

CORPORATE LANGUAGE POLICY CHANGE: THE
TRAJECTORY OF MANAGEMENT DISCOURSE IN
JAPAN, THE OPPRESSED OR THE OPPRESSOR?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the debates that have revolved around the global spread of English, Japan has been viewed from variety of angles. With the world's second largest gross domestic product, Japan is seen as one of the main actors in the world economy. Phillipson (1992: 319) viewed Japan as a rising new economic power whose language might influence the dominance of English language in the world business. However when it comes to its domestic use of English, Japan is apparently on the periphery. The English competence of the average Japanese has been said to be weak; for example, Japanese examinees' average TOEFL score is far below that of most Asian countries' (Tsuda, 2003: 220). Thus I am hesitant to assert that Japan is playing the part of the oppressed or the oppressor. It might be excessively ambitious to see the world consisting of only these two parties. Japan's role in its own history has been ambivalent as well. Colonial Japan attempted to implement a Japanese language policy in Korea and Taiwan, while Japan's education reform after World War II was heavily influenced by the American occupation army. It was the oppressor and the oppressed.

2. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS WITH AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

The complexity of Japan's position has been deepened since the need for Japanese corporate employees to use English dramatically increased after the socio-political changes in 1990s. Its ambivalent position prompted controversies on how to react to this increased use of English. Management researchers Yoshihara *et alii* (2001) proposed to implement "management by English" in Japanese organizations. On the other hand Tsuda (2003: 128), echoing Phillipson, warns against ideological and cultural colonization by the use of English as the only global language. Tsuda (2003: 169) also problematized the non-political attitude of traditional applied linguists who

generally adopt the psychological trend toward statistical analyses. He accused these applied linguists of taking the phenomena for granted without questioning the political nature of the global spread of English. This line of criticism is prevalent in Japan where qualitative approaches to linguistic issues are still in their early stages.

The declaration of alternative strands in applied linguistics, qualitative approaches (for example, Davis, 1995) showed a way to deal with the problem. The inclusion of social and cultural consideration and the use of associated ethnographic methods in qualitative researches are considered to be appropriate in documenting how language is associated by socio-political variables (Canagarajah, 1999: 47). However, some questions were posed regarding the quality of critical research with qualitative approaches. The main concern was about its validity; analysts may interpret data in one particular way by giving priority to their preferences (Widdowson, 1995: 68-69). For this issue, triangulation procedures are claimed to ensure validity. The notion of triangulations can be applied to various elements of research. Wodak's triangulatory approach takes various levels of contexts into account, from immediate language level, and inter-discursive level to as broad as socio-political and historical level (Meyer, 2001: 29-30). Hence, in order to investigate how English and underlying ideologies infiltrate the hearts of local business people, and how use of English affects their day-to-day activities, research with a micro-social perspective which is situated in a macro-historical context needs to be undertaken.

Davis & Henze (1998: 404) emphasized the use of multiple sources, methods, and investigators to achieve triangulation. The present research analyzes the data collected from different sources for the same information (the president, board directors, the human resource manager, and employees), and different methods (structured and unstructured interviews, e-mail exchanges, and participant observation) over an extended period (three years) of engagement in the field in order to increase the credibility of interpretation. In addition, my interpretation was developed by multiple member-checks in which the participants examined my initial analysis.

Finally my position is clarified later in this article in order to clarify my own assumptions to light. Although ethnographers are trained to be systematic in their observation and to examine recorded data before making claims, they are social subjects and are not completely free from their biases (Davis & Henze, 1998: 402). The overt recognition of my own position allows others to see the basis of my analysis, and it also allowed me to reflect on the baggage that I carried into the research site. I recognize a need to give special attention to the validity of my research both in the process and

product; therefore I made it clear that I took the above-mentioned procedures to enhance the quality of the research.

3. THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES: A HISTORICAL VIEW

It is essential, as discussed earlier, to situate the research site in the changing historical context and develop an interpretive framework that looks at the participants' linguistic and cultural practice as shaped by the dynamic realities. In this section I will describe the changing business environment in Japan.

In the last decade, in Japan, as in other countries, dramatic changes have taken place that have affected the way people interact, perform jobs, and see the world. In fact Japan was a less internationalized country in regard to its domestic business up to the middle of 1990s. Although the outward investment from Japan has been large the inward investment from foreign countries was only one-seventeenth of outward investment in 1990, and it continues to be small in the 2000s (Cabinet Office, 2001).

