

A STUDY OF THE JAPANESE COMMUNICATION STYLE: Some Cross-cultural Insights into *ma*

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I. Introduction

This is an analysis, discussion and clarification of the Japanese concept of *ma* as it relates to rhetoric and communication. In this discussion it will be shown that *ma* is a rhetorical device in Japan.

A widely accepted definition of rhetoric is "the function of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas." In his volume, *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China*, Oliver took Bryant's definition of rhetoric⁽¹⁾ a step further and informed us that rhetoric in Asia is "adjusting people to people."⁽²⁾ The author agrees with Oliver inasmuch as harmony is crucial to Asian society.

The notion of "harmony" is exemplified in a *Time* magazine article titled "How Japan Does it — the world's toughest competitor." In the article, the writer informed the reader about Japanese people achieving consensus:

For all their cross-cultural borrowing, the Japanese have remained astonishingly unchanged. One of the most important of their native characteristics is a willingness to achieve consensus by compromising. . . . No matter what the group — from the smallest upstart enterprise to the largest multibillion dollar multinational — nothing gets done until the people involved agree. The Japanese call this *nemawashi* (root binding). Just as a gardener carefully wraps all the roots

of a tree together before he attempts to transplant it, Japanese leaders bring all members of society together before an important decision is made. The result is an often tedious, and sometimes interminable, process of compromise in the pursuit of consensus. But in the end the group as a whole benefits because all members are aligned behind the same goal.⁽³⁾

With that *Time* magazine article, a facet of Japanese communication style, different from that in the West, was introduced. It is essential to clarify Japanese communication style inasmuch as a limited number of scholars have conducted research up to this time.

In this paper, the concept of *ma* is to be discussed from the viewpoint of the Japanese communication style. The concept of *ma* has not been explained explicitly even among the Japanese scholars, for they have not directed much attention to it. However, some students recently have demonstrated an interest in the subject. Because of the increased contact with Western culture, scholars began to recognize the significant difference between two cultures, especially in terms of *ma*. A number of Japanese expressions using *ma*⁽⁴⁾ helps to explain the importance of the concept in Japanese culture. The followings are some of the sample phrases.

Ma o akeru	—	leave a space
Ma ga nukeru	—	be stupid
		be out of place
		be out of tune
Ma o oku	—	put a pause
Ma ga motenai	—	cannot fill the time
Ma ga au	—	be in rhythm
Ma ni au	—	be in time
		be useful
		can do without
Ma ga ii	—	be lucky

Ma ga warui	—	be unlucky
Ma ni awaseru	—	make shift with
		manage with
		fill a gap
		have (a thing) ready

The purpose of this paper, then, is to explain *ma* from the viewpoint of Japanese communication style which is so different from that of the Westerners that it often creates a communication gap. With increased awareness of the importance of the study of rhetorical theory and practice across national and cultural barriers, this examination of "The Concept of *ma*" will aid in clarifying the barriers.

II. Definition

This chapter represents an attempt to define the Japanese concept of *ma*. It is worthy of note to understand the importance of *ma* to Japanese people, that is, without *ma*, the communication process would lack effectiveness and harmony.

1. The Japanese people's traditional attitude toward language

The Japanese people's frequent use of *ma* can be attributed to their traditional attitude toward language. This can be best illustrated in the following discussion. Haruhiko Kindaichi, a scholar of Japanese language, stated in his book, *Nihon-jin no Gengo Hyogen* (language expression of the Japanese people), that since ancient times there has been the traditional idea of *Kotodama* which means that if you say or write something recklessly, it will come true causing misfortune.⁽⁵⁾ For example, in a wedding ceremony, the Japanese people avoid saying words like cut, separate, and finish. According to *Kojien*,⁽⁶⁾ a Japanese dictionary, *kotodama* is defined as a mysterious soul of words with supernatural power making what is said or written come true.

As two Japanese sayings proclaim: "The mouth is the gate of misfortune." and "Least said, soonest mended.", the Japanese people do not always enjoy talking. Because of this attitude, the Japanese use indirect expression in language, and enjoy conscious inclusion of nonverbal expression.

