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English and Japanese Gestures In Contrast¹⁾

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Human communication is done not only by speech but also by gesticulation. Signs used in gestural communication are not always the same between different nations. For instance, a Japanese points a forefinger to his nose when he means 'Me?', while in the same context, an Englishman may put a thumb to his chest.

Some English gestures convey completely opposite meanings to their Japanese counterparts. For example:

Harry: Hey, Hymie. You won't tell her I was at my mother's all the time, will you? No? (*The boys assure him with pats and shakes of the head.*)

(AW)²⁾

In this context, a Japanese will nod, signifying the approval to the speaker's assumption that he will *not* tell her that.

According to Roman Jakobson, there are three different groups of head sings for 'yes' and 'no.' They are the Russian, Bulgarian, and Greek groups. The system of English-speaking people belong to the first, in which the head moves from side to side for 'no' and vertically for 'yes.' In the Bulgarian type, the head moves seemingly in the opposite way to the Russian. The Greek type consists of bending the head forward for affirmation and

(1) I am very grateful to Mr. James Kirkup and Mr. Howard Wilson for giving me many valuable comments and examples.

(2) A list of sources is given at p. 63.

backward for negation.³⁾ The Japanese system belongs to the Russian-English type. But, as mentioned above, the Japanese syntax in the choice of 'yes' or 'no' is different from that of English. According to Robert A. Hall, Jr., speakers of New Guinea Pidgin English respond to the negative question in the same way as Japanese.⁴⁾

It is also necessary, when we examine a given gesture, to give a consideration to the social context in which it is employed. This is especially so, today, when the opportunities for international person-to-person communication have remarkably increased. Even the meaning of smiling is not universal. Ray L. Birdwhistell says: "In one part of the country [i.e. the United States] an unsmiling individual might be queried as to whether he was 'angry about something,' while in another, the smiling individual might be asked, 'What's funny?'. In one area, an apology required an accompanying smile; in another, the smile elicited the response that the apology was not 'serious.'"⁵⁾

The Japanese gesture of pointing to oneself at his nose may cause misunderstanding among foreigners. Robert L. Saitz points out: 'The Japanese student who touches his nose with his finger to indicate that he is not really sure that the teacher has called on him to recite should be informed that in the U.S., for example, such a gesture might well astonish his teacher.'⁶⁾

A Japanese avoids asking by gesticulation his superiors to do something, as shown in the following situation: Suppose you are a young school teacher and you have invited your former retired principal to your house. The principal is watching flowers in your garden, when your wife tells

(3) Jakobson (1972), p.91-5.

(4) Hall (1966), pp.92-3. Hall refers to the speech form in reply to the negative question, not the head movements. But probably we can say that the choice of 'yes' or 'no' and that of the head signs are correlated with each other under the same syntactical rules, though this does not follow that the Japanese type and the Neo-Melanesian type are precisely the same in their outer forms.

(5) Birdwhistell (1970), p.31.

(6) Saitz (1966), p. 36.

you that dinner is ready and you should ask the principal to come in. You go out to the garden, to invite your guest into dinner, but then you remember he is nearly deaf! Fortunately, he happens to look at you. In this situation, however, a Japanese cannot beckon the principal. It would be impolite and ill-mannered. Instead, you must go over to him and ask him in speech.

People learn gestures, intentionally or unintentionally, in the process of their growing up in a speech community. When we carefully examine on what occasion, at what, and in what manner, they laugh, we can see that even laughing is something we learn. It is easy to know even in a dark theater whether a laughing woman is a Japanese or a foreigner. From the manner in which she laughs, we can feel a Japanese woman struggling to suppress a burst of laughter. According to the social rule for politeness, Japanese women usually cover their mouths when they laugh. This may be more or less common to all cultures. But in the case of Japanese women they may cover their mouths even when they are not really amused. They politely laugh to show their (sometimes false) interest in the conversation. Westerners often misunderstand this for 'laughing up one's sleeve.'

These examples show us that it is not sufficient to describe only the form and the meaning of a given gesture. So, in the following discussion about English and Japanese gestures, I will take into consideration, when necessary, such social factors, too, as the proper occasion for a gesture, the relation between the signer and the signee, and so on.

POINTING GESTURES are most useful and important gestures. They are perhaps pancultural, but the manner of pointing is different from culture to culture.

