Language Switching for Inexperienced Foreign Language Speakers

by

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1. Introduction

Let us begin with this question from a Japanese junior-high school students' questionnaire,

<Question 3>
(In the USA) You go to a record shop with your friend. You find a video tape. You want it very much. Another person at the store wants to buy it. You have no money. But your friend lends you ¥20,000 for the video tape. In English, what would you say to your friend?

<Answer>
I'm really sorry.

This answer appears to be a kind of negative transfer that interests many scholars of English. This problem is not directly related to language itself, but strongly related to the value discrepancies between Japanese culture and American culture. Coulmas (1981) discusses the differences in ways of expressing thanks and apologies in the cross-cultural realization of the speech act. He points out that the foreign language user sometimes sticks to the underlying rules governing the usage of the corresponding phrases of his mother tongue in expressing gratitude. This kind of transfer of pragmatics from one linguistic system to another might cause inferential mistakes just like any other transfer. This is called a sociopragmatic failure. It cannot be taken for granted that interactions are defined in an identical manner in different cultures. When using a second language, a person resorting to a routine formula from his own language often fails to recognize the shift in meaning that arises in the second language. In Question 3 above, the misunderstanding results from the fact that gratitude is associated with expressions of apology in Japanese culture. These kinds of utterances are difficult for Americans to interpret, and they are often confused by them. Such value discrepancies between Japanese culture and American culture might lead to misunderstanding in actual speech.

In this study, I shall discuss the learner's association in different languages. Next, I investigate whether a person who has not been outside his/her own monolingual culture can switch from his/her language to another using culture-specific strategy. Specifically, I study how Japanese junior-high school students can express gratitude in English and Japanese using the strategy.

2. Background

The relationship of language and thought has intrigued scholars through the ages. In a recent publication, Steinberg (1993) refers to the Sapir/Whorf Hypothesis and has stated that as follows:

Although I have argued for the view that language is not the basis of thought, by this I do not wish to imply that never language affects the content or direction of particular thoughts. Thus, while language is neither the basis of thought nor is necessary for the functioning of thought, language can affect thought once thought is established. For
examples, language may be used to provide us with new ideas.

(Steinberg, 1993: 169)

Ervin-Tripp (1964a) assumes that as language shifts, content will shift, and wherever monolingual American women and Japanese women tested in Japan differ in content, the bilingual women will tend to show an analogous content shift with language, even though the situations are otherwise identical. She describes some mismatch phenomena in the subjects’ association with second person pronouns in two languages, English and Japanese. Ervin-Tripp (1964a)’s study compared two sets of Sentence Completion Tests by the subjects (Japanese-American bilinguals). The informants heard (and read) the first half of each sentence. The responses by the same subjects in both languages are cited below:

<Question 1>
WHEN MY WISHES CONFLICT WITH MY FAMILY

<Answer>
(Japanese) it is a time of great unhappiness.
(English) I do what I want.

<Question 2>
I WILL PROBABLY BECOME

<Answer>
(Japanese) a housewife.
(English) a teacher.

<Question 3>
REAL FRIENDS SHOULD

<Answer>
(Japanese) help each other.
(English) be very frank.

Ervin-Tripp (1964a) concludes that when the sentences were weight by their frequency in the American and Japanese monolingual comparison group, the bilingual women’s sentences were significantly less “Japanese” in content when the women spoke English. This change in content could not be simulated by women who did not change language but were instructed to give “typically Japanese” or “typically American” answers at the two sessions. Thus the change in the associations and the sentence completions is an effect of language, and not of self-instruction.

However, Mackey (1968) clearly describes bilingualism as follows:

_Bilingualism_ is not a phenomenon of language; it is a characteristic of its use.

(W.F. Mackey, 1968: 554)

He proposes that bilingualism is a relative concept involving degree, function, alternation, and interference. Bilingualism is not only related to external factors (such as cultural, political, and historical factors) but also connected with internal ones (such as internal speech and the expression of intrinsic aptitudes).

Haga (1976) suggests that learning a foreign language might involve acquiring essentially the same processes as a native bilingual. If so, EFL learners in Japan would also show similar mismatch phenomena.

In contrast, Eisenstein & Bodman (1993) reports the difficulties for second and foreign language learners to acquire the means of expressing gratitude as follows:

Most native speakers of English on a conscious level associate the expression of gratitude with the words “thank you”; however, they are unaware of the underlying complex rules and the mutuality needed for expressing gratitude in a manner satisfying to both the giver and recipient. Similarly, second and foreign language learners are unaware of the underlying rules for expressing gratitude in English; in fact, they usually assume that the expression of gratitude is universal and remain unaware of significant differences in its cross-cultural realization. Because of this, the function of expressing gratitude is particularly difficult for learners to perform successfully.

(Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993: 64)
Such cultural rules provide a strong argument for expecting Japanese EFL learners to be unable to modify their ideas according to the language they are speaking.