2. Definition

From the Chinese character for *ma* (間), the basic idea of the concept of *ma* is explained, that is, something which is in-between two stages in the development of a process. According to *Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary*,⁽⁷⁾ one of the most popular Japanese-English dictionaries, the term, *ma*, is explained as follows:

- a. space, room
- b. an interval
- c. a pause
- d. a room
- e. time, while
- f. leisure, spare time
- g. luck, chance
- h. timing

These are to be classified as follows:

- | | | |
|------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| a. space, room | } | spatial meaning |
| d. a room | | |
| c. a pause | } | temporal meaning |
| e. time, while | | |
| f. leisure, spare time | | |
| g. luck, chance | } | spatio-temporal meaning |
| h. timing | | |

According to this classification, *ma* relates to space, time, and the accidental combination of both.

Edward T. Hall defines *ma*, in his book, *The Hidden Dimension*, in terms of space as follows: "The meaning of this [space as empty] becomes clear only when it is contrasted with the Japanese, who are trained to give meaning to spaces — to perceive the shape and arrangement of spaces; for this they have a word, *ma*. The *ma*, or interval, is a basic building block in all Japanese spatial experience."⁽⁸⁾ The idea of meaningful empty space can be applied to the whole concept of *ma*, that is, *ma* is empty but meaningful space, time, and the combination of them.

Before discussing the definition of *ma* in terms of communication, examination of the nature of *ma* in space and time will help in understanding the concept of *ma* in Japanese communication style.

a. *ma* as in space

The following quotation translated from *Kuoritii Raifu no Hasso*, is helpful in understanding the sacredness and meaningfulness of *ma* (space) which is, in fact, not functional at all. "The site of the village shrine has no functional meaning. Although people in every village have a strong desire for cultivating land, they would not encroach upon the space because they consider the place as linking this world and the supernatural one signifying that this world is not everything. To them, such a space left uncultivated is more important for their peace of mind."⁽⁹⁾

When we take a look at Japanese architecture, spatial *ma* can be recognized. *Genkan* (entrance) is one of the examples. In the Edo era (1603-1867), the area space of *genkan* was determined according to the amount of the owner's wealth. It is interesting to note that the space of the *genkan* was measured by *ken* which is another way to read the Chinese character for *ma*. The space is neither outside nor inside. It is in-between. It exists between outside and inside. People can enter *genkan* with their shoes on, but they must take them off when they go beyond that space.

The entrance or *genkan* could be considered as *ma* (space) in human

relations. Traditionally, when Japanese people visit their friends, it often happens that they do not go to the *genkan* which would mean formality. They would rather go to *engawa* (a kind of veranda which usually goes from east side of the house to the south side), without going through the *genkan*. This means there is less *ma* (relational distance) between them because of their closeness. The relationship is reflected in *ma* precisely. Spatial *ma*, then, as a non-verbal manifestation in Japanese culture, communicates a deeper meaning in human relationship and in nature.

b. *ma* as in time

Ma as in time might be considered as meaningless in the West. In Japanese culture, however, *ma* speaks eloquently. It frequently occurs in general communications that, in spite of a deadlock, when people are pressed to reach an agreement, they would employ *ma* (a pause in this case) in which each person searches for a better decision. After *ma*, usually the superior-ranked person will propose his own decision with which most of the people would agree. Once this proposal is made, no one will likely disagree with it openly. Rather, they are ready to consider the weak points of the decision. In short, during *ma*, there is an appraisal of the problem and people recognize what is occurring. The communicators comprehend *ma* just as they are accustomed to understanding images in *kanji* (Chinese character). For example, the character 川 means river, and it is easy to see something riverlike about the character. Moreover, meaningful cues are hidden in *ma* which are understood by the people. The ability to comprehend these cues is called *sasshi* (sensitivity). (The discussion of *sasshi* will be given in Chapter III.)

As Edward T. Hall states,⁽¹⁰⁾ Japanese culture is high-context. He explains high-context communication in contrast with low-context communication as follows using the figure.

A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or inter-

nalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial (LC), a mathematician programming a computer, two politicians drafting legislation, two administrators writing a regulation, or a child trying to explain to his mother why he got into a fight.⁽¹¹⁾

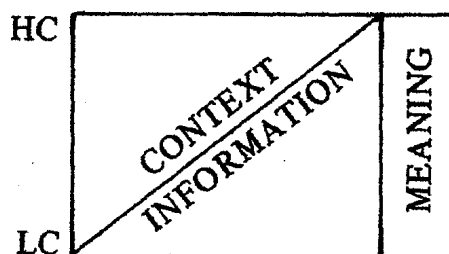


Fig. 1 A High-context and a Low-context Communications

Source: Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 102.

Since Japanese culture is high-context, the Japanese people need *ma* (time) to understand or *sassuru* (verb form for *sasshi*) the situation. Thus, they sometimes must be silent and sensitive. Since Western people have a low-context culture, they need speech or words to understand the situation.

