

Note

Comparing Japanese and English Dialogues in *My Neighbor Totoro*

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Abstract

In this paper, Japanese and English dialogues used in the Japanese movie, *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) are compared by quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method looks at the number of turns spoken by main characters in the movie. The qualitative method considers *moves*, which consist of *initiation*, *response*, and *feedback* (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) to see the discourse patterns of the dialogue. The results of both methods show that there are significant differences between the Japanese and English dialogues. This paper discusses the reasons of these differences considering cultural and linguistic features.

1. Introduction

Recently, Japanese movies, *anime*, and *manga* have become popular in many parts of the world, and through these popular cultural media, interest in Japanese culture as a whole has increased. However, how are these Japanese movies and *anime* translated out of Japanese? And to what extent are Japanese culture and language appropriately understood when non-Japanese is the language medium? This paper looks at the case of Japanese and English, by investigating the Japanese and English dialogues used in the same scene in the movie, *My Neighbor Totoro*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki and produced by Studio Ghibli in 1988. One reason why this movie was chosen is that this movie has been remained popular among all ages in Japan for more than 20 years and depicts a traditional and somewhat old-fashioned Japanese life style. Another reason is that I personally got totally different impressions

when I saw this movie in Japanese and English. Whereas the Japanese version evoked a sense of the peacefulness of rural Japan, the English version seemed more active and energetic, and some characters were described in different ways.

According to Jacobson's communication model (1973) shown below (Figure 1), when an *addresser* sends a *message* to an *addressee*, a *contact* and a *context* and a *code* are involved in the process. The *addresser* here refers to *My Neighbor Totoro*, the *addressee* refers to the viewer, and the *message* includes both moving images and dialogues. The *code* is the Japanese language for people who watch the movie in Japanese, and the English language for people watching in English. The *context* here is

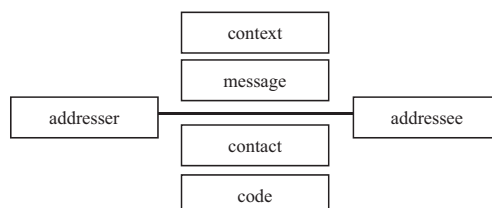


Figure 1 Jacobson's communication model (1973)

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Japanese because this movie's setting is in Japan. My assumption here is that depending upon the understanding of the *context* and the form of the *code*, the *addressee's* experience of the *message* will be different.

Conversation Analysis is "a branch of study which sets out to discover what order there might be in this apparent chaos and tries to describe how people take turns, and under what circumstances they overlap turns or pauses between them" (Cook, 1989: p. 52). Allwright (1980) used a quantitative method in order to see patterns of participation and simply counted the number of turns in terms of two different analytical categories, namely *turn-getting analysis* and *turn-giving analysis*. Although these two methods of analysis would give a descriptive statement of participation patterns, it is still difficult to explain how this happens as Allwright himself acknowledged.

Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) considered three-part exchanges as an organizational unit. They pioneered the structure of classroom interaction by using a rank scale for the descriptive model. It is a hierarchical system, which consists of *lesson*, *transaction*, *exchange*, *move* and *act* (see the whole rank scale presented in Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992: 6–8). Each *move* consists of *initiation*, *response* and *feedback* [IRF]. They proposed typical interaction patterns in the classroom. Normally, the teacher does *initiation*, the student does *response*, and then the teacher gives *feedback*. However, they also claimed that if the exchange, or *move*, is defined as the minimal unit of interaction, then [IRF] is a primary structure which can be applied to general interactive discourse (Sinclair, 1980).

Francis and Hunston (1992) proposed that the original Sinclair-Coulthard model should be revised in order to analyze a wide variety of everyday conversations. Their proposal considered that the original [IRF] *move* was too rigid and needed to be adapted to incorporate other exchanges. Developing that idea, Coulthard and Montgomery (1981) proposed a revised model allowing for a wider variety of exchanges. The various possibilities can be expressed as I(R/D)R(Fⁿ).

2. Method

Firstly, the number of each character's turns was counted to see how many times they spoke, and then all the numbers were compared in order to see any differences between the Japanese and English dialogues.

The first scene, depicting the Kusakabe family (Satsuki, Mei and their father) moving to the countryside is used for the analysis. Satsuki is a 6th-grade elementary school student and Mei is her four-year-old sister. Their father works for a university and sometimes does his work at home. They have moved to the countryside for their mother's health meanwhile she is sick and staying in hospital. At the beginning of the movie, on the way to their new house, the Kusakabe family sees a man who rides on a bicycle (Man), and greets a neighbor (Kanta and his father).

