Intercultural Sensitivity and its Impact on Ethnocentric Attitudes in Intercultural Communication

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In this paper, I describe the key aspects of my research on intercultural sensitivity, summarizing my own experiences and the key concepts that have underpinned the research, then discuss the general findings that emerged from it. The core purpose of the research has been to consider intercultural sensitivity and its impact on ethnocentric attitudes observed in the workplace among multicultural workers in Japan. The way in which diverse communicators employ different levels of intercultural sensitivity and how it impacts their attitudes among the interlocutors from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds has been explored.

Communicators from diverse backgrounds tend to have culture-specific assumptions, perceptions, expectations and practices, in addition to their limited language proficiency reflected in intercultural communication. This can lead to some ethnocentric attitudes and unequal relations between them in the workplace. I have explored the experiences of participants with respect to their intercultural competence and its impact on their interactions across cultures. Also, by looking at some aspects of intercultural communicative competence, my findings suggest how such affective factors as intercultural sensitivity, empathy, open-mindedness, and nonjudgmental attitudes can help reduce the ethnocentric attitudes and power asymmetry among multicultural communicators in the workplace.

AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND

I originally became interested in intercultural sensitivity through my own personal experience of living and working abroad, including living in the U.S. as a Japanese national for over fifteen years, and having considerable familiarity with American life, including my marriage to an American man, and raising two bilingual/ bicultural children. My own experience was a major factor in deciding to examine power relations in intercultural settings. It has led me to value the importance of intercultural competence in order to reduce the power imbalance among communicators from diverse backgrounds.

In relation to workplace settings, I worked for a corporation in California as a marketing assistant, and at the Department of Health in Hawaii as a case manager. Although my English proficiency level was more than sufficient for meetings conducted in English, I felt that some American employees tended to share certain attitudes and behavior towards non-native speakers of English that were problematic. These Americans sometimes acted "superior" to non-native speakers of English and played the role of teachers rather than colleagues since they consciously or unconsciously behaved as members of the dominant group and expected others to communicate on their terms. Although this attitude was not the case with all Americans, it was sufficiently prevalent for me to want to critically examine the use of power in intercultural communication.

My experience of living in the U.S. also made me go through a difficult struggle of adaptation to various aspects of American culture in the beginning. As a Japanese person living in the U.S., I was aware that I was expected to assimilate to American culture, and I felt somewhat inferior because I sometimes had difficulty dealing with new or usual events that I was not used to, or simply did not speak like an American. The English language also played a part in the way I constructed my identity as an "English speaker". American people used to compliment my English when I first moved to the U.S., but as my English proficiency level became higher, I noticed nobody was complimenting my language skill any longer. I assume that at that point, I was accepted as an insider, as someone who spoke natural-sounding English, not as a foreigner with a strong accent. However, even after gaining native-like fluency, I felt that I was still not good enough to be giving presentations in university classes compared to native speakers of American English, or in engaging in interactions I had in meetings with other Americans.

These stages in my own personal development led me to decide that I should explore intercultural sensitivity and power relations in a systematic way, and the following section discusses the theoretical concepts that I have used in my research.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS
Power of Language Across Cultures

Tsuda (1994) notes that "native speakers often take advantage of their English proficiency and push non-native speakers aside during discussions by stepping up their speed, using much jargon and idiomatic expressions, or making grammatically complex statements" (p. 69). He continues, "some Japanese and other non-native speakers feel inhibited when speaking English. As a result, this type of unequal power relations between the two groups exists" (p. 69).

There are various dimensions to the relationship between power and language. For example, there are two major aspects of power/language relationships, "power in discourse, and power behind discourse" (Fairclough, 2001). With power in cross-cultural discourse, participants belong to different ethnic groupings, and there may be unequal encounters where the non-powerful people have cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from those of the powerful people. For example, in encounters such as a job interview, an interviewer who belongs to the societally dominant cultural group controls and determines whether an interviewee who belongs to a less dominant group gets a job. Because "discourse types and orders of discourse vary across cultures" (Fairclough, 2003), dominant speakers are likely to limit the discourse types which can be drawn upon to those of the dominant cultural group. Although the world is becoming more globalized, with tolerance and sensitivity towards cultural differences growing gradually, in unequal encounters in cross-cultural settings, dominant interlocutors may assume that less dominant interactants are familiar with dominant ways of behaving and communicating. Therefore, in this type of situation, less dominant speakers' contributions may be interpreted on the assumption that they are capable of communicating in terms of these dominant values. For instance, if a less dominant speaker gives what is perceived to be a poor or irrelevant response to a question in interaction, it can be thought to be due to his/her lack of knowledge or experience rather than as a reflection of a different cultural background. In this way, there is a possibility of miscommunication and unfair communication because of the differences in discourse and misconceptions based on cultural insensitivity and dominance.