Therefore, it is easy to see what will happen when a Westerner meets a Japanese person. To the Japanese, Western people appear to be talkative and restless with no *ma* while the Westerners believe the Japanese people to be shy and sometimes reluctant to talk.

Thus, in Japan, *ma* is a concept which is shared by people in a specific environment where hidden cues can only be understood through *sasshi*.

c. *ma* as in communication

Ma in communication is relationship oriented inasmuch as the harmony

is important in Japanese society. Takehiko Kenmochi uses the following episode, "Ohmisoka wa Awanu Sanyo," from *Saikaku Shokoku Banashi* (1685) which illustrates the importance of harmonious communication.

When people were having a party on New Year's Eve, one of the host's *koban*, a small-sized oval Japanese gold coin, disappeared. When the host was at a loss, people began to take off their clothes to prove their innocence. A man, who had one *koban* by chance, said, "I must be reconciled to my fate that I happened to have one *koban*," and declared to do *harakiri* to prove his innocence. The moment he tried to do it, some other man threw his *koban* to the center of the room, then the hostess came out of the kitchen and said that she found it, too. This brought them another problem of having an extra *koban*. It was clear that someone paid his own *koban* to solve the problem. The host's idea to find out the owner was that he placed the extra *koban* on the pottery in the garden and let each guest go home one by one. After all the guests had gone, the *koban* was not there.⁽¹²⁾ [Translated by the author.]

As the story exemplifies, communication among the Japanese people is relation-oriented rather than purpose-oriented. To the Japanese, any solution which lacks harmony does not make sense. The *koban* placed in the garden could be understood as a use of *ma*. It exists among the people, and speaks to them eloquently. It says thanks to the owner of the extra *koban* and also affirms that their relation is still close, indicating trust among them.

Furthermore, the story illustrates the difference between the Japanese person's approach to a problem and Westerner's. In explanation of the difference, a portion of Kaplan's diagrams⁽¹³⁾ which follow indicate the distinction between Eastern and Western logic.



Fig. 2 Cultural Thought Patterns

These diagrams compare the different logical patterns of persons with different backgrounds. The Japanese indirect logic has much to do with the concept of *ma*. Further, it can be stated that the spiral is the *ma* itself. In the process of the spiral, the Japanese people enjoy employing some factors of non-verbal communication such as clothing, interpersonal distance, direction of gaze, objects, paralanguage, and silence, as well as indirect verbal communication, to achieve harmonious and effective communication.

III. *Ma* and *sasshi*

In the previous chapter, *ma* was discussed as an important means of communication in Japan. In Japan, *ma* is nonverbal as well as verbal, and it is as significant as verbal communication is in the West. In *ma*, many meanings are reflected, and it is the task of the listener to recognize and understand them. This ability is called *sasshi* (sensitivity). Only when a listener can sense what is reflected in *ma*, does the communication become effective. Even when a listener fails to do so, both the speaker and the listener continue to wait harmoniously for another chance in which the speaker's reflections of *ma* can be understood by the listener. If the listener is not sensitive at all, he or she would be called *nibui-hito* (a dull or stupid fellow), or *sasshi no warui-hito* (an insensitive person) and thus not appreciated.

Professor Satoshi Ishii of Ohtsuma Women's University designed the *Enryo-Sasshi* Communication Model in his paper, "Characteristics of Japanese Nonverbal Communicative Behavior."