3. Experiment

3.1. Purpose of the Study
I investigate whether a person who has not been outside his/her own monolingual culture can switch from his/her language to another using culture-specific strategy. Specifically, I study how Japanese junior-high school students can express gratitude in English and Japanese using the strategy.

3.2. Subjects
The subjects of this survey were 78 Japanese students at a government junior-high school in the Kanto area. They were all second-year non-native speakers of English. They reported no previous experience of living in an English-speaking country.

3.3. Methodology
Subjects were asked to respond to three situations in the questionnaire that they might have experienced in their own lives. The questionnaire's contents are as follows:

1.) Paying a taxi driver
2.) Receiving a present from a friend.
3.) Borrowing money from a friend to buy a video tape.
(See Appendix 1)

The subjects were first asked to respond to the items in the questionnaire in Japanese. Subsequently, they were asked to respond to the same situations in English. However, conceivably difficult vocabulary items were glossed in Japanese. I considered it important for my subjects to interact with cross-cultural influences in order to express themselves fully and naturally in imparting gratitude. Therefore, I asked them to imagine they were in the United States when they were doing the English version and to imagine they were in Japan when doing the Japanese version.

The data elicited by the questionnaire were analyzed by applying Eisenstein and Bodman's study (1993) of coding utterance in terms of its underlying speech act. (See Appendix 2) All three situations were taken from real-life contexts and culturally familiar situations. If social distances between the interlocutors, the giver and the thanker is considerably large, it would add an irrelevant factor to this study. The interactions were limited to those between strangers such as the taxi driver and the subject in Question 1 and the friends in Question 2 and 3.

3.4. Statement of the Hypothesis
My hypothesis was that the subjects could not switch from Japanese to English using culture-specific strategy. As mentioned above, the ritual of thanking is often a standardized routine. The EFL student not only has to find out when this speech act is appropriate, or even required, in the English-speaking country, but also what formulas need to be used, and in conjunction with what other means of expressing gratitude or regret.

Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that Japan is a "debt-sensitive culture" in which thanks can be expressed in apologetic terms that would seem very odd in most English-speaking communities. This observation is supported by Coulmas (1981), Kumatoritani (1988, 1994), and Miyake (1993, 1994), all of whom explain how people in debt-sensitive cultures formulate expressions of gratitude in apologies to relieve their indebtedness. While relevant contextual factors may be easily interpreted by second language learners, since they have been well exposed to real-life language situations, unexposed EFL learners will misinterpret contextual cues for exactly the same reason: experience is the main teacher of contexts. And one variety of misinterpretation will be negative transfer (e.g., Sumimase) which literally means "I'm sorry", can function as "thank you" or "I'm sorry" in Japanese).

3.5. Results
This data revealed that, although the subjects were free to write anything they wished in expressing gratitude (and there were occasional examples of
highly creative language), most subjects seemed to draw from a finite pool of conventionalized expressions and ideas in the USA contexts. However, the students were somewhat better at expressing gratitude than this theory alone would have predicted, considering the fact that they were in junior-high school. Following are typical answers:

(Situation 1)
Thank you.
(Situation 2)
Thank you. This sweater is very nice.
(Situation 3)
Thank you. I’ll return you the money tomorrow.

It seems reasonable that the subjects would find it difficult to express gratitude in English. Through the subjects were not asked to give the same responses both in English and Japanese versions. The following example shows that they seem to have tried to respond using semantically same expressions but they had difficulty composing English counterparts. The following examples leave out some significant words and phrases in English (underlined):

(Situation 2)
1. (Japanese version)
Sugoku kawaii. Arigatō.
Kōjūno hoshikattano.

(US version)
It’s very cute. Thank you.

2. (Japanese version)
Honntouni arigatō. Sugoku ureshii.
Niau?

(US version)
Thank you very much for a nice sweater.
I’m very glad.

3. (Japanese version)
Beri beri sannkyu.

(US version)
Thank you very much.
I’m very happy.

(Situation 3)
1. (Japanese version)
Oo. Arigatō.
Kondo Kanarazu oreiwasuuyo.

(US version)
Thank you. You are very kind.

2. (Japanese version)
Narubeku hayaku kaesune.

(US version)
? Thank you.

3. (Japanese version)
Warukattana.

(US version)
Oh!

They typically switched to easier phrases, and sometimes even used phrases that conveyed an inappropriate content. Otherwise, some of them also responded that they would prefer to use body language rather than English to convey difficult content. As greater emotion provoked longer speech acts, the subjects’ responses in the Japanese version in sections 2 and 3 were predictably longer than English version in each section. Furthermore, the expressions of thanks within the speech act did not appear in a special place. Direct expressions of their thanks were stated at the beginning, the middle, and the end of speech act set.

The data from the experiment in the US version of situation 3 indicates that 17% of the subjects made a negative transfer (using the expression “Sorry”), as subjects had made in my previous study (Sano, 1995). Within this negative transfer, half of the subjects attached the expression of their thanks as well:

(Japanese version)
Gomen-ne. Arigatō.

