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A Comparison of the Communication Behaviors of Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese Business Professionals in Intracultural and Intercultural Decision-Making Meetings

Bertha Du-Babcock[1] and Hiromasa Tanaka[2]

Abstract

Past research in intercultural business communication has laid a partial foundation for explaining Asian business communication. Asians are classified as high-context communicators and speak English in intercultural communication. Nevertheless, the relationship of language and culture on communication behaviors has remained unclear. To address

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this gap in the research, this study compares the communication behaviors of business professionals from two prominent Asian cultures—Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese—when these professionals participate in intercultural and intracultural decision-making meetings. The study reveals some differences in communication behaviors between the two cultural groups in both the intracultural and the intercultural meetings. Although both groups generally reflected their high-context communication orientations, they exhibited some deviations from the general discourse patterns, especially in the ways in which they expressed disagreements.

Keywords

turn-taking behavior, first-language and second-language communication, Asian business communication, intracultural meeting, intercultural business communication

Research and theory building are needed to provide an updated, more complete, and accurate description of Asian business communication. Prior theory and research, although limited, has confirmed that Asians (including Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese) use a high-context communication (HCC) style (see Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990; Ting-Toomey, 2005, 2008) that reflects their collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 1991, 2001; Triandis, 2010). But this scholarship does not distinguish between the particular features of different Asian cultures, instead lumping them together in the collectivistic category. It has, however, established that the language use of interactants affects their communication. In the present environment of global communication, Asians communicate in their native languages as well as in a second language (usually English because it is the world's business language).

To address this deficiency in research and theory in Asian business communication, we conducted a field study of Asian business communication relating to two prominent Asian cultures; specifically, we compared the business communication behavior of Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese professionals. We address how Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese professionals who come from the same general cultural background (intracultural groups) and those who come from similar cultural backgrounds (intercultural groups) communicate in different situational contexts. As such, we seek to identify the relationship between culture

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and language use in specific situational contexts in which the participants are all from HCC cultures, but their cultures are not identical. In these contexts, the Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese make decisions using their first and second languages. To contrast this first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) communication, we identified five contexts representing intracultural and intercultural communication in small-group meetings—namely, Japanese speaking in Japanese (intracultural), Japanese speaking in English (intracultural), Hong Kong Chinese speaking in Cantonese (intracultural), Hong Kong Chinese speaking in English (intracultural), and Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese speaking in English (intercultural). We included intracultural English meetings to our list of contexts to allow a more complete comparison of L1 and L2 communication.

Our purpose for this study is twofold. First, we wanted to examine the role of context in communication by different cultures that are usually treated as similar because they are considered HCC cultures. Knowing whether differences exist in communication styles between different collectivist, HCC cultures is the first step to ascertaining whether individuals from HCC cultures (Japan and Hong Kong) communicate similarly or differently. Second, we wanted to discern whether Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese business professionals communicate differently in their first and second languages, both intraculturally and interculturally.

Review of Literature

Before we investigated the effect of culture and language use on the communication behavior of Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese business professionals, we reviewed literature relating to the dual influences of culture and language on communication behavior. Specifically, we reviewed (a) the theory and research on high-context versus low-context communication and the related topic of individualism versus collectivism and (b) empirical studies on L1 and L2 communication of Asian communicators.

Concepts of High-Context Versus Low-Context Communication and Individualism Versus Collectivism

Past research has been premised on the theory that people from collectivist cultures use a HCC style whereas people from individualist cultures use a low-context communication style (Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Trompenaars, 1993). Such research has considered

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high-context and low-context communication styles (Hall, 1976) as being on opposite ends of a continuum rather than existing somewhere within their respective sides of it. Hall's distinction between high-context and low-context communication has been empirically confirmed. Studies by Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, and Heyman (1996) and Ting-Toomey (2005, 2008) are the two most significant large-scale empirical research studies that confirm this high-context to low-context distinction. Ting-Toomey (2008) elaborated that low-context culture refers to communication patterns in a direct verbal mode and sender-oriented values, in which the sender assumes the responsibility of imparting the meaning of the message. In contrast, HCC refers to communication patterns in an indirect verbal mode and interpreter-sensitive values, in which the receiver or interpreter of the message assumes the responsibility of inferring the hidden or contextual meanings of the message. In HCC, the receiver of the message is expected to read between the lines, to infer accurately the implicit intent of the verbal message, and to decode the nonverbal subtleties. These studies describe the communication within high-context societies but not between them.

