Conversation from a Cross-Cultural Perspective, and Implications for Language Teaching

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What a person thinks language is very much will determine how he will teach or lean it. For most persons their image of language is very much derived from their use of the written forms of their language. The kind of English, for example, that we are most concious of is a result of our reading, such as in newspapers, magazines, various kinds of books and the occasional use (more or less) of dictionaries. As a result we tend to think of language as being made up of well-formed sentences and think of words as having clearly defined meanings. The reality of how we develop our speech, however, is quite different. Not only students of foreign languages but native speakers of their own languages often feel anxious or embarrassed by the realities of their actual speech performance. Certainly the pressures upon persons using a second or foreign language to make "correct" sentences and pronounce words clearly as well as use them appropriately all too often prevent them from active interaction with others.

In thinking about the spoken language we need to understand the characteristics and motivation of the characteristics of the acts of speaking. The written forms of language, especially those forms which are published, are the result of a process of planning, organizing, writing, and rewriting or editing. The ideal final product should be free from unnecessary repetition, all sentences should be clearly organized to avoid ambiguity, since the reader is usually unknown. In contrast the acts of speaking are usually spontaneous to the situation, very often unplanned, and developed in an accumulative process with

immediate feedback from listeners. Thus natural, unplanned language is characterized by repetition (to ensure the listener understands or for emphasis), false starts (when the speaker is searching for what he wants to say), focusing and refocusing on points as the feedback indicates a need, the expression of various feelings, getting and keeping the other's attention, and identifying the kind of relationship that exists between the speakers.

Natural conversation is developed in utterances (groupings of words marked by pause and intonation) rather than formal complete sentences. The meaning of words depends very much upon the context of their use. Fifty per cent of conversation is devoted to the maintenance of the cooperative process in the interaction, such as getting the other's attention, preparing the listener for the main point, keeping the turn, linking utterances together, and providing clarification of what mainly has been intended. Table 4 lists five broad areas of purposes for speaking. Under the label of SEDB (Spoken English Data Base) which reflects a large spoken language data base developed at Chiba University, the expression of feelings makes up 8.5% of conversation, using language to influence others' behavior such as making requests, suggestions, apologies, etc. is 20.6%, managing the flow of conversation (the strategy management mentioned above) is 50.5%, social graces which include greetings, introductions, saying good-bye, etc. are only 2%, and finally the exchange of information is 18.4%.

Table 1 gives only the primary purposes in face to face communication. Even after eliminating all the uses of speech for strategy management, the exchange of information is still only a third of the

Table 1 Language Communication Goals (Primary Purposes in Turns)

Exchange of information	(E)	33.4%	(J)	33.2%
Exchange of feelings	(E)	13.8%	(J)	16.5%
Suasive purposes	(E)	52.8%	(J)	50.3%

interaction in conversation. Significantly half of conversational goals has to do with persuasion or doing something with speech which will influence others' behavior.

Conversation is primarily thus communcation about people or in German "Volksprache, "whereas the written language which has the predominant purpose of giving information or describing things has been called "Buchsprache" in German, or book language whose primary purpose is the transaction of information. Sentences provide the frame for such information transmission. The dominant frame for developing the interactive, people-centered communication of natural conversation can be divided into four phases : *preparatory expressions* which prepare the listener for what follows, attention getting expressions, turn keeping expressions (including uh, oh, well, listen, look, say, if clauses, I mean, you know, etc.), *relationship bonding* which focuses on indentifying the kind of relationship in the conversation (eg. use of names and address terms), the *main purpose* which may be exchange of information but more likely is request forms, suggestions, criticism, apologies, expression of feelings, etc. and fourth *clarificaton* which is essentially a follow-up phase to make clear, give reasons why, or support the primary purpose in speaking.

Dominant Strategy in Conversation Development

A : Preparatory Expressions+ (Relationship Bonding) +Primary Purpose+ (Rel. Bond.) +Clarification

B : Prep. Exp.+ (Rel.Bond.) +Prime Purpose+ (Rel. Bond.) + Clar.