English as the Dominant Language

English is the most widely used language for international business and intercultural communication. Although we take it for granted that English is used in international communication today, the use of English should be examined as a possible problem in relation to linguistic dominance from the perspective of a non-native speaker of English. Furthermore, the dominance of English could cause not only linguistic and communicative inequality, but also feelings of anxiety and insecurity on the part of non-native speakers of English as the world becomes more globalized and English is used as a lingua franca or international business language. Ammon (1992) points out some statistical indicators of the dominance of English as follows:

> The number of English speakers has grown to 1.5 billion people. English is designated as an official language in as many as 62 nations. English is the most dominant language in scientific communication, being the language of 70-80 percent of academic publications" (p. 78).

As Ammon observes, English is indeed the most dominant language and considered to be a tool for international communication. However, because it is dominant, "it creates both a structure of linguistic and communicative inequality and discrimination between speakers of English and speakers of other languages" (Tsuda 2008, p.167).

According to Tsuda (2008), while the use of English has been taken for granted in most international interactions, it has never been perceived as problematic in the English-dominated Western academic community. Nevertheless, he found that the dominance of English causes serious consequences, which include: (1) linguistic and communicative inequality to the great disadvantage of speakers of languages other than English; (2) discrimination against non-English speaking people and those who are not proficient in English; and (3) colonization of the consciousness of non-English speakers, causing them to develop linguistic, cultural, and psychological dependency upon, and identification with its culture and people. He believes that in a situation where English dominates communication, inevitably speakers of languages other than English are disadvantaged. He continues that "they [non-English speaking people] become mute and deaf and are therefore prevented from fully participating in communication" (p. 168). In his view, native speakers of English may take full advantage of the linguistic and communicative inequality to their own benefit.

Language Dominance and Ethnocentric Attitudes

As pointed out by Tsuda, it is possible that native speakers of English in an English-dominated situation may use their linguistic advantage consciously or unconsciously to exercise their power, which may create unequal and asymmetrical relationships with non-native speakers of English. In this type of situation, native speakers of English may possibly employ some ethnocentric attitudes or even ideological values. For example, according to Mooney, ideology is simply "a way of describing a set of beliefs and behaviors that are thought of as natural" (Mooney 2011, p. 18). He argues that everybody has an ideology, and they are the values we hold and ideas that seem perfectly natural to us. This type of 'common sense' thinking and acting is considered to be dominant ideology. Kress and Hodge (1993) define ideology as "a systematic body of ideas, organized from a particular point of view" (p. 6). Because we all have a particular point of view, in

some sense, we all have ideologies. Understanding the concept of ideology is important in relation to power since power is often supported by ideologies. Ideology links to power because "our 'taken for granted' beliefs and values become significant with respect to other people when we are in a position to have our point of view accepted by others as a norm" (Mooney, 2011). Mooney further observes that "language is crucial to the creation and maintenance of 'common sense' ideology, and that looking at language closely allows us to map these ideologies". Therefore, examining language closely allows us to see evidence of particular ideologies at work and how people exercise power.

Fairclough (2001) explains that ideological assumptions are embedded in features of discourse. The sociologist Garfinkel wrote that "the familiar common sense world of everyday life [is], a world which is built entirely upon assumptions and expectations which control both the actions of members of a society and their interpretations of the actions of others" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 64). According to Fairclough, ideology is most effective when it is invisible. In other words, if one becomes aware that a particular aspect of common sense is sustaining power inequalities, it ceases to be 'common sense' and may cease to have the capacity to sustain such inequalities. And "invisibility is achieved when ideologies are brought to discourse not as explicit elements on the text, but as the background assumptions which lead the text producer to 'textualize' the world in a particular way" (p. 71). Thus, in order to discover hidden ideological power in discourse, looking at language practices and orders of discourse becomes an important aspect.

THE RESEARCH

My research has involved analyzing naturally occurring interactions in meetings and interviewees' perceptions in interview data. I analyzed what kind of power asymmetry and dominance were observed in staff meetings. The research also shed light on discovering whether the use of English is a problematic aspect in power asymmetry in cross-cultural interaction between native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English in actual business meetings. By looking at language practices and organization of discourse closely, some hidden ideological assumptions and expectations embedded in meeting discourse were discovered.

Setting and Method

This study is based on analysis of transcribed data (meetings and interviews) and ethnographic observations. The data for analysis came from an intercultural context of staff meetings among colleagues in Japan. This particular institution was selected as a setting for my data collection in this study because it had a long history of employing workers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. According to one of the workers in the institution, some workers in this department experienced a tension among senior employees from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Thus, this particular setting was a valuable place to explore whether there was a power imbalance among workers from different backgrounds. Furthermore, the setting allowed me to investigate whether workers from different backgrounds employed and demonstrated some aspect of intercultural sensitivity and competence in the intercultural setting. Lastly, findings from this study provided some insights for managing the imbalance of power relations that can arise due to the deficiency of employing some intercultural sensitivities and competence.