Political and economical factors have changed the Japanese government's protectionist attitude toward inward foreign investment. In 2001, Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi pledged that Japan will double foreign direct investment into stocks within five years in order to strengthen its tie with the U.S. Bush administration in response to the latter's request to reduce barriers to foreign direct investment. Global reorganizations in areas such as the automotive, telecommunication, and finance industries increased mergers and acquisitions of Japanese companies, which were weakened during the recession from the late 1990s, and by foreign investors (JETRO, 2001). Consequently, there have been many deregulations and revisions in commercial codes, accounting system, and labor laws (Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, 2002: 9-10). Such capital integration provided Japanese people with increased opportunities to work in linguistically and culturally more diversified environments.

4. CORPORATE LANGUAGE POLICIES, TURN TAKING, AND POWER

In this section, I will touch upon studies with micro-social perspective on two levels, inter-discursive and pragmatic/linguistic level. Furthermore, I will connect the two levels of studies with a notion of power structures.

When a cross-boarder merger or alliance is established, corporate language policies become an important issue for employees. Corporate language policy affects the identity of employees and, consequently, inter-discursive power relations. The research by Yoshihara *et alii* (2001) described Japanese feelings of inferiority because of their weak English

competence. Deeper analysis is available in an ethnographic case study of language policy in a cross-border merger of two banks (Vaara *et alii*, 2005). They concluded the choice of language could construct a sense of superiority and inferiority among native speakers and non-native speakers of the official language.

From the above studies we can assume that not only language but also the preferred values, discourse conventions, and knowledge associated with language affect the relation of the powered and disempowered. In order for many employees to conduct themselves in their lives in multi-national corporations, they are required to acquire a kind of global business literacy. Here I am using the word literacy as to identify the acquisition of a culturally situated set of social practices such as “saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing” (Gee, 1996: 127). Therefore, employees in companies whose official language is English need to be discursively literate; they are required not only to use correct English but also to act, value, and think adequately in the discourse (Wodak, 2001: 3). A few studies have shown that turn taking practices in meetings is part of business literacy.

In a study mentioned earlier, Vaara *et al.* examined the role of language in the construction of professional identity by showing the frustration of a Finnish participant who was forced to remain silent in situations where a professional would be required to participate actively. In my earlier study of airline alliance business meetings held by multi-national participants (Tanaka, 2002), the numbers of turns and back channeling behavior of the Japanese participants were found to be much smaller than those of Western participants. The Japanese participants’ silence in the meeting was negatively evaluated by their Western colleagues. I linked these differences to contextual factors including human resource development, educational policies, and decision-making systems. Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris (1996) studied British and Italian management meetings. They analyzed the turns taken in meetings and showed that both numbers and length were positively correlated with the hierarchical power of speakers.

As we see from the above studies, not only in U.S. settings, but also in most European settings, active participation in meetings is usually believed to represent professionalism. Corporate language policy change can decrease the frequency of turns taken by non-native speakers, and bring them to the periphery. Silence in the meeting was taken as incompetence, “absence of communication” (Scollon, 1985: 21), or even “distrust” (Carbaugh, 1988), and as Gee (1996: 46) argues, literacy in a certain discourse connects to power, to social identity, and to ideologies functioning as gatekeepers to the discourse community.

With these concepts from micro and macro social perspectives to frame my analysis, I will examine the data using critical ethnographic approach.

5. A CASE STUDY OF A JAPANESE SUBSIDIARY OF AN AMERICAN MULTINATIONAL CORPORATION

The analysis in this paper focuses on the effect of language policy on turn taking frequency and its power implication in a high-level management meeting of an agrochemical company in Tokyo.

I was hired as a consultant by the company to recommend changes in their corporate culture and enhance their intra-organizational communication. The American president and three expatriate senior managers realized they needed to transform their corporate culture. Particularly, the president was not satisfied with the lack of urgency and communicative abilities among not only the general employees but also the Japanese management team members. My position enabled me to collect critical data that relates to political situations inside the company but at the same time undoubtedly biased my interpretation.

Finally, due to the confidentiality agreement, all names of the participants are pseudonyms. Also I must make it clear that comments from company employees, including the president, are their personal thoughts and feelings and do not necessarily represent the organization's view.

