just the opposite question. That is, when I walk with a Japanese person, do I look like I am fluent in Japanese? Not surprisingly, they all had the same opinion. What surprised me, though, was that they all said, "No, you don't look fluent in Japanese

when you walk with a Japanese person.” In other words, when a Japanese person walks with me, he or she looks like an English speaker, but even when I walk with a Japanese individual, I don’t look a fluent Japanese speaker. Why, I wondered, should this be? The fact that I don’t “look fluent in Japanese” to Japanese people even when walking with a Japanese person or associating with Japanese people may be connected to linguistic attitudes pointed out by one famous American scholar of things Japanese. He writes, “For many Japanese, the sight of a Caucasian person speaking their tongue fluently is nothing less than miraculous (Taylor, 1983). Since I have included this issue in the student survey, readers will have an opportunity to judge whether or not this type of linguistic attitude is prevalent among students of HIU.

In Picture Three there were two Americans and two Japanese shown. The Americans were A and B, while the Japanese were C and D. B was a former colleague of mine, a veteran English teacher in Japan, who is fluent in Japanese. A was his mother, who is a monolingual English speaker. C and D were two Japanese teachers of English at a school I once taught at. Let us have a look at student responses to this picture.

Figure 5 1st year Student Results

<u>Which of these people do you think speaks Japanese?</u>	
Persons C and D	56%
Person D Only	26%
Person C Only	13%
Person B Only	2%
Person A Only	2%
Persons B, C and D	1%

Of our freshmen, a majority of 56% said

that only the two Asians, C and D, were Japanese speakers. Over one fourth of the students also thought that just D, the woman who is actually Japanese, could speak Japanese. The best answer would have been B, C and D since the two Asians are both Japanese and B, the American, is actually fluent in Japanese. Only a mere 2% of frosh thought that A, the American lady, could be a Japanese speaker. Also, a mere 1% got the best answer, B, C and D. In essence, over half of first year students judged that only the Asians, and not either of the white people, were speakers of Japanese. This would appear to bear out the opinion of our previously mentioned scholar, Mr. Taylor. Before criticizing all of our students, however, let us look at the responses of the sophomores.

Figure 6 2nd year Student Results

<u>Which of these people do you think speaks Japanese?</u>	
Persons C and D	57%
Person D Only	24%
Person C Only	15%
Person A Only	1%
Persons B and D	1%
Persons B and C	1%
Persons B, C and D	1%

Concerning Picture Three, our 2nd year student results bear a strong similarity to the results of the freshmen. Sophomores who felt that only the Asians could be Japanese speakers added up to a combined 81% of the total. Only 1% thought that the American lady could be a Japanese speaker. Another 3% answered that both Asians and non-Asians could possibly be Japanese speakers. Obviously in the eyes of most of our students, the white people in Picture Three did not “look fluent” in Japanese. Does it follow, then, that the two Asians in the

picture “looked fluent” in English because they were with Caucasian people? In order to check on this, students were asked the opposite question also about the picture. Let us examine those results below.

Figure 7 1st Year Student Results

Which of these people do you think speaks English?	
Persons A and B	58%
Person B Only	20%
Persons A, B and C	6%
Person D Only	4%
Persons A, B and D	4%
Persons B and C	3%
Persons C and D	3%
Person A Only	2%

Once again, the great majority of our frosh thought that the white people were the English speakers, just as they had felt that the Asians were the Japanese speakers. 58% of first year students said that just A and B, the two Americans, were English speakers. Interestingly, though, only 3% of freshmen judged that C and D, the two Japanese, would be English speakers. Evidently, being with Caucasians did not make these Japanese “look fluent” in English. The fascinating part here is that, in fact, both C and D were English teachers! Also notable was that 20% of freshmen said that only B, and not A, looked like an English speaker. In fact, the lady in A, an American, speaks only English. Certainly, in this section there were some quite surprising results. 6% felt that C, a Japanese, looked like an English speaker as much as A and B. This 6% of students did not think that D, who was an actual English teacher, looked like she was an English speaker. Let us check the results of the sophomores regarding the same picture

Figure 8 2nd Year Student Results

Which of these people do you think speaks English?	
Persons A and B	56%
Person B Only	14%
Person A Only	9%
Persons A, B and C	5%
Persons A, B and D	5%
Person C Only	4%
Person D Only	3%
Persons A, C and D	3%
Persons B and D	1%

Like the first year students, over 50% of the sophomores judged that just the two Caucasians were likely to be English speakers. Significantly, none of the second year students thought that the two Asians, C and D, were both English speakers. Similar to the freshmen, sophomores picked B, the American man, as the only fluent English speaker, though by less of a percentage at 14% to 20% among frosh. Unlike the freshmen, however, a sizable number of second year students thought that A, the American lady, was the sole English speaker. 9% of sophomores thought so as opposed to only 2% of the first year students.

There was a Picture Four in the survey, although that chart is unavailable. The results of both frosh and sophomores were almost identical to those for Picture Three. Person A was a Korean, B was an American, C was a biracial child and D was a Chinese man.