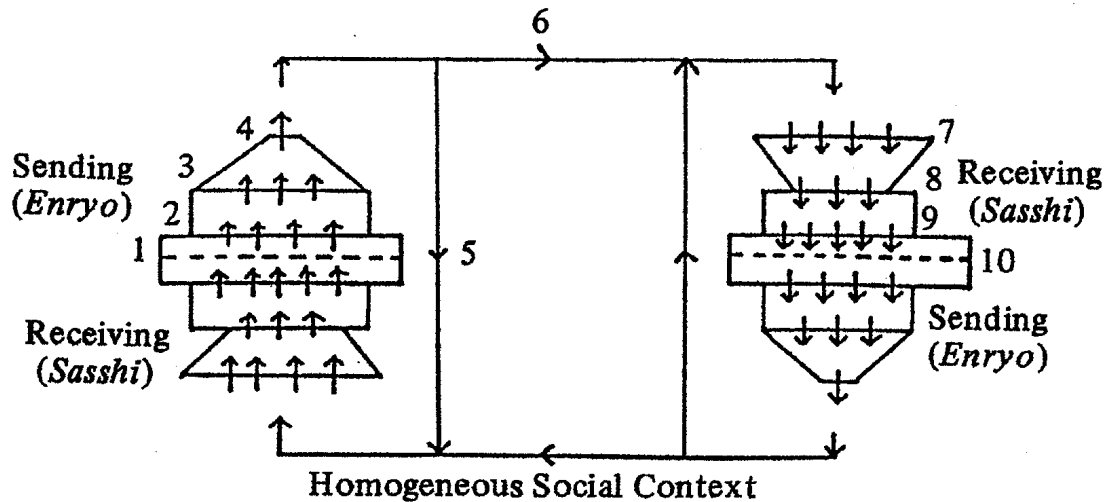


Fig. 3 Japanese *Enryo-Sasshi* Communication Model (by Ishii)

Source: Satoshi Ishii, "Characteristics of Japanese Nonverbal Communicative Behavior," *Occasional Papers in Speech* (Honolulu: Department of Speech, University of Hawaii, 1975), p. 176.

Ishii describes the model as follows:

It has been the Japanese traditional culture to go out of their way to conceal their sentiments, and to express them, verbally and non-verbally, only sparingly, so they may not disturb the general atmosphere of harmony . . . the basis of Japanese self-inhibition is *enryo*, modesty and reservation in communicating ideas and feelings to others. . . . Only a message that is safe and perhaps ambiguous is allowed to go out through the narrow exit. This careful screening process is *enryo*, which makes Japanese behavior quiet, timid and awkward in public.

The receiver or listener is always expected to possess a great sensitivity to the limited, ambiguous message sent by the speaker. In order to be a person of good *sasshi* who can handle social transactions smoothly, he must keep his receiving entrance wide open so that the controlled message can come in . . . the receiver engages in the work of "expanding" the message on the basis of his trained, sensitive guessing ability, *sasshi*.⁽¹⁴⁾

Enryo could be thought of as a part of *ma*. Both concepts aim to keep a harmonious atmosphere. However, as Fig. 4 indicates *ma* functions more than that. *Ma* inspires a people's intuition so that they can reach for the exact understanding almost instantaneously.

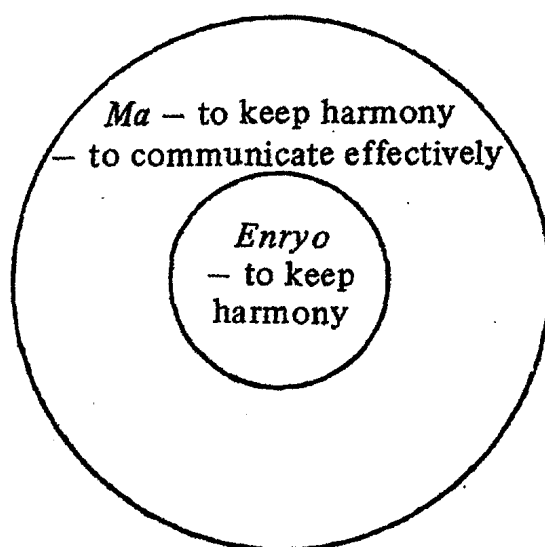


Fig. 4 The Relationship between *Ma* and *Enryo*

Since *ma* functions in various situations in time, space, and other areas, Japanese people need enough sensitivity to comprehend the speaker's subtleties, that is, *ma* is manifest in a variety of situations.

As Ishii noted in the model above, the Japanese people use few words to keep a harmonious atmosphere. However, that is not the only reason for a minimum use of words. In another sense, the limited use of words is employed to persuade. One of the most effective ways to persuade people in Japan is to speak to them indirectly, briefly, or subtly so that they can motivate themselves to act as the speaker intended. However, this type of persuasion can be attained only if listeners have the perception that *sasshi* is being employed.

In general communication, the Japanese people also enjoy indirect verbal expression. For example, Keiko Ueda wrote an interesting article specifically on "Sixteen Ways to Avoid Saying 'No' in Japan",⁽¹⁵⁾ which

exemplifies the importance of indirect verbal communication in Japanese society.

IV. *Ma*, *Zen* and general semantics

Zen Buddhism, viewing verbalization as the barrier to *satori* (enlightenment), has influenced Japanese communication style, and thus developed the concept of *ma*. To the extent that *Zen* emphasizes the difference between the word and that which it symbolizes, General Semantics (which is a Western theory) observes the same principle.