I audio-recorded naturally occurring conversations in three staff meetings mainly conducted in English. Two of the recorded meetings were transcribed and analyzed using discourse analysis and an ethnographic approach. In addition, two interviews, six months apart, were conducted individually with the six participants. The interviews were also transcribed and analyzed. Participants of this study were told that their privacy and anonymity would be protected.

The members of the department at that time were two native speakers of English—two male Americans, and three non-native speakers of English—two Japanese male employees and one Chinese-Taiwanese female employee. Although the English proficiency levels of the participants were not tested, the two Japanese employees were operational in English while one Taiwanese employee was fluent in the English language. 'Fluent' used here means that speakers can carry out daily conversation and communicate their thoughts in English with little difficulty. However, the two Japanese male employees seemed to have difficulty in expressing their opinions when the topics were related to scientific knowledge in the workplace, while the female Taiwanese seemed to have less difficulty in expressing them in her L2.

FINDINGS

Here, I describe the overall findings at the end of the research process. My analysis revealed that interactional dominance was manifested among communicators from different backgrounds through spoken interactions in the meetings. However, at the same time, the findings further revealed that some participants in the department demonstrated a higher degree of intercultural sensitivity and competence than others. An empathic attitude and willingness to take others' perspectives were shown to play an important role in intercultural development. For instance, one American employee seemed to demonstrate plenty of intercultural sensitivity. Based on the interview data, he appeared to have adopted more adaptable and flexible attitudes than the other American employee in some ways. For example, he stated that "an ideal section chief is someone who is bilingual who can translate back and forth for everyone." Further, the American employee mentioned that he tried to speak to Japanese colleagues in person after the staff meetings since he realized that Japanese in general prefer to speak one-to-one rather than speaking up in meetings in front of everyone. The American employee seemed to show a deep understanding of Japanese custom and demonstrated a flexible attitude.

In contrast, another American reported in his interview that Japanese people tend not to speak up since they do not want to be criticized. He perceived it as a negative attitude because in America, peer review is important and avoiding criticism could negatively impact work quality. He seemed to demonstrate a certain degree of "ethnocentrism"—a concept that refers to "the tendency to identify with our group (e.g. ethnic or racial group) and to evaluate out-groups and their members according to those standards" (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003, p. 137). Further, according to Barna (1998), it applies to a situation when our lack of knowledge about other groups leaves us with no option other than to draw upon the information already stored in our minds to interpret what is happening, which can lead us to interpret strangers' behavior from our cultural frame of reference, perhaps misunderstandings in the process" (p. 173).

Similarly, one Japanese employee showed more intercultural sensitivity and competence than another Japanese employee by demonstrating his openness and flexibility towards the differences in communication styles. For example, the less culturally sensitive Japanese employee did not show any willingness to change

his Japanese ways, but instead expected the American employees to adapt their ways for him. On the other hand, the one who demonstrated a higher level of intercultural sensitivity showed his positivity and willingness to expose himself to the new culture and the language. It appeared that he was demonstrating a more open-minded attitude by taking the perspective of the American employees, and was willing to develop more intercultural adaptive skills.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have connected my own experience of living and working in intercultural settings with a summary of my research. At the core of my research is the examination of intercultural communication in a workplace setting.

'Sensitivity' has been shown to be one of the most important aspects of intercultural competence. Key to the development of intercultural sensitivity are non-judgmental stance and the development of adaptive skills.

As we become more globalized, developing intercultural sensitivity and communicative competence across cultures is crucial in order to achieve mutual cooperation and engage in collaborative efforts. Furthermore, by developing intercultural sensitivity and communicative competence, communicators in multicultural settings can utilize the skills to reduce asymmetrical relations which would be caused by such factors as cultural and linguistic ethnocentric attitudes as well as ideological assumptions.

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ABSTRACT

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要 約

異文化間の感受性と異文化コミュニケーションにおける民族中心的態度への影響

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　本論文では，異文化間の感受性に関する著者が実施した研究の重要な側面を説明しながら，著者自身の経験を要約し，研究を裏付ける重要な概念を説明する。さらに，その研究から得られた総合的な調査結果について論じる。本研究の主な目的は，異文化間の感受性と，それが日本の異なる文化的背景を持つ複数の労働者が働く職場で観察される民族中心的態度に与える影響を考察することであった。多様なコミュニケーターが，異なる感受性レベルを採用する方法と，それが異なる文化的，言語的背景を持つ対話者間の態度にどのように影響するかを調査した。調査結果は，異文化間の感受性，共感，オープンマインディッドネス（偏見のない物の見方・考え方），非判断的態度などの感情的要因が，職場において，いかに異なる文化的背景を持つコミュニケーター間の民族中心的態度と力関係の非対称性を減らすのに役立つ可能性があるかを示唆している。