Pointing with a forefinger is the simplest and clearest form of this gesture. It is the basic way of pointing among both Japanese and English-speaking people. But notice that many Japanese point, with the palm of the hand at right angles to the floor, while many English-speaking

people keep the palm horizontal in this gesture. Pointing with one's hand, all fingers extended and the thumb folded in, is considered more polite in the Japanese culture, but it has a feminine flavour. So men will not point in this way except in the case of showing a guest where he should sit down.

One English way of pointing which the Japanese do not employ is 'jerking one's thumb.' For example:

'You live in there?' I jerked my thumb at the boards hiding the cave.
'Well, let's just say it's my Passport to Paradise.'

(JM)

In the above example, the speaker 'I' points over his shoulder at a thing behind him. In the next, the 'hackie' points at a thing before him:

There was a taxi stand there and I yanked open the door. 'He goes first,' the hackie said jerking a thumb at the cab ahead.

(RC-1)

This is perhaps one of the gestures that the Japanese should learn. (Indeed, it is awkward to point over one's shoulder with a forefinger!)

Another European pointing gesture which is not Japanese is 'jerking one's head' as seen in the following passage:

'That's where *they* all go,' whispered Bella reverently, jerking her head in the direction of the brass-railed bar entrance.

'Who?'

'The reporters.'

(JK)

In English they sometimes point by nodding:

'Your playmates sent him?' I asked, nodding at the dead man.

'I only talked to him with this,' he said, patting the automatic on the bed, "but I reckon they did.'

(DH)

This gesture may be the same as what the Japanese call 'point with one's chin.'

SIGNAL GESTURES are employed in order to tell someone to do or not to do something. The most typical of this kind of gesture is beckoning. English-speaking people beckon by hooking a forefinger or by flapping their fingers. In both cases, the palm is kept upward. The Japanese wave their hand, with the palm down.

At the first landing she stopped and beckoned us forwards encouragingly towards the open door of the dead room. My aunt went in and the old woman, seeing that I hesitated to enter, began to beckon me again repeatedly with her hand.

(JJ-1)

Taplow looks at him over an imaginary pair of spectacles, and then, very quietly crooks his forefinger to him in indication to approach the table.

(TR)

Jerking one's head is one of the gestures that the Japanese do not have in their repertoire:

He ordered me into a bedside chair with a two-inch jerk of his round head, chased the secretary away with another.

(DH)

He turns quickly away from both of them as emotion once more seems about to overcome him. Frank brusquely jerks his head to the bewildered Taplow to get out.

(TR)

A wink is sometimes used as a signal gesture.

'I believe we have seven Shelleys,' said Mr Bons, with a slow smile. Then he brushed the cake crumbs off his stomach, and together with his daughter, rose to go. The boy, obeying a wink from his mother, saw them all the way to the garden gate.

(EF)

A wink of this type is used in the Japanese culture, too, though there are some other types unknown to the Japanese, which will be discussed later.

It is not a Japanese gesture to pat the table in order to signal for silence and encouragement as in the following example:

Someone coughed once or twice, and then a few gentlemen patted the table gently as a signal for silence. The silence came and Gabriel pushed back his chair and stood up. The patting at once grew louder in encouragement and then ceased altogether. Gabriel leaned his ten trembling fingers on the tablecloth and smiled nervously at the company.

(JJ-2)

Putting one's finger on one's lips is a signal for silence in both Japan and English-speaking nations.

But when they came to Holy Howe Farm, mother met them in the

doorway with her finger on her lips.

'Vickey's asleep,' she said, 'don't make a noise coming in. Supper's just ready.'

(AR)

GREETING GESTURES are culturally-patterned actions which accompany or substitute for greetings in words. There are at least two gestures in this type which are common to the Japanese and English cultures: nodding when one sees an acquaintance and waving on parting.

Just as he was putting the empty glass on the tray, the black velvet curtains parted, lissome blond-haired girl came into the room. Smiling, she nodded to Roddy, and he grinned and nodded to her.

(EC)

There was someone watching, after all. It was a little boy. It was Tim. He stared at the departing cab. He looked wise. Pat felt like a child again as he gave Tim a little wave. Tim did not wave back.

(JK)

But the others are very different. It is common for Europeans to kiss when they meet or depart between husband and wife, between parent and child, between brother and sister, or between lovers. A kiss of this kind, that is, a kiss as a greeting gesture, does not exist in the Japanese custom.

