

## **NATIVE AND FOREIGN COMMUNICATION STANDARDS IN COLLOQUIAL JAPANESE LANGUAGE.**

### **AN EXAMPLE OF JAPANESE-BRAZILIAN COMMUNICATION<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Abstract**

There is a distinct difference on the standards of Japanese communication between native and foreign speakers. This is considered a problem for foreigners who communicate in Japanese within the Japanese community. This study focuses on the case of Japanese-Brazilian's style of communication. The use of honorifics, final particle and back-channeling are some of the important functions concerned with Japanese standards of communication. Even though these three functions are used by foreigners with the same frequency as native speakers, it is determined that this use can create different impressions. Pitch and long intervals have an important element within the standard of communication. It was concluded that although the frequency of use of these three functions was consistent, the different use of pitch and interval length produced differing results. In Japanese education as a foreign language (JSL) there needs to be more focus on the importance of accent and pitch.

#### **Key words**

Standards, Japanese, favorable rating, pitch, Japanese-Brazilians.

## **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to clarify the communication problems that exist between Japanese-Brazilians who can speak the Japanese language and the native speakers in Japanese society. Furthermore, this study will clarify one of the potential causes of this

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<sup>1</sup> This study was supported by the Miyata grant for 2009.

conflict regarding Japanese standards of communication, whereby Japanese society has high expectations on correct language usage. There seems to be a strong attitude among native Japanese speakers on how communication in the Japanese language should be conducted. This may be the cause of communication problems experienced by foreign Japanese speakers and the resulting conflict. That is to say that the cause of the conflict is not from the foreigner's side alone, but also from the prevailing attitudes of Japanese society.

When I met with various Japanese-Brazilian people, some of them said that the Japanese people are sometimes unfriendly and at times difficult to establish close relationships with. On the other hand, Japanese people and other Asians living in Japan who listened to a sample of Japanese-Brazilian conversation thought that the Brazilian's way of speaking was rather sharp in tone, with a tendency to be self-assertive. Therefore, they did not get a good first impression of Japanese-Brazilians.

From 1990, Japan began to accept many foreign workers into the country. Japanese society is now experiencing more problems than ever before as a result of the increase in residents who speak a variety of different languages. In order to adapt to Japanese culture, newcomers need support in the form of Japanese language and culture education. Out of a total of 1.5 million Japanese-Brazilians, 320,000 people came to work in Japan (The Ministry of Justice, 2007).

In Brazil, there is a large Japanese-Brazilian society that has a 100 year history, excluding the war period of Japanese education. As most of these immigrants came from Western Japanese regions, their language is based on the Western Japanese dialect. We consider their Japanese language a Brazilian-Japanese dialect.

Most 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Japanese-Brazilians grew up with Japanese as their mother tongue. By the time they reached school age, they began to receive their formal education in Portuguese. Within Japanese-Brazilian families, Japanese would be the common language spoken within their homes and while children are of elementary school and secondary school age. On weekends, they would utilize free time to attend Japanese schools. Once they had stopped studying the Japanese language in their home environment

and either came to Japan or found a job with a Japanese company, they would again begin to attend Japanese school in order to learn how to utilize the Japanese language in their jobs.

The Japanese language used by Japanese-Brazilians is based on what they learned in their childhood. Therefore, characteristically their Japanese is very fluent and mature. Normally they use the informal style (da) rather than the formal style (desu, masu) of language. Sometimes, they have never studied Japanese as a foreign language, as the option to take a Japanese language course at school was not available. However, as the appearance of Japanese-Brazilians is very similar to that of Japanese people, it is probable that native Japanese speakers have a higher level of expectation for Japanese-Brazilian people, when compared with other Westerners who can speak the Japanese language.

Multilingual groups of foreign residents are on the increase in Japan and the role of Japanese language as the common language is becoming vital. The problem of communication conflict in Japanese is not only between Japanese-Brazilians and Japanese inhabitants, but also with other residents from other countries who also speak Japanese. We can analyze this problem of communication and how the foreign residents are accepted into the Japanese community.

## **2. Method**

For this study, we considered the language use of 15 participants. They were Japanese-Brazilian, second and third generation emigrants who resided mainly in the Tokai region on the Pacific Ocean side in Japan.