Individualism–Collectivism (IC) is a theoretical dimension of a cultural construct that has been used to predict a variety of behavioral styles of communication, such as low-context and HCC styles (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Oetzel, 1995, 1998; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, & Rinderle, 2006) and conflict styles (Ting-Toomey, 1988). This line of research has concluded that culture affects communication behaviors. For instance, Gudykunst et al. showed that IC has a direct influence on behavior and that individualistic and collectivistic tendencies influence how individuals perceive themselves, which in turn influences their communication behavior, or styles.

Adopting the IC theoretical construct, studies on turn taking (e.g., Aritz & Walker, 2010; Iwata, 2010; Ng, Loong, He, Liu, & Weatherall, 2000; Stivers et al., 2009) have found that turn-taking behaviors appear to be influenced by cultures. Studies by Yamada (1990) and Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) suggest that the pattern of turn-taking distribution can be linked to cultural differences. These research studies conclude that individuals from collectivistic cultures stress group sharing and harmony rather than individual gains, which is the preference of individualistic cultures.

Replicating Oetzel's (1998) study, I examined the turn-taking behavior of Asian and U.S. business school students participating in decision-making meetings in monocultural and multicultural groups (Du-Babcock, 2003, 2005). I found that the communication behaviors that Chinese bilinguals exhibited when participating in a monocultural Chinese group were different from those they exhibited when participating in a multicultural group. But

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whether the different patterns and frequencies of turn taking are sufficiently explained by differences in collectivistic and individualistic tendencies is still under debate (Oetzel, 1998). Recent studies present counterevidence to past research that relies on IC for interpretation and suggest alternative factors that may account for variations in communication behavior. Bargiela-Chiappini and Tanaka (2011) found unequal turn distribution in an intracultural business meeting in which participants spoke in Japanese. The turn-taking frequency of the managers was higher than that of the employees when the discussion focused on management issues whereas the turn-taking frequency for employees and managers was equivalent when the discussion concerned those employees' responsibilities. The researchers explained that this unequal distribution of turns arises from the participants' concern for relationship maintenance. In another study, Tanaka (2006a), using critical discourse analysis, examined the power relations between Japanese and French in intercultural meetings. The results showed that the number of turns taken in the meeting can be affected by the speaker's position or power. These findings are consistent with data from the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus meeting that suggest that the power relationship between speakers, not cultures, is the most relevant factor in accounting for unequal turn distribution (Handford, 2010).

In addition to speakers' power relationship, their proficiency in using the language of the local linguistic environment may influence their turn-taking behavior. Studies by Tanaka (2006b) and Rogerson-Revell (2008) confirmed Yamada's (1990) research findings that nonnative English-speaking business professionals (i.e., Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese) took less speaking turns than did their Western counterparts. These findings were echoed in my previous studies (Du-Babcock, 2003, 2005) of the relationship between linguistic proficiency and turn-taking behaviors. Taken together, these studies suggest that Chinese and Japanese take fewer speaking turns due to their lower English-language proficiency than do their American and Western European counterparts. The linguistic proficiency difference, then, can create a communication breakdown as well as a power divergence between fluent speakers and less fluent speakers.

L1 and L2 Communication

Research examining the impact of language use on communication behaviors has focused on English intercultural communication in which Asians were speaking in their second language. In these studies, researchers have found that native and nonnative English speakers exhibited different communication

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behaviors in intercultural meetings. Yamada (1990) studied the distribution of turn-taking behaviors and found that the Japanese business professionals were less active than were their Western counterparts. Bilbow (1996) and Rogerson-Revell (1999) investigated the meeting interaction between native English-speaking expatriates and local Cantonese-speaking Chinese in large multinational corporations. These two intercultural communication studies concluded that (a) Chinese are not as verbally active as Westerners in English intercultural meetings, and (b) culture can be a determining factor affecting the participation rate of Hong Kong Chinese bilinguals. In previous studies (Du-Babcock, 2003, 2005), I compared the turn-taking behaviors of Asians and Westerners in intracultural and intercultural English meetings. The results showed that participants from Asian cultures (a) spoke less and took fewer turns than did those from Western cultures and (b) took more turns and spoke for a longer time in intracultural than in intercultural decision-making meetings.