Gerald (*smiling*): Well, perhaps this will help to stop it. (*He produces a ring case.*)

Sheila (*excited*): Oh—Gerald—you've got it—is it the one you wanted me to have?

Gerald (*giving the case to her*): Yes—the very one.

Sheila (*taking out the ring*): Oh—it's wonderful! Look—Mummy—

isn't it a beauty? Oh—darling—(*She kisses Gerald hastily.*)

(JP)

(Note: Sheila and Gerald are engaged. Sheila's brother and mother are present.)

Hymie: It's been a nice evening, Sarah. Why don't you come up to us sometimes? I'm always at home.

Sarah: What chance do I get to leave Harry now?

Cissie: Good night, Sarah.

(*Hymie kisses Sarah and Cissie kisses Harry, and all leave Sarah wave to them from the balcony.*)

(Note: Hymie is Sarah's brother; Harry is Sarah's husband; Cissie is Harry's sister.)

On such an occasion as in the above examples Japanese will never kiss, but just, perhaps, smile.

It is interesting that Japanese do not bow to their immediate relatives, though their ancestors may have done so. Today we see children taught to bow to their parents only once a year, on New Year's Day.

But in general, bowing is the most important greeting gesture in the Japanese culture. They do not bow so often and so deeply as in the old days, but still it is something that they must do as often as Westerners shake hands. Instead, the Japanese are one of the few nations who do not have a traditional custom of shaking hands.

Both in the Japanese and English cultures, it differs from area to area whether one nods and/or smiles to a completely strange person who passes by. In rural areas, they usually do, but in cities, they usually do not.

CODE GESTURES are signs nearest to linguistic signs. They correspond to and substitute for words. The relation between the sign and its meaning is conventional and clear to any native speaker of the same language. The

person who is making this kind of sign is clearly conscious that he is communicating by means of a sign.

The gesture of rubbing the thumb of one hand against the forefinger of the same hand, meaning 'money,' is a Greek gesture, but my British informant says that it is also a British gesture. This sign, however, is not Japanese. Instead, Japanese form a ring with the thumb and the forefinger, which resembles the gesture seen in the following example:

Then a fat fellow in a blue-denim jacket bearing a button that had Nixon's face and the words 'An American Tragedy' on it ordered a taco and a root beer. He ate the taco, turned to Peter, raised his left hand, and made a circle of his thumb and forefinger.

(NY)

But in this gesture meaning approval, the hand is held high and the palm is seen by the receiver of the sign. In the Japanese sign indicating money, Japanese hold their hands comparatively low, over or below the waist, and with the palm not shown to the person to whom the sign is addressed.

The English gesture meaning 'cuckold' is said to be almost obsolete today.⁷⁾ The locale of the play from which the following example is taken is 'a village populated mostly by Sicilians somewhere along the Gulf Coast between New Orleans and Mobile,' and the time is the present.

Serafina: They think they know something that Serafina don't know; they think I got these on my head! (*She holds her fingers like horns at either side of her forehead.*)

(TW)

This gesture often appears in some of Shakespeare's plays:

(7) *Encyclopedia Americana*, s.v. Gesture.

Pist: ...O! odius is the name!

Ford: What name, sir?

Pist: The horn, I say. . . .

.....

Ford: I do not misdoubt my wife, but I would be loath to turn them together. A man may be too confident; I would have nothing 'lie on my head': I cannot be thus satisfied.

(WS)

Interestingly enough Japanese have a gesture which is similar in form, but more or less different in meaning. In Japanese, a 'horn' gesture refers to a wife's anger, especially, jealousy. For instance, a Japanese husband may return home very late at night after a pub-crawl, he pushes the bell and, to his relief, his son, not his wife, appears. Then the man puts up his little finger (i.e. 'wife' or 'mother') and makes a gesture of imaginary horns, meaning, 'Is Mum angry?' This gesture is still used in Japan.

Putting one's thumb up means 'O.K.' or 'I see,' in English:

I held the door open and jerked my head at Carmen. She came towards me, smiling uncertainly.

'Go on home and wait for me,' I said soothingly. She put her thumb up.

(RC-2)

This sign means 'father, husband, boss, etc.' in Japanese. A hooked forefinger means 'theft' in Japan. When a Japanese chops the left or right side of his neck with the ulnar side of his hand, the meaning implied is that he is about 'to be fired.' This was apparently derived from the old method of death punishment. English-speaking people have the gesture of cutting one's throat, which seems to have some similar but broader sense.