Using the participants' voice recordings, I asked respondents about their impression of a conversation between Japanese people and the Japanese-Brazilians. Those who provided their impressions were Japanese native speakers and foreigners (Koreans, Chinese and Thai who had the same level of proficiency, or higher, than the Japanese-Brazilians). Their average age was in the mid-thirties. Out of three males and ten females, eight of them

had social life experience and five were non-experienced graduate students.

The respondents only heard the participants' voices and did not observe anything while listening. Using a written questionnaire, I asked respondents to provide their impression of the conversations by rating them between 0 and 5 (0 being the poorest and 5 being the best impression). The average response I received was relatively good. However, if respondents did not answer with a 5, I asked them to write reasons as to why this was so (e.g. Lack of Japanese proficiency, whether the speaker was too friendly or not kind, lack of polite language, difficulty in understanding, etc.). After filling in the questionnaire, I followed up with more questions about the respondents' impressions of the interviews.

In these conversations, one participant spoke for an hour. I selected the first ten minutes and put this data into the BTSJ (Basic Transcription System for Japanese) (Usami, 2007). I completed a discourse analysis and with the results of this analysis, I got Cohen's Kappa standard for rating (Measures the agreement between analysis's results, in this case between two or three analyst's results, which also can be referred to as coefficient of confidence). If coefficient of confidence is more than  $k=0.7$ , it is reliable.

In the article, we analyzed first the final particle (ne, yo, etc.), secondly back-channeling (soo-ne, soo-ka, etc.), thirdly honorific expressions and finally function and speech level shift. So from the degree of favorable rating (0-5) of impression and article of discourse analysis, we can see the correlation between them and try to analyze what is demanded from them as Japanese speakers in Japan's society. In other words, this determines how difficult it is for them to communicate effectively in Japanese society when speaking Japanese.

The OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) tester, who earned an ACTFL (The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) qualification, measured the level of the first five participants' tapes. OPI is an interview test for measuring oral proficiency which was developed by ACTFL. For the ten remaining participants, the author measured the level referring to the first five tapes.

### **3. Previous Studies**

When considering the standards of language in Japanese society, the linguistic attitudes can be classified into five groups (Sugito, 1992: 130-134):

1. Evaluation and effective response
2. Perception about the present state of affairs
3. Intention consideration
4. Belief and expectation
5. Consideration of standards

These five elements may affect our judgment of how foreigners (in this case Japanese-Brazilians) speak in Japanese. For example, when belief and expectation and consideration of the standards of Japanese society are not understood, a poor impression could be formed. It is of the utmost importance that people speaking the Japanese language have an understanding of pragmatics and illocutionary acts.

The reason why non-native Japanese speakers are not so favorably rated was analyzed (Szatrowski, 2001: 7-21). Whilst a non-native Japanese speaker was listening in silence to another speaker, he did not nod or look directly at the person who was speaking. The non-native speakers relied on their own standards of language and demeanor from their own culture. The lack of expected response, when communicating with native Japanese speakers in Japan, can lead to misunderstandings and furthermore produce negative assumptions regarding the speaker's human qualities. In all verbal communication, back-channeling in Japanese plays an important role.

It is noted that a corresponding stereotype of voice and vocal features is determined when two or more respondents hear the same voice (Teshigawara, 2008: 60-65). It is important to analyze the relationship between this stereotype of the voice and the vocal features.

The influence of cultural standards on the high pitched voices of young Japanese

women is also reported (Imaida, 2005: 13-26). Japanese culture has a preference for such high pitched voices, as the women who speak in this manner are considered to be more indirect, modest, dependent and kind. Even when there are mistakes in words or grammar, many people don't feel unpleasant when the language used generally expresses consideration toward the other people involved in the conversations (Nomura, 2001: 15-25). Japanese people think that it is enjoyable or pleasant if a conversation partner speaks in a good, attentive way. The expressions used by a speaker are indications of the speaker's character and back ground.