(US version)
Sorry, and thank you.

Attaching the two expressions was the students’ way of conveying delicate feelings. We know that even
the best students do not learn every rule they are exposed to. This tendency to attach expressions of regret to those of gratitude might be expected to cause misunderstanding on the part of Americans.

Most of the subjects could not change their attitude and language from Japanese to English using their culture-specific strategies. There were however occasional examples of highly creative speech act realization using culture-specific strategy, as follows:

(Section 1)
1. (Japanese version)
   Arigatō gozaimashita.
(US version)
   Thank you. Here is the money and your chip.

(Section 3)
1. (Japanese version)
   Goonnwa issho wasuremasen.
   Ashita mimiwosoroette kaesukara.
(US version)
   Oh, thank you very much. You are my best friend. I love you. Chu, chu.

Despite a slight (humorous) error (chip should be tip), the expression of gratitude in the US version of situation 1 above appeared to successfully express a social amenity. This kind of expression of gratitude is called a "bald thank-you" by Rubin (1983). Only two subjects properly employed this cultural strategy in this section.

One limitation of the present study may be its small sample size. This study combines data from the written questionnaires. It is also necessary to examine other kind of data sources: observation of naturally occurring events, oral production questionnaires, representing a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

3.6. Conclusion

The present study has shown that, whereas the hypothesis is supported by the results as a whole (74 students out of 78), it is remarkable that four students who had not been outside their own monolingual culture did succeed in switching from Japanese to English. Learning a culture-specific strategy or understanding the new ways of a foreign country is like looking into a shadowed mirror. Learning a foreign language enriches the learner's ideas of cultural diversity. To acquire another language successfully is to accept the foreign country's values as well as those of the learner's native country.
（Appendix 1）

日米状況会話
問題 次の1〜3の状況にあなたが居ると仮定して下さい。各状況は日本語と英語に分かれていますが、同じ内容です。ただし、日本語の場合は、あなたは日本に居ると考え、英語の場合は、アメリカに居ると考えて答えても下さいます。当てはまると思う答えの番号に○をつけて下さい。下線を引いてある単語は日本語訳が「注」の欄にありますので、参考にして下さい。

状況1
（日本で）駅前で、タクシーにのり、家の前につきまし た。タクシー運転手はあなたに料金をつげました。あなた は運転手に料金をわたしとき、どのようにいいますか？
1. 何も言わない。
2. 何か言う。（言うことを下に、日本語で書いて下さい。）

（アメリカで）One day you take a taxi from the nearest station to your house. The taxi driver tells you the price in front of your house. When you give the money to the driver, what would you say？
1. 何も言わない。
2. 何か言う。（言うことを下に、英語で書いて下さい。）

状況2
（日本で）あなたの誕生日に友達からプレゼントをもらいました。プレゼントは、とても素敵な黒色のセーターです。あなたはどのようにいいますか？
1. 何も言わない。
2. 何か言う。（言うことを下に、日本語で書いて下さい。）

（アメリカで）Your friend gives you a present on your birthday. The present is a really nice black sweater. What would you say？
（注）sweater セーター
1. 何も言わない。
2. 何か言う。（言うことを下に、英語で書いて下さい。）

状況3
（日本で）友達がレコード店に行くというので、一緒に 行きました。自分が前から欲しかったビデオが一本だけ その店に残っていました。別の客がそれを買いそうな雰 囲気があったが、自分はお金を持っていません。そこで 友達が代金の2万円を貸してくれました。
1. 何も言わない。
2. 何か言う。（言うことを下に、日本語で書いて下さい。）

（アメリカで）You go to a record shop with your friend. You find a video tape. You want it very much. Another person at the store wants to buy it. You have no money. But your friend lend you ¥20,000 for the video tape. What would you say？
（注）lend 貸す
1. 何も言わない。
2. 何か言う。（言うことを下に、英語で書いて下さい。）

（Appendix 2）
Acceptability Scale for Nonnative Responses

NU : No utterance（Those who have chosen「何も言わない」）
NA : Not acceptable（A violation of a social norm, a faux pas, a likely instance of sociopragmatic failure.）
PR : Problematic（An error that might cause misunderstanding, but of a less serious nature. Language so strange, unexpected, or garbled that interpretation is difficult. Instances of pragmalinguistic and/or sociopragmatic failure.）
AC : Acceptable（Clear and appropriate language, but containing small errors that do not interfere seriously with native speakers’ understanding.）
PE : Nativelike perfect（Close to native responses in content, syntax, and lexicon.）
RE : Resistant（Nonnative participants,}
although finding it possible to answer some items, refused to answer others, or gave reasons why they could not or would not answer particular items.

Summary of Results of All Subjects on Each Situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>NU</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>PR</th>
<th>AC</th>
<th>PE</th>
<th>RE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Japanese)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(English)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 (Japanese)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(English)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (Japanese)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(English)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The data in this paper have been reanalyzed, although the contents are basically the same.

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