Table 2 Clarification/Explanation Statements

Pattern A	(E)	5.4%	(S)	1.7%	(J)	23.8%
Pattern B	(E)	81.5%	(S)	93.7%	(J)	64.4%
Pattern C	(E)	3.6%	(S)	1.0%	(J)	1.0%
Pattern D	(E)	9.5%	(S)	3.5%	(J)	6.7%

Table 3 Interactive Functions in Jr. High School Textbooks

	HORIZON	TOTAL	WORLD	EVERY	CROWN	SUN	ALL
I. EMOTIONAL STATE	33 (3.4)	36 (4.6)	31 (4.5)	15 (2.4)	36 (7.9)	41 (9.0)	192 (4.8)
II. INSTRUMENTAL-AFFECTIVE BEHAVIOR	142 (14.5)	145 (18.5)	111 (16.0)	104 (16.6)	53 (11.6)	81 (17.7)	536 (15.9)
V. REFERENTIAL-DESCRIPTIVE MEANING	377 (38.6)	326 (41.5)	287 (41.4)	255 (40.8)	166 (36.2)	140 (30.6)	1551 (38.8)
III. STRATEGY	390 (40.0)	245 (31.2)	233 (33.6)	217 (34.7)	192 (41.9)	172 (37.6)	1449 (36.3)
IV. SOCIAL GRACES	34 (3.5)	33 (4.2)	31 (4.5)	34 (5.4)	11 (2.4)	23 (5.0)	166 (4.2)
Total Number of Functions	976 (100.0)	785 (100.0)	693 (100.0)	625 (100.0)	458 (100.0)	457 (100.0)	3994 (100.0)

Written as well as spoken language each has its complexities. Natural unplanned speech is a complex, cooperative web of interaction which focuses more on the maintenance of a relationship or tries to influence the relationship. The written language focuses on the presentation of ideas or the description of events. It can do so with complex grammatical constructions to make the transaction of information clear in isolation, since the writer does not by and large know who his reader might be.

Many teachers and learners of spoken English often judge their performance in terms of what they expect of the written language : to make perfect complete sentences and to communicate only information about things. "This is a pen. I am a teacher." are stereotypes of this kind of language. The teaching of such language reflects the image that language is primarily grammatical patterns and the meaning of words are limited to their descriptive use. This is not only a false representation of speaking but leads to a stitled form of communication largely devoid of the expression of human relationships and feelings.

Table 3 and 4 show the communicative purposes in the conversation found in junior high school (authorized) textbooks. Conversations focusing on the giving and getting of information (transactional purposes) range from 30.6% to 41.5% all much higher than that found in natural language use (18.4%). The imbalance in learning can be seen in general in Table 4 by comparing the texts with the SEDB. Such imbalances in the textbooks undoubtedly reflect the misconceptions about what the spoken language is and for what purposes it is used.

A good example of the problem may be seen in the grammar and use of questions. While question forms in grammar are used to get information, nonetheless Table 5 illustrates that questions are used less than fifty per cent of the time for getting information (referential-descriptive use). The varied uses of such a grammatical

Table 4 Comparison of Interactive Functions in Jr. H. S. Texts & Spoken English Date Base

I.	Emotional State	SEDB	TEXTS
		487	192
		(8.5%)	(4.8%)
II.	Instrumental-Affective Behavior	SEDB	TEXTS
		1184	636
		(20.6)	(15.9%)
III.	Strategy	SEDB	TEXTS
		2896	1449
		(50.5%)	(36.3)
IV.	Social Graces	SEDB	TEXTS
		117	166
		(2%)	(4.2%)
V.	Referential-Descriptive Meanings	SEDB	TEXTS
		1055	1551
		(18.4%)	(38.8%)

Table 5 Questions in Spoken Discourse

	Ref.-Descriptive	Instrumental	Emotive	Management
(E)	48.8%	27.8%	16.0%	8.5%
(J)	30.4%	27.5%	29.7%	12.4%

pattern as questions is an important learning goal in teaching conversation. Tables 6 and 7 further illustrate the cross-over of the interactive uses of the same grammatical patterns from different purposes, such as in making suggestions and criticisms. Intonation plays a significant role in how we interpret the communicative porpose of words and grammatical patterns. Human beings have the significant power in conversation to judge the meaning or intention of the speaker's words from the intonation and context of their use. That communicative ability needs to be recognized and integrated in the teaching of grammatical forms and vocabulary in conversation. The interactive use of language requires teachers to teach communicative skills as an essential part of learning to speak. Thus role plays, communication games, gambits, drama, simulation games, etc. are

