

## **THE CULTURAL INTERFACE: THE ROLE OF SELF**

SATINDER GILL  
*NTT Basic Research Labs, Japan*

### **Introduction**

With the increasing use of communications technology across cultural boundaries, and within cultural boundaries, we see shifts taking place both within a culture about itself, and across cultures about each other. Yet in what way are the shifts distinct, if so, from those which occur in face-to-face interaction?

Consider the following simple example of a change in addressing: A Japanese person who would normally when referring to a colleague address him/her with surname to the addressee, changes to first name referral when communicating via email in the c.c. section of the mail header, and in the message itself. Neither would normally address the other by first name.

Yet in a meeting at another company, Japanese persons addressed themselves by first name and surname, and the non-Japanese person with the Japanese form of name and 'san'. They were adapting a traditional form of respecting the non-company person to a non-Japanese person in this manner of elevating my address in relation to their own. The addressing was a mixture of English and Japanese. This is in contrast to the consistency of addressing in the email situation, which is also an act of politeness to the English speaker's cultural norm.

Consider another example of a British subject being asked if they ever communicate differently with a non-British person in email. The reply is that it depends on the person's competence in English. Yet in a face-to-face situation, we would not necessarily judge someone's competence in understanding our utterance by the level of their English, but by their ability to make sense of what we are saying in relation to the situation. A Japanese person in a face-to-face setting may be highly competent in communicating, yet in a video conference, finds that due to poor quality of communication channels, he misunderstands and that the emphasis is placed on 'competence' in language as being equivalent to competence in communication.

It is proposed that the use of communications technology seems to be creating a perception of language as being independent of the culture it's participants are situated in. This is more likely to be the case for the English

speaker as this is the predominant language of cross-cultural communication, and even more so in email, say, than in face-to-face settings. Yet, the non-English speaking cultures are having to accommodate to a different language and to its perceived cultural norms. Hence, we have the first-name self addressing occurring in the above example. The English speaker is not aware of this accommodation process and is thereby not involved in cross-cultural accommodation. This may explain why the discussions of communication by email and video-conferencing assume a universality of culture, or simply do not address the matter, in their focus on various behaviours such as flaming, group working etc.

Yet studies undertaken in Japan (Nojima, 1994; Nojima and Gill, 1997) indicate that we do need to consider in detail, the affects and new possibilities of communications technologies in and across cultural communication. In order to do so, we need to compare what happens in cross cultural communication face-to-face with computer mediated cross-cultural communication. Any in depth understanding of cultural dynamics also requires an analysis of the nature of self in culture. In this paper we shall present some findings from preliminary empirical research which compares British and Japanese subjects, and considers the relationship between self, culture and communication. We will conclude with reflections on future work.

## **Experiment**

In the research presented below, we investigated people's perception of the differences, if any, between face-to-face communication and email. In particular we investigate the nature of emotion in relationship to certain attitudes about the difference between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. The data we collected are of people's recollections of their experiences rather than their actions, i.e. their perceptions of the use of email.

In this study of the emotional dimension of Email communication, our cultural comparative hypothesis was that English speakers would not have as much difficulty in communicating with the written word as would the Japanese for whom much is communicated in silence. For example, disagreement and anger is to some degree communicated in silence, so the utterance of it can sound especially harsh in the Japanese communicative environment. Negatives are also expressed at the end of an utterance, unlike in English, where we say 'no' at the beginning of our utterance. In Japanese, this means that one can reserve judgement of the expression of the negative depending on the particular situation and how it unfolds. Hence, facial expression and other body movements are critical to making such a judgement. It is not therefore surprising that Japanese feel that people can be very rude when communicating

by email and in lists, and it is difficult for them not to react with anger at the explicit nature of the negative expression.

Our study involved Japanese and British subjects. This was a preliminary study, and the small size of the sample means that we do not draw definitive conclusions, but rather are looking for indicative differences. 10 Japanese subjects (6 male and 4 female), and 9 British subjects (5 male and 4 female) were interviewed in the respective countries (the UK subjects were contacted by telephone) and languages (English and Japanese). All belong to universities/laboratories, use Email daily, with 3-18 years experience, and use Email extensively.

We sought to explore the hypotheses that for Japan, the perception of email is that it is easier for conflicts to emerge, there is more likelihood of flaming, and that face to face communication is valued much more; that in the UK, Email is perceived as a functional communication media. By this, we mean there is a tendency to demarcate and separate functional communication from face to face, and that flaming also arises.