The polite form of expressions in Japanese language has theoretically been discussed (Suzuki, 1998: 45-76). When the speaker is trying to express friendliness and is taking a polite attitude, he must continue to use a polite form. He cannot therefore begin to use normal or plain form when the utterance is towards the listener. It is also explained that the listener judges the speaker's state of mind and personality by the expectations, or illusions of the standards within Japanese society (Suzuki, 2007: 48-57).

#### **4. Results**

Of the fifteen Japanese-Brazilian participants, ten were working as staff in the international exchange section or the multi-cultural symbiosis room in the city office. The others had a wide variety of occupations, ranging from company employees and restaurant workers to homemakers. The staff who worked in the city office had roles as consultants about the payment of taxes, interpreters of information into Portuguese and Japanese and advisors on children's schooling, family health issues, etc. In effect, they had important roles in assisting foreign residents in Japan in the multinational resident cities. The average age of the participants was 38.3 years old. Among the 15 participants, ten were second generation Japanese-Brazilians and five were third generation. The nationality of 12 of the participants was Brazilian and three people had Japanese nationality.

A Colonia refers to a town that develops around a region where the first wave of

Japanese had settled. Therefore, in such Colonia, there is a network of people who are from the same prefecture. Japanese-language education has been actively and historically provided by Japanese language schools in a Colonia. The possibility of using Japanese language in daily life is high in a Colonia. Among the 15 participants, seven people had lived in a Colonia. However, eight people didn't have the Colonia experience and none of the third generation immigrants had had the Colonia experience. As the movement to cities occurred in the second generation, third generations Japanese-Brazilians have mostly lived in the city.

As for residency in Japan, there was an average stay of 12.6 years. The longest residency was 21 years and the shortest was four years. Attendance at Japanese language school was between two to 14 years. Three participants did not have any experience of learning Japanese at a language school.

Three participants were Japanese and the period they had spent in a Colonia was long, with an average of 17.6 years. Their first language was Japanese. Portuguese was the first language for 12 participants. The Japanese language levels of the participants were considered intermediate and advanced. However, these levels cannot be officially indicated because the participants were not interviewed in accordance with the OPI method or other standards.

Upon assessing the participants responses, there was an average favorable rating of 4 (with 5 being the highest score), which means that the participants more or less gave a good impression to the respondents. This favorable rating almost corresponded to the impression given by graduate students who joined in the interview, regardless of whether non-verbal elements are included or excluded. Although, the non-verbal element is thought to be what plays a major functional role in communications. The reasons why the favorable rating was not a five was due to lack of "Japanese proficiency", "non-use of honorifics" and "incomprehensible". These reasons are thought to be natural. Even though they got high favorable ratings, there were however comments that the participants were "over-familiar" or "too strong"

## 5. Analysis of Results

### 5.1. Classification of Groups

It is possible to classify the participants into three groups. A person who is classified in the first group is someone who has fewer problems communicating in Japanese society (from 4.5 points to 4.6 points of favorable rating out of 5). The second group is a group that can communicate grammatically and honorifically correctly (from 4 to 4.4). However, this group needs to improve on choice of words or vocabulary according to the circumstances. This second group won't have any serious problems in daily life. The third group needs to study daily expressions (from 3.4 to 3.9).

### 5.2. Reasons for Differences in Favorable Ratings

In reference to Table 1, among the 15 Japanese Brazilian participants, two women (hereafter known as A and B) were further assessed on their communication standards. It was determined that A had the highest favorable rating. Participant B got a rating of 3.8 which is classified as the third group. In contrast with A, B has lived much longer in Japan (A eight years and B 18 years). The length of Japanese study, back-channeling and honorifics all have a certain correlation with favorable ratings. The length of stay in Japan doesn't show any correlation with the use of Honorifics.

B stated her mother tongue was Japanese. Both A and B have had experience of living in a Colonia for more than 15 years. B studied Japanese language for 18 years which was much longer than A. The big difference between them was that A grew up in Parana where the traditional Japanese style of living remains much the same as in Japan unlike São Paulo where B was born. A should have had more exposure to the Japanese way of speaking compared to B.



	Age	Generation	Nationality	Birthplace	Colonia (years)	Living in Japan (years)	Japanese study (years)	Mother Tongue	Level of Japanese
A	30 's	2	Brazilian	Palana	17	8	4	Portuguese	Advanced
B	40 's	2	Brazilian	São Paulo	15	18	14	Japanese	Advanced

Table 1. Background of Japanese Brazilian participants, A and B (Yamashita, 2009: 133-143).