5.1. *Explicit Exclusion*

Since the company was acquired by an American corporation, the operating committee meetings were held in English. All documents and presentation materials I reviewed were written in English.

The change of the official corporate language overtly excluded some people. When the official language changed, Machiko, an employee in the human resource section, saw the first effect of the language exclusion. Just after the merger, some executive directors from the acquired Japanese company disappeared: *Itsu no ma ni ka eigo wo shaberanai yakuin ga inaku nari mashita. Maa shikata ga nai koto desu kedo chotto shokku deshita* (“Executive directors who did not speak English left the company. It’s quite a straightforward effect [of the policy change], but I was a little shocked”).

Such language policy changes in Japan are not as common as in other countries where English is spread as the lingua franca for domestic economic exchange. For Machiko it was counter-intuitive to see several executive directors leave the company in spite of the fact that they loyally served the company for a long time. It is quite recently that people have come to realize that life-time employment, a previously held Japanese employment

convention, is no more a reality. Business relations between companies in Japan are relatively long and stable. Wakabayashi described the traditional *unspoken contract* between Japanese companies and employees: namely, the company provided jobs, incentives, training, wage increases, promotion, and job security, while workers demonstrated loyalty by committing to the firm's production goals and staying with the firm, disregarding alternative employment opportunities elsewhere.

When the owner of the company changed, not only was there an explicit change in their language policy, but also the American notion of company-employee relationship was implicitly brought in. What shocked Machiko was the changed relationship between the company and directors, which must have influenced her identity as an employee.

5.2. *Implicit Effects*

The prolonged engagement with the research site enabled me to notice that the language policy affected a local director's identity which resulted in implicit exclusion. In the early stage of the consultation, I asked the management team to analyze the current corporate culture and identify some problems that needed to be dealt with. The objective was to have management team members share the needs in promoting intra-organizational communication. However, throughout the meeting, most Japanese directors were quiet. As a result, Dale, the president, and Jeff, the executive director of marketing, dominated the meeting as evidenced by the number of turns shown in the following table.

TABLE 1. *Number of Turns Taken in a Director Meeting of F-Chemical*

Participant	Cultural Background	Total Turns
Dale	USA	16
Jeff	France	8
Mark	USA	3
Nobuhiro	Japan	3
Jeri	USA	0
Mitsuyuki	Japan	2
Kenji	Japan	1
Junichi	Japan	4
Rinten	Japan	1
Ken	Japan	0
Shinya	Japan	0
Total		38

In the interview after the meeting, Dale expressed dissatisfaction with the competence of the Japanese directors: “They don’t see problems. That’s the problem”. According to Dale, the limited participation of the Japanese directors indicated their lack of professionalism.

One Japanese director, Ken, identified a client service problem and wanted to have it discussed in the meeting. Nevertheless, he failed to raise the issue in the meeting. In his interview, Ken said he tried to raise the issue about which he had repeatedly heard complaints from his clients. The problem was the inaccessibility of the client service call center. Many of his clients told him that when they called, the line was always busy, and even when an employee answered the phone, the employee often failed to give the caller adequate information. He talked about his concern about this problem: *Kono mondai wa juyou dato omoi masu. Dokoka ni madoguchi wo mouke te uketsuke joukyhou chousa wo okonatte kentou kaizen shiteiku purosesu ga hituyou nano dewa nai ka to omoi masu* (“This is a critical issue. We need to set up a section that collects more information, analyzes the problem, and plans a process of improvement”).

When I asked why Ken did not speak up and raise this inaccessibility issue, his reply by e-mail stated that he was tired of communicating in English: *Yahari eigo ga umaku nai kara tsutaeru koto ga okkuu ni natte shimai. Jissai no tokoro shikkari tsutawara nai koto mo aru to omoi masu* (“Since my English is not good, I am tired of trying to convey my English message. Actually I often fail to convey my message”). He emphasized that he had actually tried in several previous meetings: *Gaijin-san ni hanashita no desu ga. Kaigi de hanasare te inai kara toiu koto deshita. Iwayuru hitori goto ni natte simatte ita nodewa nai de shou ka. Jissai iroiro na bamen de kono ken hanashi te imasu ga kekkyoku toriage rare nakatta* (“I did talk about [this problem] with foreign-expatriates. But [their response was that] the issue had not been taken up in any of the previous meetings. Maybe I ended up just talking to myself. As a matter of fact, I talked about this issue on various occasions but nobody has taken it up”).