Earlier I conducted the only empirical research that directly compares L1 and L2 communication (Du-Babcock, 1999, 2006). Specifically, I compared the L1 (Cantonese) and L2 (English) communication of bilingual Hong Kong Chinese. In these empirical studies, I drew on the notion that the language that communicators use can influence and change message content and communication behavior. With regard to turn-taking behavior, my findings indicated that (a) the average number of turns in Cantonese meetings was higher than those in English meetings and (b) there was a moderate relationship between high L2 proficiency and the amount of English used during meetings. The findings provide explanations for the ways in which individuals interact differently when they use their first language from when they use their second language to make decisions in intracultural small-group meetings.

Based on the literature reviewed, we developed the following research questions to explore the differences in communication behaviors between Japanese and Hong Kong business professionals in their intercultural and intracultural decision-making meetings:

Research question (RQ) 1. Do Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals exhibit different communication behavior in their intercultural decision-making meetings in which English is used?

Research question (RQ) 2a. Do Japanese business professionals exhibit different communication behaviors in intracultural decision-making meetings in which English is used than they do in intercultural decision-making meetings in which English is used?

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Table 1. Demographic Description of Meetings.

Meeting no.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Meeting types	Intercultural Meetings					Intracultural Meetings			
	Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese					Japanese		Hong Kong Chinese	
Language	English					Eng.	Jap.	Eng.	Chin.
No. of participants	8	7	6	7	5	5	7	5	6
Duration (in minutes)	80	77	57	43	58	20	46	56	40

Research question (RQ) 2b. Do Hong Kong business professionals exhibit different communication behaviors in intracultural decision-making meetings in which English is used than they do in intercultural decision-making meetings in which English is used?

Research question (RQ) 3a. Do Japanese business professionals exhibit different communication behaviors in decision-making meetings in which their first language (Japanese) is used than they do in such meetings in which their second language (English) is used?

Research question (RQ) 3b. Do Hong Kong Chinese business professionals exhibit different communication behaviors in decision-making meetings in which their first language (Cantonese) is used than they do in such meetings in which their second language (English) is used?

Method

We designed this study so that we could compare the communication behaviors of Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals in both intracultural and intercultural decision-making meetings in which their first language (Cantonese for Hong Kong business professionals and Japanese for Japanese business professionals) was used and those in which their second language (English) was used. To collect data for this study, we invited Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese business professionals to take part in intercultural or intracultural decision-making meetings (see Table 1).

Research Participants

In total, 33 Japanese and Hong Kong business professionals were involved in five intercultural decision-making meetings. In addition, 12 Japanese and

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11 Hong Kong business professionals participated in the four intracultural meetings in which either their native language (or–i.e., Japanese or Cantonese) or a second language (English) was used as the medium of communication.

The Japanese participants voluntarily signed up to participate in this study in response to an invitation announcement posted on a Web site whereas the Hong Kong participants accepted an invitation from one of us. We followed the university requirements for human-subjects studies. The application of the human ethics was approved by the Research Ethics Subcommittee at the City University of Hong Kong. For the intercultural meetings, only those who actually engage in business meetings in which English is used were invited to participate in the study. This screening process ensured that the competencies of the business professionals were sufficient to take part in the English-meeting discussions.

To cross-check language competency, a native-English-speaking consultant assessed the English proficiency of the business professionals after we collected the data. The speech acts assessed were derived from edited meeting videotapes. The native-English-speaking consultant viewed and listened to 5 minutes of each participant's speech acts and recorded their proficiency levels using the Common European Framework (CEFR). The CEFR divides learners into three broad divisions that can be subdivided into six levels: basic speakers (A1 and A2), independent speakers (B1 and B2), and proficient speakers (C1 and C2). Although the English-proficiency levels of the Hong Kong business professionals are slightly higher than those of the Japanese, the English-language proficiency of 95% of the participants falls within the range of A2, B1, and B2, indicating that all of the participants possessed adequate English proficiency for interactive meeting discussions.