The Japanese sign for 'drinking alcoholics' is a mimicry gesture of the hand holding a small cup and carrying it to the mouth with the forefinger and the thumb. The hand is jerked near the mouth across the face. On the other hand, a speaker of English may move his thumb back and forth against his mouth, in the same context, but the liquid may not necessarily be alcoholic.

About English WARNING GESTURES Robert L. Saitz says: 'A common American and English gesture for warning someone consists of extending the index finger from a fist, and then moving the hand back and forth with the index finger pointing towards the person being warned. . . . We should note that in a number of other cultures it is common for such a warning gesture to be made with the index finger moving from side to side, not pointing at the person being warned. The pointing of a finger at someone may be considered an extreme insult.'⁸⁾

This warning gesture appears frequently in literary works:

That got him really mad. He shook his big stupid finger in my face.
'Holden, god damn it, I'm warning you, now. For the last time. If you don't keep your yap shut, I'm gonna. . .'

(JS)

His heart pounded as he saw one of the policemen shake a finger into the watchman's face.

'Why don't you admit it's an inside job, Thompson?' the policeman said.

(RW)

I remember how I was warned by a priest who shook his forefinger from side to side, when I was sitting where I should not do so in a cathedral in

(8) Saitz (1966), p.34.

Europe. It took me more than a few seconds to realize the meaning of his wagging finger. This sign does not exist in the Japanese culture. Japanese parents may point their thumbs at their children when they are scolding them. But they do not shake the thumbs.

Shaking one's fist may be called an ACCUSING GESTURE:

The filthy object of universal charity shook his fist at the youngster,
— 'I'll make you keep this 'ere fo'c'sle clean, young feller,' he snarled viciously.

(JC)

'Stanley!'

The door opened to let the secretary glide in.

'Throw this bastard out!' his master ordered, waving a fist at me.

(DH)

This gesture also is not Japanese except for a case of the natural expression of one's serious anger.

Raising two fingers against someone, with the back of the hand outward, is a typical English INSULTING GESTURE.

UP YOU!

This was the answer to reason in Belfast yesterday. The fingers of derision were raised against TUC general secretary Len Murray and a small band of brave men.

(DM)

Besides being an insulting gesture, it is also an obscene and vulgar gesture.

Japanese children put their tongues out and pull down the skin below their eye with their forefingers, in order to insult someone. Putting out one's tongue is an English children's gesture, too:

Liza: You don't know my father. All he comes here for was to touch you for some money to get drunk on.

Doolittle: Well, what else would I want money for? To put into the plate in church, I suppose. *(She puts out her tongue at him. He is so incensed by this that Pickering presently finds it necessary to step between them.)*

(GS)

English-speaking people who are Christians draw a cross and pray to God, clasping their hands. Japanese pray to Buddha, putting their palms together, sometimes rubbing their hands up and down, fingers extended, not clasped. They do the same to the Shinto god after clapping their hands two or three times. The object of these PRAYING GESTURES are not necessarily the dieties in both respective cultures. But the Japanese seem to employ these gestures far more off-handedly and frequently than English-speaking people. For instance, a Japanese holds up a hand at someone when asking him for a cigarette. He may do the same when passing before other persons, though in this case it may be interpreted as a sign of drawing an imaginary territory line. ('I'll not intrude on your territory.')

This is a very important gesture, because in the Japanese culture, people usually sit directly on the floor, so a sitting person is weak against a standing person's attack.

The English crossed fingers represent the sign of Christ on the cross. It is popularly thought to protect an addressee of the sign from disaster.

Mrs. Rome: But seriously, the Director has been taken ill. We haven't received word yet on exactly what his condition is. He's been taken to the hospital. We're all keeping our fingers crossed.

(DD)

The following are some other English gestures which have no Japanese equivalents:

To twiddle one's thumbs: this is a sign of one's state of having nothing to do.

'I shall be carrying a large amount of money and it is not my money. I'm acting for a friend.'

I snuffed out my cigarette and leaned back in the pink chair and twiddled my thumbs.

(RC-1)

Millie: And what did you say? Just sat there and made a joke in Latin, I suppose?

Andrew: There wasn't very much I could say, in Latin or any other language.

Millie: Oh, wasn't there? I'd have said it all right. I wouldn't just have sat there twiddling my thumbs and taking it from that old phoney of a schoolmaster.