Over half of both frosh and sophomores thought that only the American was the English speaker, though one quarter of students thought the biracial kid was also a fluent English speaker.

4 Do Foreigners in Japan Always Long to Return to Their Homelands?

Since coming to Japan, the questions I have been asked by Japanese people most often are, “Don’t you want to return to your homeland?” and “Don’t you get homesick for your own country?” To be honest, however, I cannot recall ever feeling that way. Certainly, there were stressful periods, especially those first several years when this writer was still learning the ins and outs of daily life in a Japanese city. Also, there were numerous misunderstandings due to cultural differences which contributed to significant levels of frustration. Even now, I cannot say that I perfectly “blend in” socially.

However, I have not once felt that life in a foreign country was unbearable or that I was so homesick for the U.S. that I just wanted to go back home. In addition, most of my non-Japanese friends with long residence in this country seem to feel the same way. Although I remember one female American colleague who got homesick (and returned to the U.S. after one year), there were a number of others who said they wanted to stay in Japan longer! More than a few times I have heard the following story from resident foreign people: He or she came to Japan, planning to stay for one year or so, but became fascinated with some aspect of Japan and ended up staying three years, a number of years, even twenty years and becoming permanent residents, getting married to Japanese and, in one case, becoming a city council member of his town of residence (McLarty, 1999).

The most important point here, however, is not McLarty’s personal experience, but rather why

Japanese people ask the above questions so often. It quite likely stems from the feeling among many Japanese that living overseas for an extended period of time is simply unimaginable. Historically, it can be fairly said that Japanese have shown a greater reluctance to leave their own shores than Americans or Europeans. Particularly significant, I believe, is the fact that Japan had a 200-year period of isolation called the *sakoku jidai* (closed country period). While the number of Japanese tourists heading abroad has increased considerably in recent years, actually living abroad seems to present special challenges for people of this country. One American researcher of Japan has made interesting comments to this end. He writes that, no matter how bad the political situation in Japan gets, Japanese are a people basically incapable of defecting abroad. In his amusing phrase Japanese are “mentally glued” to the shores of their country (Horvath, 1976). He adds that, no matter what happens in Japan domestically, staying put and doing one’s best at home is better than avoiding problems by living abroad. He says that many Japanese appear to feel that going to live overseas is, in effect, tantamount to abandoning Japan.

Even when it is not a matter of defection, living abroad seems to be particularly difficult for Japanese people. Nowadays, it seems there is hardly any region or country of the globe where at least some Japanese are not living. Recently, one popular Japanese television’s theme is searching remote parts of the world for Japanese and interviewing them to see what exotic lives they are living. Those Japanese abroad who have appeared on this program are mostly doing well by all reports. However,

there are also a considerable number of Japanese living abroad who have not been handling foreign life so well.

According to one Japanese who researches his countrymen abroad, the number of Japanese who cannot adjust to life in foreign nations is quite large. He writes that living abroad requires that a person have a strong character and a solid sense of his or her own identity. Unfortunately, he notes, a considerable number of Japanese seem to lack these characteristics. While many of us veteran Japan hands agree that Japanese people usually excel in group endeavors, we are all too aware of the reverse side of the coin. The above researcher, a psychologist and author of numerous books on mental disorders, says that many Japanese are relatively lacking in their ability to act on their own initiative compared to Europeans or Americans. He points out that many Japanese, when faced with the prospect of living abroad, fall into a condition called "inability to adapt to foreign living circumstances" as he puts it (Inamura, 1980).

When we consider this background information on Japanese attitudes toward living overseas, some pieces of the puzzle start to fall into place. For those who feel living abroad is unpleasant, scary or simply unimaginable, asking non-Japanese people questions like, "Don't you get homesick overseas?" or "Don't you want to return to your own country?" is hardly a surprising thing to do. In fact, from a Japanese perspective, it may be perfectly natural. As I have also stated in a previous paper, if our positions were reversed, I would likely ask Japanese people the same sort of questions (McLarty, 1997).

Conclusions

This report has dealt with four topics related to intercultural communication between Japanese and non-Japanese people. I have selected these particular topics because I believe they are very indicative of the differences in sensibility which often bedevil our attempts to better understand each other. No matter which country we hail from, we can never completely avoid seeing people of other nations through the prism of our own cultural background and its norms. The important thing is to be aware of our own cultural biases and try to become as knowledgeable about other cultures and societies as we possibly can.

That I have my own unique bias is, by now, probably obvious to all of the readers. While I have tried to present as balanced a report as possible, there is little doubt that my preferences have managed to seep into this account. Readers would be doing this writer a favor if they would point out some areas in which this article has room for improvement. Whatever my own shortcomings as a scholar, however, I believe that one of my main objectives has been achieved. By starting a discussion of these topics, the field is now open for other scholars, researchers and laymen to debate where we are in intercultural communication today, where we are headed tomorrow and what areas we need to focus on in the future. The livelier the discussion becomes, the more all of us, whatever our nationality, can become communication winners. That is all I could possibly hope for.

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