In the four intracultural meetings, 12 Japanese and 11 Hong Kong business professionals made their decisions in their native language or in English. Of the 11 Hong Kong Chinese taking part in these intracultural meetings, 6 of them took part in all three types of decision-making meetings—an intercultural meeting with the Japanese and two intracultural meetings at which Cantonese was used in one meeting and English was used at the other. Each of the three meetings took place about 2 months apart; the participants' familiarity with the simulated case was minimal. The research design of the simulated case and meeting allowed us to capture relevant communication behaviors regarding whether and how the same individuals participated differently in intercultural and intracultural group meetings and to ascertain how culture and English-language proficiency affected the communication behaviors of the Hong Kong business professionals. Of the 12 Japanese taking part in these

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intracultural meetings, 5 of them took part in an intracultural meeting at which English was used, and the other 7 took part in an intracultural meeting at which Japanese was used.

The participants in all these meetings assumed the roles of corporate directors attending a board meeting (see Guffey & Du-Babcock, 2010). Their task was to respond to a company crisis and decide whether the company should recall a product that has caused 20 to 30 deaths in the past 5 years. Although random assignment of participants to the groups was not geographically possible, all of the participants had comparable and adequate English-language proficiency and interactive listening skills for business-related communication (see, e.g., Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). The work experience of these business professionals ranged from 5 to 15 years of full-time working experience with midlevel managerial positions and engineers from various organizations, such as private enterprises, educational institutions, a pharmaceutical company, and law firms.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data sets contain transcripts of the dialogues of nine decision-making meetings: five intercultural meetings between Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals that were conducted using videoconferencing and four intracultural meetings in which the participants came from the same cultural backgrounds. To create a comparison of L1 and L2 communication, we transcribed the meetings held in English verbatim in English. We transcribed the L1 intracultural meetings in written forms of colloquial Cantonese and in Japanese phonetics and *kanji* (Chinese characters).

To assess communication behavior, we adopted the turn-taking framework that Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) developed together with the specific technique that I used in previous studies (Du-Babcock, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2006). For the purpose of this study, we operationalized the communication behaviors by comparing the turns, the length of speaking time, and the volume of spoken words (utterances) from our quantitative analysis of the meeting data. A *turn* consists of all the speaker's utterances up to when another individual takes over the speaking role (see Du-Babcock, 1999, 2005, 2006; Taboada, 2006; Ten Bosch, Oostdijk, & De Ruiter, 2004). We calculated the length of group members' speaking time using a digital video recorder reader to measure the exact length of each conversational turn, and then we added all of a speaker's turn times together to obtain that speaker's total speaking time in the meeting. We also calculated the total number of words in each turn.

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In our quantitative data analysis, we defined similarities and differences in the communication patterns by comparing (a) the number of turns taken by, (b) the length of speaking time for, and (c) the number of words spoken by each participant. Possible variations in the duration of and the number of participants at each meeting may adversely affect the accuracy of the statistical test results on the variables examined. To prevent these intervening factors from confusing or influencing the statistical tests and to obtain more accurate results, we controlled and adjusted the factors (i.e., treated them as covariates and kept them constant) by using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tests.

Our qualitative data analysis is based on the total number of word utterances that constituted the 82,000 words in the meeting dialogues. In analyzing these qualitative data, we looked for patterns that could describe the nature of the communication process in the meetings. To assure the validity of our analysis, we followed the principle of triangulation (Denzin, 1978), using multiple data collection methods, in that we searched for the recurrence of specific communication behavior across different meetings. Our continuous dialogue about the qualitative analysis served as peer debriefing sessions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure the consistency of the analysis. In analyzing the qualitative aspect of communication behaviors, we examined the differences between Japanese and Hong Kong business professionals in how they disclosed disagreements in their intercultural and intracultural meetings. We chose to examine how these business professionals communicated disagreement in order to compare the HCC of the two cultures after a content analysis of the data. In other words, when reviewing the transcripts, we could see the effect of culture in the different ways in which Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese communicated their conflicting views.