Assessing the total utterances of the 15 participants, the average utterance was 133 times in 10 minutes, with a correlation of -0.06 for favorable rating (good impression). Final particle was used on average 36 times with a correlation of 0.23. Back-channeling language (average 44 times) had a correlation of -0.4. Non-interrupted back-channeling (average 12 times) had a correlation of 0.24. The backchannel usage was from 70 times to 30 times. In the same period the favorable rating increased when it was between 40 times to 60 times.

Honorifics were used an average of 40 times with a correlation of 0.52. Normal language was used 20 times, on average, with a correlation of -0.45. Formal language was used on average 58 times with a correlation of 0.41 and Casual Language an average of 49 times with an average of -0.38. The reliability coefficient (Cohen's Kappa) value was 0.8.

The analysis of the results of Japanese discourse is shown in Table 2. Almost all the items were used more by B than A except 'final particle'. Why then is the rating of B so low? When we compare table 2 with table 3, there were five respondents who thought B was over familiar. It is mentioned that the ideal picture of a person in a community in Japan is diligent, sociable, good-tempered and modest (Muroyama, 2001: 196-225). This picture is of someone who comprehends the regard for harmony, group principle and the virtue of

modesty. There is a feeling that an impudent and assured manner shows lack of humility. Probably B tried to show far more friendliness than the respondents expected.

Secondly, three respondents pointed out that B had a problem with language ability and two people said B didn't use enough honorifics. However, B used far more honorifics and formal style compared with A. It is hard to believe B had a problem with honorifics. The important point here is that B gave the impression to the respondents that she didn't use honorifics although they were used by her many times.

	Total Utterance	Final Particle	Back-Channel	Honorifics	Normal	Formal	Casual
A	118	64	36	41	2	78	40
B	128	56	51	64	9	88	40

Table 2. Result of discourse analysis of Japanese-Brazilian participants, A and B.

(※ A and B are Japanese-Brazilian participants.)

	Favorable rating	Problem of Language Ability	Over Familiar	Not Kind	No Use of Honorifics	Difficult to Understand
A	4.6	0	1	1	0	0
B	3.8	3	5	0	2	0

Table 3. Favorable rating of A / B and Reasons of no high favorable rating.

(\* numbers mean numbers of respondents who commented.)

A part of politeness in Japanese requires understanding of where to be polite; you must show politeness with the correct sense of distance. Honorific expressions in Japanese indicate a rather negative politeness. Speaking in plain form on first meeting makes people feel the speaker is too familiar. Honorifics are difficult to use because they express a ritual form of politeness and not an emotional politeness or friendliness.

Respondents mentioned A used too many ‘maa’ (A filler like err, you know, well). As for B, some respondents commented that B stretched the use of final particles and also used many irrelevant words.

### *5.3. Pitch Accent and Favorable Rating*

Japanese-Brazilians have a tendency to use the final particle ‘ne’ as a way to communicate their friendliness. As this is like the abbreviation of ‘não e’ (isn’t it) in Brazilian Portuguese, which when abbreviated becomes ‘ne’; the usage of ‘ne’ by Brazilian-Japanese is more frequent than by any other foreign nationals (Yamashita, 2007: 139-142). The analysis of the use of the final particle ‘ne’ among Korean Japanese speakers is explained (Zen, 1994: 141-144). Zen determined that within a group of Korean students, their image of the students use of ‘ne’ had a light tone usage of 81%, a soft tone of 75%, a friendly tone of 77% and easy to listen to tone of 83%. It was furthermore determined that Japanese Brazilian speakers were also similar to the Korean speakers of Japanese when using ‘ne’.

It is noted that Japanese language is a language of pitch accent (Imaida, 2005:13-26). Japanese women speak at a higher pitch under the influence of socio-cultural factors. This is the influence of gender ideology. When they want to be feminine, a higher pitch is chosen. When using the final particle ‘ne’, women often tend to show an emotional request with pitch. Therefore, they can show their emotional side as softer and friendlier. The higher the pitch, the softer, kinder and more polite it becomes.