Table 6   suggestions

Patterns Used in Expressing English Suggestions

Why don't you/we...?	35	(occurrences)
How/What about...?	14	
Can I/we...?	11	
Tag questions	10	
Single word or phrase	10	
Won't/Wouldn't...?	7	
May I...?	7	
Either...or...?	7	
Why not...?	4	
Why not?	4	
BE...?	4	
BE not...?	4	
uh/huh?	3	
rising intonation only	3	

Patterns Used in Expressing Japanese Suggestions

...ka?	33	(occurrences)
...yaranai?	11	
rising intonation only	11	
...shiteagenaino?	6	
...janaika?	6	
...dosurunda?	5	
...shinai?	5	
Na?	5	

A Comparison of Question Typologies
in English and Japanese

English	Question Types	Japanese
42.9%	X Questions	5.9%
34.3%	Polar Questions	70.6%
8.6%	Tag Questions	5.9%
8.6%	Single Word/Phrase	17.6%
2.9%	Interrogative Adv.	0
2.9%	Interjection	0

needed as contexts for conversational development. The group associated with Gillian Brown has pointed out the need for native English speaking teenagers in learning to converse. How much more so second language learners.

Within the *dominant strategy* mentioned above we can find

Table 7   criticism

Patterns Used in Expressing Criticism in English

What...?	9	(occurrences)
Why don't you...?	6	
Why do you...?	5	
What makes you...?	5	
Do...?	4	
Who do you think...?	3	
How...?	3	
Can't you...?	3	
tag questions	3	
Why not?	3	
BE not...?	2	
Have...?	2	
Either...or...?	1	
When...?	1	

Patterns Used in Expressing Criticism in Japanese

Nani...?	35	(occurrences)
...janaika?	19	
Doko...?	6	
...ka?	4	
...no?	4	
Doshite...? Dare...?	4	
...desho?	4	
Itu...?	3	
Nandayo?	3	
...dekinainoka?	3	
Dou iu...?	2	
Naze+negative...?	2	
Single word	1	

A Comparison of Question Typlogies
in English and Japanese

English	Question Types	Japanese
63.6%	X Questions	62.0%
24.2%	Polar Questions	10.0%
9.1%	Tag questions	24.0%
3.0%	Interrogative Adv.	2.0%
0	Single Word/Phrase	2.0%

significant differences between Japanese and English conversation
styles. Table 2 illustrates the cultural differences in "clarification"
between two Western languages on the one hand and Japanese on the
other. While all languages naturally need to clarify as a basic process
in developing a conversation, English and Japanese show a significant
difference in how it is expected to be carried out. In pattern A where
clarification is given on request, English and Spanish have a very low
occurrence but Japanese quite high (almost a quarter of the time). In
contrast in pattern B English and Spanish are very high over 80% of
the time and Japanese, while still quite high, is significantly lower.
Pattern B represents the fact that the speaker clarifies his points
before being asked, that is, anticipates reasons for his actions.
Patterns C (defensive explanations) and D (independent explana-
tions) show no significant cross-cultural variation.

Two other phases in the *dominant strategy* of conversation also
have culturally different patterns between Japanese usage and Eng-
lish. In English *relationship bonding* focuses mainly on some forms of
the name of the person addressed or a name substitute, whereas in
Japanese the use of names is low and role relationship terms are
common. In *preparatory expressions* phase English usually limits itself
to short or single word expressions (well, oh, uh, I mean, you know)
whereas Japanese conversation tends to have multiples of expres-
sions which contribute to the feeling of indirection and deference in
Japanese communication.

These lectures have focused on three primary points :(1) that we
need to distinguish communication which is "transactional" or the
exchange of information from communication which is "inter-
actional" or which focuses on the relationship of people :(2) that we
need to recognize the characteristics of natural spoken language and
not pre-judge it from the perspective and norms of the written
language ; and (3) that learning interactive skills is an essential basis
for the teaching of the language of conversation.

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