Results and Interpretations

In this section, we report and interpret our findings concerning our research questions. For each research question, we report and interpret the quantitative and the qualitative data, then we concentrate on a specific subject in the dialogues: the handling of disagreement.

Research Question 1: Do Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese Business Professionals Exhibit Different Communication Behavior in Their Intercultural Decision-Making Meetings in Which English Is Used?

Research Question 1 asks whether Japanese and Hong Kong business professionals exhibit different communication behavior in intercultural decision-

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Table 2. Mean Scores per Participant of the Identified Variables in Intercultural Meetings Between Hong Kong and Japanese Business Professionals.

Variables	Hong Kong Chinese	Japanese	*t*-Value
Turn taking (number)	54	32	3.975**
Speaking time (seconds)	729	399	4.012*
Spoken words (number)	1,793	799	20.893*

Note. *Statistical significance at the .05 level.
**Statistical significance at the .01 level.

making meetings. Our quantitative analysis showed that the Hong Kong Chinese took more turns, spoke for longer times, and used more words than did the Japanese. These measurements provide consistent documentation that the Hong Kong Chinese were more active in the intercultural meetings. We performed an ANCOVA test by treating the duration of the meetings as a covariate to control its effect on the other dependent variables. The results revealed significance levels of .01 and .05 (see Table 2).

Our qualitative analysis revealed that the Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese took on differing roles and exhibited differing communication styles in the intercultural meetings. The Hong Kong Chinese initiated discussion topics whereas the Japanese responded to these initiations. In effect, the Hong Kong Chinese provided a structure or framework within which the Japanese responded, engaging in an interactive discussion and analysis with the Hong Kong Chinese. The Japanese picked up on the vocabulary and phrasing of the Hong Kong Chinese, raising their own language level in the process. The meshing of cultures in these intercultural meetings influenced the communication process. The Japanese seemed better able to contribute more information through the help of the Hong Kong Chinese, and the Hong Kong Chinese seemed better able to understand the variables involved in decision making through the thought processes they employed in order to frame the discussion topics for the Japanese.

Next, we discuss the handling of disagreement in the intercultural meetings. To do so, we analyze turns 58, 77, 78, 79, 80, and 81 of Excerpt 1, an excerpt from one of the five intercultural meetings. Four Japanese (indicated by ABCD) and four Hong Kong Chinese (indicated by EFGH) attended this meeting. In this excerpt (and other excerpts), we use italics to indicate the discourse patterns that are relevant to the implicit or explicit disagreements:

> 58 H: Yes, U.S. first. And for me personally, actually … *I prefer Option E*. I think … actually is quite difference from Christy … I suggest liaising with FDA because …

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77 B: Uh … so far, what I understand from the conversation, so, ah … stopping the promotion or ah … taking some actions to the … to the government, ah … we … I think ah … we all agree, but ah … the important point for me is, do we con … *do we still continue to sell the product? or, to stop it?* And, *so far, what I understand is ah continue selling, is … ah … is no problem for … for you guys. Is this understanding correct?*

78 G, H: Yes!

79 B: Ah, yeah, we will not stop selling it?

80 H: Yeah, we will continue selling it.

81 E: We will … not … we will not be stopping, but we will continue to sell. (Excerpt 1)

Hong Kong participants G and H (turns 58, 78, and 80) used direct statements to express their positive attitude toward continuing to produce and sell the product whereas Japanese participant B (turns 77 and 79) used an indirect approach to indicate a negative attitude (disagreement) toward that position. In both instances, this Japanese participant used questions rather than direct statements to express disagreement. But in turns 80 and 81, the Hong Kong participants, in their direct statements, seemed to confirm their understanding that the Japanese participant agreed with their position. In this excerpt, then, the Japanese participant seemed to consider it more polite and respectful to infer disagreement than to express it directly (see also Fujio & Tanaka, 2012); however, this interplay of direct (Hong Kong Chinese) and indirect (Japanese) approaches to handling disagreement introduced miscommunication into the intercultural exchange.

RQ 2a: Do Japanese Business Professionals Exhibit Different Communication Behaviors in Intracultural Decision-Making Meetings in Which English Is Used Than They Do in Intercultural Decision-Making Meetings in Which English Is Used?