(TR)

Shrugging one's shoulders is a typical European gesture. It has various meanings, but basically it seems to show helplessness or detachment.

'No, no, we can't have it any other way, can we, boys?' Pat said as he saw my face.

I could only swallow and shrug, but I thought to myself, O.K. Dalloway, but a couple more times like this, and I'll be ready to take over the gang.

(JM)

In the shrugging gesture, we feel a person making the sign is composed or calm to some extent. When he is more serious, he raises his hands:

Harry: Oh, leave off, Sarah.

Sarah: No. This time I won't leave off. (*Her logic again.*) I want to

know why you told me you didn't have tea at Lottie's when you know perfectly well you did. I want to know. (*Harry raises his hands in despair.*)

(AW)

One special use of winking:

He touches his hat to Mrs. Pearce who disdains the salutation and goes out. He winks at Higgins, thinking him probably a fellow-sufferer from Mrs. Pearce's difficult disposition and follows her.

(GS)

A Japanese may wink at someone, meaning 'I love you.' Sometimes he means 'I am joking.' But we must note that, in identifying this gesture, Japanese borrow the English word 'wink,' which suggests that winking of this type is not originally Japanese. On the other hand, the wink discussed on p. 52 is called 'mekubase' in Japanese, and it is surely a genuine Japanese gesture.

A few more typical Japanese gestures:

'So you're leaving us, eh?' he said.

'Yes, sir, I guess, I am.'

He started going into this nodding routine. You never saw anybody nod as much in your life as old Spencer did. You never know if he was nodding a lot because he was thinking and all, or just because he was a nice old guy that didn't know his ass from his elbow.

(JS)

Perhaps, Holden, the narrator in this Salinger's novel, would be surprised to see how many Japanese are like old Spencer. It is very important for a Japanese to nod when listening to someone, because this is a sign of his paying attention to what the person is speaking. However, when the

Japanese listener is asked to answer the speaker's question, he must decide whether to nod or to shake his head, following the Japanese syntax, which is different from that of English. Besides, he must shake his head from side to side, when he is flattered, or when the speaker humbles himself.

Japanese do not shake their heads as English-speaking people do when they express their joy, admiration, regret, and so on.

'And now,' said Lucy, 'do please tell us what's happened to Mr. Tumnus.'

'Ah, that's bad,' said Mr. Beaver, shaking his head, 'That's a very very bad business. . .'

(CL)

Con conversationally, Pat replied: 'Well, it takes all sorts to make a world.' 'That's a wise word spoken,' said the old woman, shaking her black-shawled head.

'It's a fact, it is. It's a flippin' fact.'

(JK)

These contrastive examples of Japanese and English gestures are enough to show that the difference is more than expected. We must continue collecting these examples with the correct descriptions of their forms, meanings and usage. Then they must be subject to systematic examination. Practically, such study will contribute to better communication between Japanese and English-speaking people. From a theoretical viewpoint, it will raise some interesting questions, for instance, the ethnic variations and universal invariants in human non-verbal communication.⁹⁾

(この論文は総合プロジェクト「現代と国際環境」のうち、「日本語と英語の比較」研究の一部をなすものである。)

(9) Jakobson (1972), p.95.

LIST OF WORKS QUOTED

- AR Arthur Ransome: *Swallows and Amazons*
AW Arnold Wesker: *Chicken Soup with Barley*
CL C. S. Lewis: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*
DD *Day of the Dolphin* (movie scenario)
DH Dashiell Hammett: *Red Harvest*
DM *Daily Mirror* (May 22, 1974)
EC Erskine Caldwell: "A Gift fore Sue"
EF E.M. Forster: "The Celestial Omnibus"
GS G.B. Shaw: *Pygmalion*
JC Joseph Conrad: *The Nigger of the "Narcisus"*
JJ-1 James Joyce: "The Dead"
JJ-2 : "The Sisters"
JK James Kirkup: *The Love of Others*
JM Jean McCord: "The Cave"
JP J.B. Priestley: *An Inspector Calls*
JS J.D. Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye*
NY *New Yorker* (May 13, 1974)
RC-1 Raymond Chandler: *The Long Goodbye*
RC-2 : *The Big Sleep*
RC-3 : *Farewell, My lovely*
RW Richard Wright: *The Man Who Lived Underground*
TR Terence Rattigan: *The Browning Version*
TW Tennessee Williams: *The Rose Tatro*

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- * Written in Japanese.