According to Ken, he did raise this issue in a meeting that Tetsu, the human resource manager, happened to attend. But Tetsu did not remember that Ken clearly raised this issue: *Ken-san wa ichi nido nani ka iita souna yousu ga ari, tonari ni suwatte ita gaikokujin yakuin ni sore wo iu you ni unagasareru bamen mo ari mashita ga, kekkyoku hitokoto chiisana koe de itta dake deshita* (“One instance, Ken looked like he wanted to say something. The expatriate executive director sitting next to him encouraged Ken to speak out. Finally, he mumbled a short talk. That was all”).

Tetsu asked whether Ken actually talked about this issue in the meeting. According to Tetsu, Ken was surprised that Tetsu did not notice that Ken

spoke up: *Ken-san no kotae wa "Yette masu yo! Zentai kaigi demo. Tetsu san mo oboete imasu desho" de shita. Watashi wa doumo oboete imasen.*" ("Ken's response was 'I tried to have this taken up in the meeting! I am sure you remember [that I tried]' [But] I don't remember").

Ken's effort to have the matter taken up at the meeting was interpreted differently by foreign expatriates, and even by Tetsu. Ken did a lot of pre-negotiation with Jeff (the executive director Ken reported to) in order to have the problem discussed in the meeting. Ken expected Jeff, his boss, to bring this problem up in the meeting. He believed that the higher-position person in the same department should initiate discussion after a consensus is made in the department. According to Ken, this was how the decision was made in the Japanese organization that had previously run the company. This type of decision making based on consensus building has been discussed by many researchers (for example, Hasegawa, 1986: 23 and Kopp, 1999: 120). Ken spent a lot of time before the meeting trying to build a consensus with his boss, Jeff, and expected Jeff to raise the issue as a leader of his team. But Jeff did not understand the meaning of Ken's consensus building efforts. When I explained Ken's intention, Jeff replied: "If he (Ken) thinks that's really a problem, why didn't he talk about that in the meeting?" But for Ken hierarchy was fundamental; he did not speak up because: *Onaji maake no ningen nano ni joshi wo sashioite iidasu wake niwa ikanai de sho* ("We are in the same marketing team. I cannot initiate discussion before my boss talks about the problem").

Ken thought Jeff would lose face if this problem were brought into the discussion by a subordinate. It might look like the problem was not shared in the same marketing team.

Ken might have behaved differently if the meeting had been held in his native language or if his command of English had been better. From the data, I argue that Ken's inactive participation was not a mono-causal phenomenon. Multiple factors, including Ken's concerns for saving Jeff's face, the effects of past decision-making practice, and his language ability, made Ken behave in a way which Dale negatively valued. It should be emphasized that not only the language but also the ideologies embedded in language influenced the supervisor's evaluation of Ken's professional competence.

This case shows how language choice influenced the number of turns taken in the meeting, and ultimately how turn-taking frequency affected the image of superiority and inferiority. This case indicates that setting English as the official corporate language reinforced Anglo-American cultural dominance and influenced the construction of professional competence. We can see that power relationships are frequently hidden (Meyer, 2001: 15). Before this research was completed, Ken quit. Though there was no clear

explanation of the reason why Ken left the company, this end result implies that the new language policy affected his identity as the key person of the company.

6. CONCLUSION

Analysis of the data indicated that the native speakers' command of English as cultural capital influenced the power relations. The case of Ken illustrates that the strongest kind of cultural capital in English-speaking business settings is the speakers' command of English. Analysis of turn-taking patterns showed that the expatriates' abilities to make strong arguments, to choose and use the most effective words, and to speak fast to convey more information in a limited time helped them dominate the discussion. Although past research of business meetings showed that turn-taking dynamics were indicators of power, the data of the present study also suggested a bi-directional two-way relationship of power and frequency of the turn. The data indicated that the number of turns taken in the meeting can affect the speaker's position, or power, both positively and negatively.

With the accelerated expansion of English as the global business language, it is expected that non-native English speakers are outnumbering native speakers. Research on business discourse will have to pay more serious attention to English use on job sites and its effects on power relations between native speakers and non-native speakers, and expatriates and local participants. Further investigation in other industries in Japan or other Asian countries will contribute to our understanding in this area of inquiry.

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