RQ 2a contrasts the English communication of Japanese business professionals in two different settings: in intracultural decision-making meetings and in intercultural decision-making meetings with Hong Kong Chinese business professionals. The quantitative results of the ANCOVA test (see Table 3) reveal that Japanese business professionals on average spoke longer and spoke more words in intercultural meetings than they did in intracultural meetings (399 vs. 213 seconds and 799 vs. 412 words, respectively) although they took more turns in intracultural meetings than they did in intercultural meetings (39 turns vs. 32 turns, respectively).

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Table 3. Mean Scores per Participant of the Identified Variables in Intercultural and Intracultural Group Meetings in Which English Is Used.

Variables	Intercultural Meetings	Intracultural Meetings	*t*-Value
Japanese business professionals			
Turn taking (number)	32	39	−0.004
Speaking time (seconds)	399	213	17.651*
Spoken words (number)	799	412	21.715*
Hong Kong Chinese business professionals			
Turn taking (number)	54	61	0.002
Speaking time (seconds)	729	683	0.123*
Spoken words (number)	1,793	1,749	0.521

Note. *Statistical significance at the .01 level.

Our qualitative analysis confirms the quantitative data that the Japanese interacted differently in intracultural meetings than they did in intercultural meetings. Looking at the transcripts, we had difficulty seeing how the Japanese communicated with each other in the intracultural English meetings. The interactions were fragmented; they searched for vocabulary and had difficulty with sentence structure. Yet, they did manage to communicate. Perhaps they were able to get their ideas across because of their HCC style. In contrast, in the intercultural meetings, the Japanese exhibited a greater facility with the English language. The reason for such a drastic change in their communication behavior might be because in these intercultural meetings, the Hong Kong Chinese provided a framework that supplied the Japanese with the discussion points and the vocabulary for this discussion. In other words, the Japanese were able to engage in an interactive dialogue exchange because the Hong Kong Chinese were skilled intercultural communicators who could adjust their communication behavior so as to draw the Japanese into an interactive exchange. We also compared how the Japanese handled disagreements in intracultural and intercultural decision-making meetings in which English is used. Excerpt 2 consists of selected dialogue that shows how the Japanese handled disagreement in an intracultural meeting conducted in English. In this excerpt, Japanese participants A and C (in turns 90 and 97) are disagreeing with Japanese participant E's viewpoint. Participant A indirectly expresses this disagreement by using a questioning format and halting speech, and Participant C indirectly expresses disagreement by prefacing his concerns with "If I hear correctly . . .":

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90 A: So you, may I ah, *may I make sure your opinion?* So, you will stop selling the product in, in United States, and transport to Asian markets?

97 C: So, that, um, *if I hear correctly*, Uh you are worrying about ah consumers ah eh, evaluation or, or ethics to consumers, so I, now I'm confused because now you recommended this stock in United States market, but if, if we do so, then Asian people also has, uh, would [have a negative] opinion on this, eh, dangerous drugs. *So, they also would stop to buy, so I, I'm confused.* (Excerpt 2)

This communication-behavior pattern is consistent with the indirect approach to handling disagreement that the Japanese exhibited in their intercultural exchanges in English with the Hong Kong Chinese (see, e.g., Excerpt 1). This consistency represents a carryover of the HCC style that is typical in Japanese culture. That is, the communication behavior of the Japanese business professionals in Excerpts 1 and 2 is consistent with the communication style in high-context cultures, in which harmony is valued and indirect discourse patterns are preferred to allow disagreement with minimal threat to harmony.

RQ 2b: Do Hong Kong Business Professionals Exhibit Different Communication Behaviors in Intracultural Decision-Making Meetings in Which English Is Used Than They Do in Intercultural Decision-Making Meetings in Which English Is Used?