The tone of ‘ne’ is characterized with flat, rising, falling and rising and falling intonations (Todoroki, 1993: 7-12). Todoroki also says ‘ne’ basically means a request for consensus of opinion, confirmation and agreement about the information shared between the speaker and listener. When ‘ne’ is uttered with flat or rising intonation, it means information transmission, confirmation and desire for consensus of opinion. When spoken with falling or rising and falling intonation, it means emotional expression and desire for

consensus of opinion.

When referring to the graphs in Appendix A, the average intervals of A, when using 'ne', in figures one to four were always longer than B. In most of these cases, the pitch of A is regarded as higher than B. This higher pitch is considered to be an indication of politeness to the listener. The shortness of 'ne' by B is considered less acceptable when compared to A. Listeners understood that 'ne' of B was considered a demand for confirmation, insistence and certainty of decision. Contrary to B, A succeeded in expressing softness and friendliness with a higher use of pitch and long intervals of duration.

A and B both used rising and falling intonation for 'ne' as shown in Figure 1 in Appendix A. B used it 18 times. However it was shorter in length when compared to A. This maximum pitch variation of both A and B was between 240 and 250 hertz as shown in the graph, but the gap in hertz from minimum to maximum is greater with A. Therefore this large difference in hertz made A's 'ne' more soft.

In reference to Figure 5 in Appendix A, B was only considered better in Short Rising 'ne' when compared to A, as she had a longer interval duration and higher pitch. However, this form of 'ne' was not frequently used, with A only using it once and B twice.

In analyzing Figure 6 (Falling (Steep)) and Figure 7 (Flat) forms of 'ne' in Appendix A, it was only used by B. When speaking in falling intonation, it implies that the speaker's emotional expression is demanding a desire for consensus. Therefore B seemed to be more demanding than A in this respect. Concerning Figure 7(Flat), the duration interval it long, it provides a similar emotional expression to Figure 6 (Falling (Steep)).

## 6. Future considerations

As the current study began in spring of 2009, there were a number of issues that were not analyzed in depth within this report. The problem of interference with Portuguese with Japanese, usage of honorifics in detail and the class and variety of back-channeling will be analyzed in future studies. However, some standards of Japanese language in the Japanese

community were clarified by analyzing the discourse of Japanese-Brazilians.