The dialogues from this scene in Japanese and English are transcribed for analysis (see Appendix). The numbers in the left column of both Japanese and English dialogues refer to the total numbers of turns by all characters. Every speaker change is counted as one turn. By counting the total number of turns for each

character, we can see which dialogue contains more frequent turns. However, this quantitative measuring reveals nothing about the function of each turn. Therefore, Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) original model with later developments by Francis and Hunston (1992) is additionally used in order to analyze the discourse patterns in more detail. The right columns of both dialogues refer to *move-initiation* (I), *response* (R) or *feedback* (F). Although non-verbal gestures such as waving a hand and pointing to a person are not counted as turns, they are counted as *moves*, these non-verbal movements are described like ((waves his hand)) or ((points to his father)) to help understand the scene of the movie.

3. Results

As is shown in Figure 2, while the English dialogue has 18 turns, the Japanese dialogue has 10 turns. So the English has almost twice as many turns as the Japanese. All of the characters except Kanta's father had more turns in the English set. The most specific difference is that Man and Kanta's turns are added even though there are no turns in the original Japanese version. When Satsuki and Mei saw Man riding on a bicycle, and said "Hi! (English turn 8, see Appendix)", he just waved his hand without say-

ing anything in the Japanese dialogue, however, in the English dialogue he responded "Hi! Hello there! (English turn 9, see Appendix)". In the case of Kanta, he didn't say anything in the Japanese version, however, two utterances were added in English.

Figure 3 shows the number of IRF, IR and (IR) patterns dialogues. While there was only one IRF pattern in the Japanese version, there were five IRF patterns in the English version. Obviously the Japanese version had more IR patterns (seven) than the English version (four). Additionally, IR patterns in the Japanese version include three (IR) patterns, i.e. IR without any utterances, and this pattern is a Japanese feature that doesn't appear in the English version at all.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Analysis of this short scene reveals that there are significant differences in the Japanese

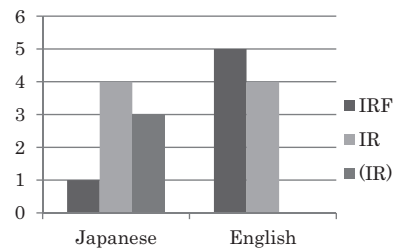


Figure 3 IRF, IR & (IR)

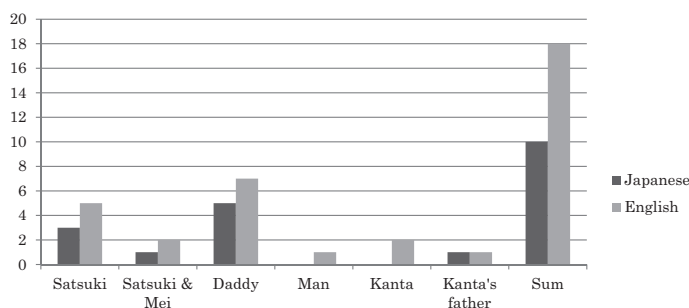


Figure 2 The number of turns of each character

and English versions. What accounts for these differences? An explanation may be found by discussing cultural and linguistic differences.

Considering cultural differences, according to Hall (1976), “A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in 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” (p. 79). He points out that western culture (such as German and other North European cultures) is rather LC, while Asian culture (such as Japanese, Chinese and Arabian cultures) is HC. As shown in Figure 4 (cited from Charles, 2000: p. 56), Japanese culture is said to be a high context culture while English and American cultures are rather low context.

That is to say, the Japanese tendency is not to state everything explicitly but rather to show emotions and intentions by expressions and movements, relying on a tacit understanding to

convey full meaning. However, English speaking cultures prefer clearer messages. So the English version contains more utterances and turns than the Japanese version. Although we experience the same movie visually, depending upon the language that is applied, our understanding of the characters and impression of human interrelationships will be different. For example, when we see *My Neighbor Totoro* in English, Satsuki seemed a more active and noisier girl than in the Japanese version. And in Kanta’s case, Kanta didn’t utter a word in the first scene in the Japanese version, however, in English, he spoke very naturally to a stranger (Satsuki’s father), clearly giving us a different image of him.