Research Question 2b contrasts the English communication of Hong Kong Chinese business professionals in two different settings: in intracultural decision-making meetings and in intercultural decision-making meetings (with Japanese business professionals). Our quantitative analysis of the data shows that, on average, the Hong Kong Chinese business professionals took more turns in the intracultural English meetings than they did in the intercultural English meetings (61 and 54, respectively); however, on average, they spoke a little longer and with a few more words in the intercultural meetings than they did in the intracultural meetings (see Table 3). The mixed results reveal that although Hong Kong business professionals exhibited slightly higher interaction levels when they spoke with each other in English than they did when they spoke with the Japanese in English, the quantity of their speech (both the amount of time and the amount of words) was slightly greater when they spoke with the Japanese than it was when they spoke with just each other.

We also compared how the Hong Kong Chinese handled disagreements in intracultural and intercultural decision-making meetings in which English is

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used. Excerpt 3 contains dialogue from an intracultural English meeting of the Hong Kong Chinese. All the participants (D, B, A, and E) expressed their agreement or disagreement directly in a sequence of turns (204, 205, 207, 208–218, and 219). At the end of this discussion, the group did not reach an agreement, but each of the participants knew where the other participants stood:

> 204 D: I agree with Diana to choose option C .... It's a kind of efficiency curing [caring] approach.
>
> 205 and 207 B: … if I make the decision A, the decision is too early .... Just stop the advertising and promotion of EasyFix, is that right?
>
> 208-218: [More dialogue is exchanged between Participant B (the chairperson), Participant A, and Participant D until Participant E took over the floor.]
>
> 219 E: Yes, Chairman, I agree to it … and … we now take the action to destroy all the drug… . Chairman you need to know, to destroy all the things, it seems to solve the problem at the moment… . Everything finish, so, no problem … to take this solution or it's too early or I think, uh, it will have a lot of side effects… . This is, what I call is a little bit ideal or very American style to do it. Every—everything has problem that, ok, destroy them. Cut it, destroy it. No, no, not, finish. I don't think at this moment we need to take so strong a reaction, right now.
>
> 226 A: All right, I see your point. But if we just, ah, take option C, stop all advertising but allow doctors to … (Excerpt 3)

The direct communication behavior of the Hong Kong Chinese in this intracultural meeting is consistent with their communication behavior with the Japanese in intercultural meetings (see, e.g., Excerpt 1).

RQ 3: Do Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese Business Professionals Exhibit Different Communication Behaviors in Decision-Making Meetings in Which Their First Language Is Used (Japanese and Cantonese, Respectively) Than They Do in Such Meetings in Which Their Second Language (English) Is Used?

RQ 3 compares the L1 and L2 communication of the Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese. Table 4 summarizes the quantitative ANCOVA results of the communication behavior of the Japanese (RQ 3a) and Hong Kong Chinese RQ 3b) business professionals in their L1 and L2 meetings. The results show that the Japanese took more turns and spoke more words but used less speaking time in their L1 meetings than they did in their L2 meetings (49 vs. 32 turns; 2,382 vs.

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Table 4. A Comparison of the Mean Scores per Participant of the Identified Variables in First-Language (L1) and Second-Language (L2) Meetings.

Variables	L1 Meetings	L2 (English) Meetings	*t*-Value
Japanese business professionals			
Turn taking (number)	49	32	4.662*
Speaking time (seconds)	358	399	−6.114*
Spoken words (number)	2,382	799	18.671*
Hong Kong Chinese business professionals			
Turn taking (number)	25	54	−6.651*
Speaking time (seconds)	436	729	−10.211*
Spoken words (number)	1,908	1,793	10.812*

Note. *Statistical significance at the .05 level.

799 words; and 358 vs. 399, respectively). As for the Hong Kong Chinese business professionals, the results show that they took fewer turns and used less speaking time but spoke more words in their L1 meetings than they did in their L2 meetings (25 vs. 54, 436 vs. 729, and 1,908 vs. 1,793, respectively).

In our qualitative analysis, we explored the reasons for the differences between the L1 and L2 communication of the Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese. For the Japanese, we believe that their level of English-language proficiency was low, so they were more efficient in their L1 than in their L2 communication. For the Hong Kong Chinese, our analysis is more tentative. We speculate that in the intracultural English meetings, the Hong Kong Chinese used more turns, so they had more interaction in order to clarify their rationales. Thus, questioning or confirming the issues became an integral part of the interactive communication process. In the Cantonese meetings, the Hong Kong Chinese elaborated their viewpoints and arguments more completely in initial statements and consequently needed less interaction to achieve understanding.