In discussions on Flaming there are differing views as to why it arises. Some claim that computer mediated communication (CMC) elicits more expressive behaviour because it lacks social information (Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, 1984; Kiesler, Zubrow and Moses, 1985; Sproull and Kiesler, 1991). Others claim that CMC elicits no significantly more expressive behaviour than face-to-face and it embodies social information (Lea, Shea, Fung and Spears, 1992). We sought to investigate these issues in a comparative cultural context.

We hypothesised that for the UK subjects, as the English language places an emphasis on the written word, which is related to the dominance of the individual self, this would result in less problems in email communication and also less emotional expression in email communication, than for Japanese speakers. For the Japanese, we hypothesized that the emphasis in communication is on the spoken and unspoken equally, and relate to a concept of social self, that email communication is going to involve a greater degree of social information.

Our interview items were on email experiences; the difference between Email and face to face meeting, telephone and letter; experiences of difficulties and troubles using Email; emotional experiences with Email; communicating with other cultures using email; situations or topics which are better transmitted by meeting face to face (not by Email) or vice versa; use of smileys and other forms to communicate extra textual messages.

## **Discussion**

The results of our study showed that in fact the Japanese subjects were on the whole, concerned to know the other person's situation and found email to be an

impediment to this. They expressed difficulty in reading it. This backs up previous research which shows that Japanese tend to meet off line as a matter of course when communicating by email, to the extent that there is a term in Japanese for this practice, namely 'Ofumi' or 'Ofu' (Nojima, 1994). They consider Email to be insufficient. They use a greater number of physically expressive smileys. Consider the following examples which show the comparison between Japanese and Western smileys:

*Japanese:* (^-^), (^o^), smiles; (^-^;) embarrassed with cold sweat; m( )m sorry

*English:* :-) smile; :-) sad; ;-) wink

These smileys also show how the Japanese subjects try to avoid possible misunderstandings, and expressing negativity. These smileys seek to show the other person(s) how the utterance needs to be considered.

However, we also found that some Japanese have similar experiences as the English subjects, for example, they find that Email is efficient because you do not have to consider the other person's situation. It allows for greater equality of status. Japanese subjects also find it useful for functional matters such as arranging meetings or sending messages to a number of people at the same time in a list. It allows for quick responses. Hence, the use of Email is opening up new possibilities for the communication process and influencing Japanese culture as a result.

Other interesting findings were that Female subjects found it useful for 'keeping appropriate distance', and found men to be less masculine, and that Japanese consider email to be an impolite form compared to the letter.

On the matter of perception of difficulties in email communications, the initial response of British subjects as to whether they had any difficulties, was 'no'. Only later in the discussion a couple of them revealed some difficulties, but on the whole there were no great difficulties reported. Some spoke of the cost-benefit ratio of using Email depending on the 'complexity of information' that needs to be conveyed. No Japanese subjects used either of these expressions. All British subjects expressed that it allows for direct communication, is convenient, they do express emotion, and develop friendships. However, some expressed that it is difficult for handling negativity, they did experience flaming/abusive behaviour, they separate between email behaviour and face to face behaviour within a relationship, that it is a necessary way to meet people (2 subjects), they never communicate with people whom they do not already know for personal communication, and they do not use email for personal communications. So there was a variety of experiences reported.

From this study, social self does appear to be part of email communication in the Japanese case, as does the maintenance of social practices. Indicative changes are that Email is seen to be efficient for certain purposes because it is

useful for quick responses, short messages, and not having to consider the other person's situation.

For the UK subjects, the individual self (and written culture) is part of email communication. There were no particular difficulties in using email, that email is seen as being real communication. However there is great variance in the way subjects think about friendships and email. Every subject talked of efficiency and convenience (one subject said he would not use it if it were not efficient), and only one subject spoke about considering the other person's situation (in marked contrast to the Japanese subjects).

### **Conclusion**

Our conclusions were that all subjects experience emotions in Email, and social cues are embodied in email. Japanese subjects bring values of social communication into Email but they are discovering new possibilities, some of which are contrary to social norms. This may increase. It may also affect social norms if we accept one argument that computer mediated behaviour is socially contextualised behaviour. British subjects do not speak of the other person's situation (except for one), and they treat email primarily as a functional tool.

This study was about the perceptions people had about their use of Email, and not about the actual practices. It indicates differences between Email use in Japan and the UK situated in cultural norms. It indicates for example that the pressure of the written word on Japanese communication is producing a range of communicative practices which avoids the direct use of language. However, it also indicates that changes which adopt the direct use of language are taking place. In both cultures there are variations in the degree to which the social or individual self is prominent. It is also therefore recognised, as indicative in our study, that some Japanese fit into the 'Western model' and some 'Western' people fit into the Japanese model of communication behaviour. However there are cultural differences in the way Email is perceived and used and further investigations are to understand these differences better, and in particular, research into the cross cultural communication situation is being undertaken.

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