1. History of *Zen* and its philosophy

At the beginning of the sixth century, *Zen* was introduced to China by Bodhidharma from India, and was developed there around the eighth century. During the T'ang period (618-906), a number of *Zen* sects were developed and introduced to Japan. Among them, the two most important sects are *Rinzai* and *Soto*. In the main, *Rinzai* stresses the paradoxical statements called *koan* as the best method of attaining *satori* (enlightenment), while *Soto* stresses the method of quiet sitting, *zazen*. In sharp contrast to the philosophical emphasis of Indian Buddhism, all branches of *Zen* rejected abstract metaphysical speculation, that is, *Zen* attempts to seek *satori* without any intermediary agent such as intellect or symbolization, and it denies arguing, theorizing, sermonizing, or even trying to explain. *Zen* urges its followers to find themselves the answer to any question raised from within themselves, because the answer is believed to be found where the question is. If one asks his master, "What is the principle of Buddhism?", the master would give him several blows without any instruction.⁽¹⁶⁾

Although *Zen* began to show signs of decline in the Ming (1368-1644) period, the two branches of *Zen* were transplanted to Japan, the *Rinzai* by Eisai and the *Soto* by Dogen. *Zen* gained enthusiastic patronage especially among the warrior leaders, and it actually became the state religion during

the 14th and 15th centuries in Japan.

During the 16th century, *Zen* priests not only contributed their talents as diplomats and administrators but also preserved the cultural life. That is, it was under their inspiration that art, literature, the tea ceremony, and the *No* play, for example, developed and prospered.

2. *Ma*, *Zen*, and General Semantics

As stated above, *Zen* had a great influence on Japanese culture, and it is interesting to note that there is something in common between *Zen* philosophy and the idea of General Semantics. This comparison will help us to understand *Zen* and also the Japanese people's attitude toward the idea of communication.

Furyumonji is the motto of *Zen*, meaning that the essence of *satori* cannot be communicated (transferred) by words. It can only be transferred from heart to heart. That is, whatever the truth is, we cannot know it until we experience it, and words or theories sometimes become obstacles in knowing the truth.

In this sense *Zen* is experiential. Words or languages may be useful in science or philosophy, but they are the essential obstacles in *Zen*. In *Zen*, words cause confusion.

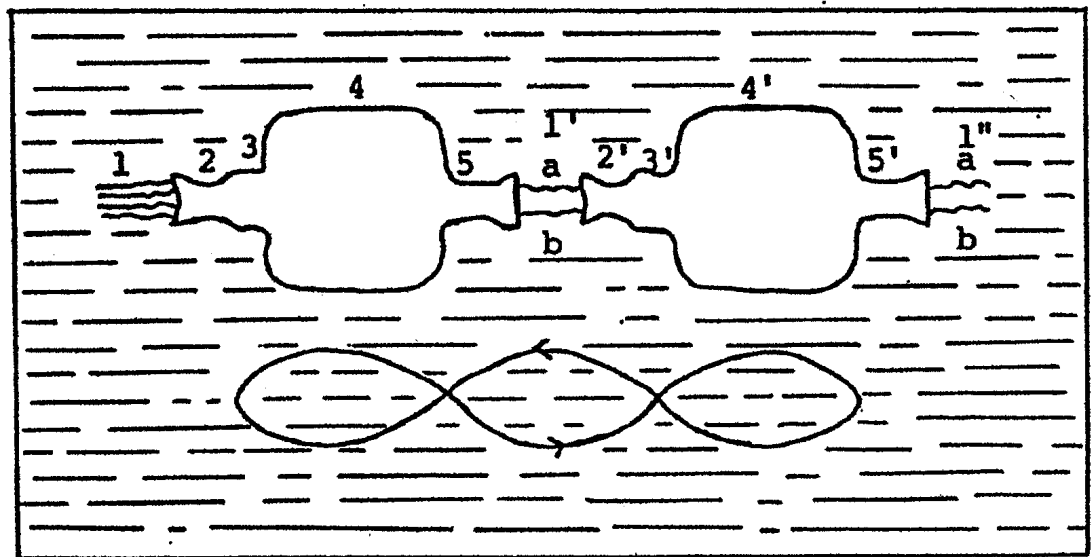
Here, the author finds some similarities between *Zen* and General Semantics. General Semantics emphasizes that the map is not the territory. Korzybski, the formulator of the principles of General Semantics, said that we should not identify the symbol with what is symbolized in order to avoid confusion in communication.