Regarding linguistic differences, one such difference is seen in the exchange between Satsuki’s father and Kanta. In Japanese, honorific language (*keigo*) is the linguistic device used to show politeness and respect (Jenkins and Hinds, 1987). Included within *keigo* are *sonkeigo* (respectful language), *kenjogo* (humble language), and *teineigo* (polite language). When Satsuki’s father talks to Kanta, he uses respectful language even though Kanta is just a boy. From this we can infer that Satsuki’s father is a very gentle and polite person. In English, this sense has to be conveyed by adding a phrase, “Sorry to bother you, ... (see turn 12 in Appendix), which doesn’t appear in Japanese. Another difference can be seen when Kanta gestures towards his father. In the high context culture of Japan, even though Kanta doesn’t say anything but only points to his father, we can understand that he is shy in the presence of these new people. We can see from his attitude that he is actually very conscious of Satsuki, who

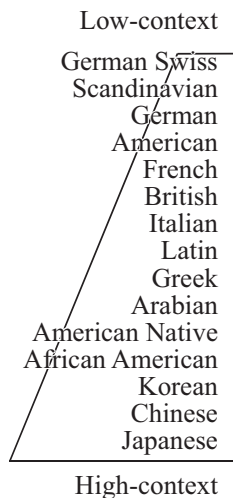


Figure 4 High-, low-context cultures
(Charles, 2000: p. 56)

looks to be about the same age as him, however, he doesn't want it to be discovered that he is interested in Satsuki. In the different context of English, Kanta's attitude might cause misunderstanding and be thought rude because even though the adult addressing him uses polite language, he doesn't speak at all. It might be said that in order to avoid this misunderstanding or to make the conversation more natural, Kanta's utterances have been added intentionally. The same care might have been taken in the exchange between Man and Satsuki. When Satsuki says "Hi!" to Man, in Japanese he doesn't say anything only waving his hand, but in English again words are added.

One good effect of the use of more turns and words in the English version is that the risk of misunderstanding is lowered for those who are not familiar with Japanese high context culture. By contrast, a bad effect of adding more language is that it changes the relaxed rural atmosphere that the movie is trying to create.

In this study, the analysis has been limited to one short scene, however, if the whole movie were to be investigated, more interesting features and differences might be discovered. Furthermore, were more recent movies analyzed, a different set of results might be obtained since it is

certain that Japanese culture has become more widely spread and appropriately understood in the last 20 years.

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Appendix

Japanese Dialogue			English Dialogue				
turn	character	utterances	Move	turn	character	utterances	Move
1.	Satsuki :	お父さん キャラメル	I	1.	Satsuki :	Daddy, want any caramel candy?	I
2.	Daddy :	おっ ありがとう	R	2.	Daddy :	Thank you very much. I would.	R
		くたびれたかい?	I	3.	Satsuki :	Welcome.	F
3.	Satsuki :	ううん	R	4.	Daddy :	Anybody tired yet?	I
4.	Daddy :	<u>もうじきだよ</u>	F	5.	Satsuki :	Mm-mmm.	R
5.	Satsuki :	あっ! メイ 隠れて!	I	6.	Daddy :	<u>We're almost there.</u>	F/I
		お巡りさんじゃなかった	R	7.	Satsuki :	Good.	R
		おーい!	I	8.	Satsuki :	Ohh! Mai, hide.	I
		((Man: waves his hand))	(R)			I thought he was a policeman.	R
		((Sounds of the truck moving the bumpy road))	I			Hi!	I
6.	M&S :	アハハハ...	R	9.	Man :	Hi! Hello there!	R
7.	Daddy :	<u>おうちの方はどなたか</u>	I	10.	M & S :	Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha!	F
		<u>いらっしゃいませんか?</u>	(R)			((Sounds of the truck moving the bumpy road))	I
		((Kanta: points his father))	(R)	11.	M & S :	Whoa! Ha ha ha!	R
8.	Daddy :	あっ どうも <u>草壁です</u>	I	12.	Daddy :	<u>Sorry to bother you, but are your</u>	I
		<u>引越してきましたあ!</u>				parents around anywhere?	
		<u>よろしくお願ひしまーす</u>		13.	Kanta :	<u>They're out there in the field.</u>	R
9.	Kanta's daddy :	<u>ご苦労様です</u>	R	14.	Daddy :	<u>Thanks a lot.</u>	F
		((Kanta: ducks his head))	(I)			Hello! There!	I
10.	Daddy :	どうも ありがとう	R			<u>Looks like we're going to be neighbors!</u>	
				15.	Kanta's daddy :	<u>Pleasure to meet you.</u>	R
						<u>Good luck in the new house!</u>	
				16.	Daddy :	<u>Thank you! See you soon!</u>	F
				17.	Kanta :	Oh!	I
				18.	Daddy :	Thank you very much.	R

The numbers in the left columns in Japanese and English refer to the number of turns. (()) means description of non-verbal movements. Highlighted utterances are the dialogues added only in English. Underlined phrases are differently translated in Japanese and English.