## APPENDIX A

### Analysis of Pitch, Frequency and Intervals of 'ne'

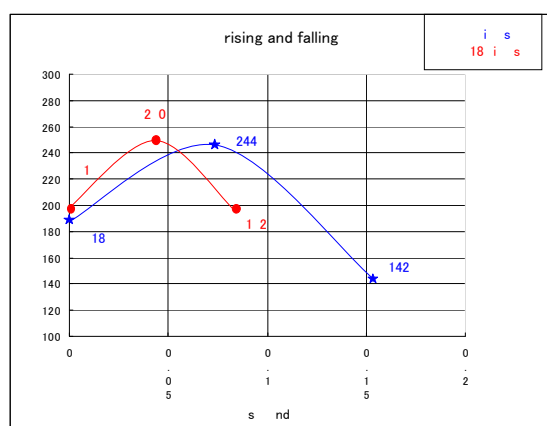


Figure 1 – Rising and Falling

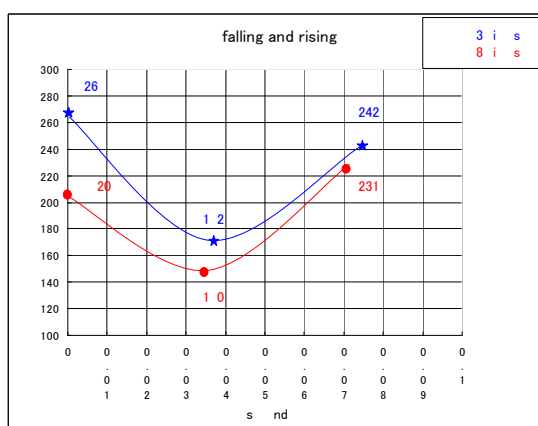


Figure 2 – Falling and Rising

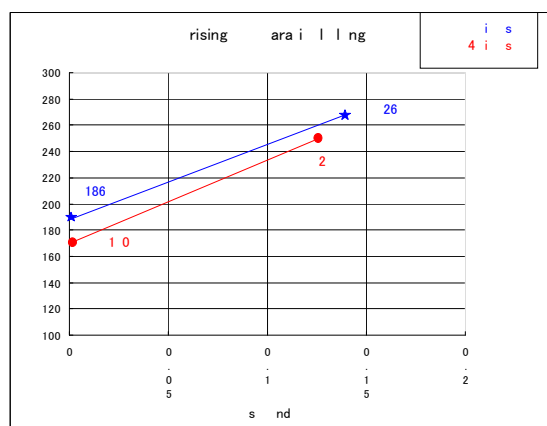


Figure 3 – Rising (Comparatively Long)

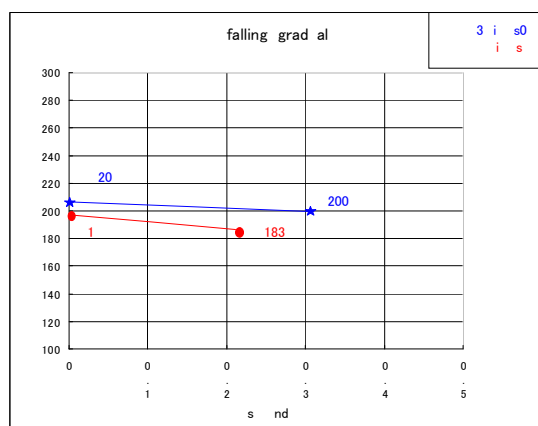


Figure 4 – Falling (Gradual)

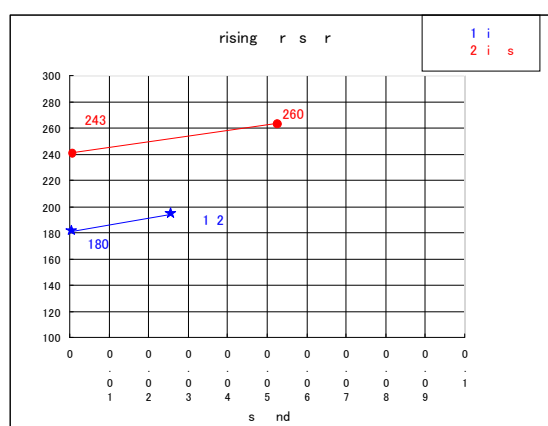


Figure 5 – Rising (Very Short)

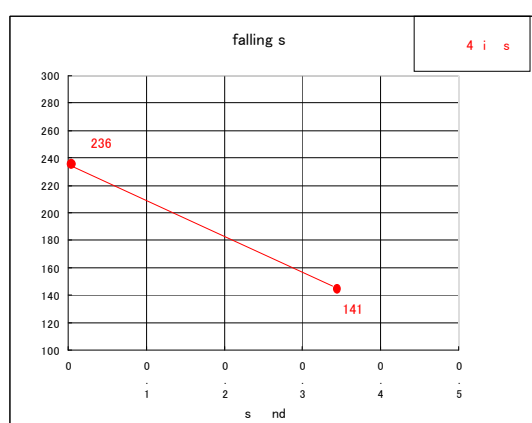


Figure 6 – Falling (Steep)

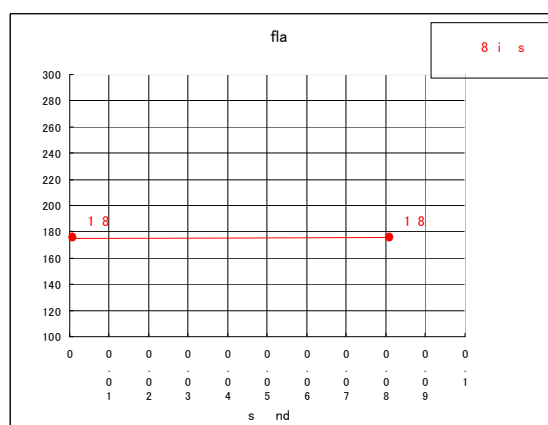


Figure 7 – Flat

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