Thus, in General Semantics, it is important to understand what is referred by a speaker who attaches some meaning to words. The person who teaches in a General Semantics framework looks for the verbal skills to know exactly what is meant by a person's words. In short, General Semantics still relies on words. However, *Zen* does not. *Zen* tries to sense what is

symbolized not relying on words but on man's intuition.

There is a Chinese saying, "Knowing the whole of something from a single bit of information." It is to be understood that "a single bit of information" signifies the insufficiency of languages. And, in order to understand the whole from such a bit of information, people need intuitive knowledge or sharp sensitivity.

Needless to say, it is important for a listener to know what is in a speaker's mind, and for a speaker to express to a listener exactly what he or she is thinking, in order to create effective communication. Dr. Wendell Johnson constructed a model of communication in which he emphasized the importance of the conscious level before verbalization (stage 4 in the model).



**Fig. 5 Schematic Diagram of Stages of the Process of Communication
(by Johnson)**

Source: Wendell Johnson, "The Spoken Word and the Great Unsaid,"
The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 37 (Dec. 1951), p. 421.

Using Johnson's model, one may summarize as follows: Because the Westerners place much emphasis on words, they tend to focus on level 5

of the model where the speaker's thought is verbalized to understand level 4 of the model. On the contrary, the Japanese people place much emphasis on level 4 and try to read it directly or intuitively paying less attention to stage 5 of verbalization. One can call this an intuitive approach to the human mind, which is one of the characteristics of *ma*. However, that is not to say that the Japanese have a supernatural power in reading people's minds. Instead, they try to grasp level 4 more nonverbally than the Westerners do. As a result, the Japanese are sensitive toward context, facial expression, objects, and circumstances, which are the hidden cues in *ma*.

V. Summary

The paper attempts to clarify the concept of *ma* in Japanese communication style which often appears to be ambiguous to Westerners, and thus, causes misunderstanding. *Ma* is defined as a harmonious and effective communication device in which all kinds of nonverbal elements as well as verbal messages (usually indirect) are employed. With the clarification of the concept, the author explained the principle difference in communication style between the East and the West. The difference could be summarized as follows: Because of the use of *ma*, Japanese communication

- 1) involves space
- 2) takes time in order to involve all participants
- 3) aims at harmony
- 4) allows ambiguity
- 5) incorporates nonverbal behavior
- 6) employs indirect verbal expression

In order for this type of communication to be successful, listeners should possess the ability of *sasshi* (sensitivity) so that they may comprehend meaningful cues reflected through *ma* accurately. This interesting subject of *sasshi* has much to do with the concept of *ma* in that both are

like wheels of a chariot. The absence of either one would disturb communication in Japan. If speakers send messages too directly, they will probably insult listeners. On the other hand, the lack of *sazshi* by listeners will create frustration for the speakers.

The clarification of the communication style between the East and the West poses a creative problem, that is, how can both achieve effective communication? The author presented Zen and General Semantics as the meeting point. That is, although the approach is different, both schools of thought try to understand level 4 of consciousness in Johnson's model. Westerners put their emphasis on words, while Easterners direct their attention to nonverbal cues in communication. These two different approaches, namely, verbal approach/nonverbal approach or direct approach/indirect approach have their own merits which in some cases function well and in other cases not.

In order to be a good communicator, on both the intra- and intercultural levels, East and West should learn from one another. Then we will be able to manage two different types of communication skills by careful observation of a situation.

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NOTES:

- (1) Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Its Scope," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 39 (Dec. 1953), pp. 401-24.
- (2) Robert T. Oliver, *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China* (New York: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1971), p. 6.
- (3) "How Japan Does It," *Time*, 30 Mar. 1981, p. 57.
- (4) Taiji Shiraki listed 171 examples in his article, "Ma-o Fukumu Seigo-no Jiten (dictionary of the idioms using *ma*)," *Gendai-no Esupuri*, 141 (Apr. 1979), pp. 196-207.
- (5) Haruhiko Kindaichi, *Nihon-jin no Gengo Hyogen* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1975), p. 50.
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- (7) Koh Masuda, ed., *Kenkyusha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1973).
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- (12) Takehiko Kenmochi, *Ma no Nippon Bunka* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1980), p. 162.
- (13) Robert B. Kaplan, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education," *Language Learning* 16 (1966), p. 15.
- (14) Satoshi Ishii, "Characteristics of Japanese Non-verbal Communicative Behavior," *Occasional Papers in Speech* (Honolulu: Department of Speech, University of Hawaii, 1975), pp. 176-77.
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