To examine how the Japanese handled disagreement in L1 and L2 meetings, we compare the dialogue in the following excerpt (Excerpt 4) with those in Excerpts 1 and 2. Excerpt 4 is a selected dialogue from a Japanese intracultural meeting conducted in Japanese. Turn 36 followed a flow of turns (22–34) in which Participant C disclosed his opinion. Participant C's choice was option C. If Participant B were to have stated his choice was D in turn 36, he would have been directly confronting Participant C, but Participant B was deliberately ambiguous in showing his preferred choice:

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36 B: これと、どこにあてはまるのか、ちょっとわからないのですけど。僕の思ったのは、その毎年20から30人死者が出ているということで、.で医者のま、間違いで、.医者がどのぐらい、患者に、えーそれを与えたか、プリスクライブ したかですか、それを会社が管理することは、不可能なのかなと、思ったんですけども [I am Nishikawa. *I don't know which choice this idea would fit in*. What I've just thought is there have been 20 to 30 deaths every year. Uh. Even if the medicine costs less and works, if the medicine itself has no elements that might cause people to die (using it appropriately), and if the deaths were caused by doctors' inadequate prescriptions, what I've thought is: How much a dose do the doctors give the patients? Is it impossible for the company to control it? I thought …]

37 E: ということはいまのBさんの意見はDにあたるということで考えていいですか [Is it right to assume Mr. B's opinion shows that your choice is D?]

38 B: そうですねぼくのは,うん、僕もDだと思ったんですが [You are right. Mine is. Yes. I thought D]. (Excerpt 4)

In Excerpt 1, a Japanese participant first summarized the group's agreement "to take action to the government." He then indirectly expressed his disapproval of continuing to sell the product by asking if he understood that position correctly: "What I understand is [that to] continue selling … is no problem for you guys. Is this understanding correct?" (turn 77). Rather than expressly disagreeing with all the Hong Kong participants that sales of the antibiotic product should be continued, he asked for confirmation of their opinion. We also observed this indirect way of revealing disagreement in the Japanese intracultural meeting (Excerpt 2). By posing questions rather than directly confronting the meeting participants with arguments to justify other options, the Japanese tended to minimize their amount of talk, which may explain why they spoke less in these meetings than did the Hong Kong Chinese. In comparing Excerpt 4 with Excerpts 1 and 2, we see that the Japanese consistently used an indirect approach in handling disagreement in both L1 and L2 meetings.

To examine how the Hong Kong Chinese handled disagreement in L1 and L2 meetings, we compare the dialogue in the following excerpt (Excerpt 5) with those in Excerpts 1 and 3. Excerpt 5 contains selected dialogue from an intracultural meeting conducted in Cantonese. In turn 92 and turn 143, Participants D and Participant A, respectively, disagreed with Participant E's viewpoint. Rather than showing direct disagreement, Participant A responded that the U.S. and the Asian markets are different and offered to think about Participant E's suggestion:

91 E: 係啦，咁所以我地而家要研究呢.我地要 case by case 咁去睇個的人，就唔係 case by case 睇個的藥囉。[We should deal case by case in

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investigating patients affected, rather than examining the drug itself case by case.]

92 D: 不過我又其實覺得 [But, I indeed think …]

142 E: 係啦係啦。…in case 真係要即刻停既，要賠償各樣野既，…就睇返我地 finance 或者係 PR個邊既意見會好的。[We should consult finance and PR departments about their opinions on (any penalty in case the company chose to stop manufacturing EasyFix). I think it would be better.]

143 A: 我但係我會覺得， um 始終亞洲同 uh 美國個 market 都好唔同啦，咁我都贊成 advertising 要做野既，但我就諗下係唔係 stop [I think U.S. and Asian markets are different. I agree that the company's advertising department should do something, but I need to think about whether we should stop or not.] (Excerpt 5)

In comparing the intracultural meeting conducted in Cantonese (Excerpt 5) with the meetings in English (Excerpts 1 and 3), we observed different communication approaches to disclosing disagreement. In the L1 meeting, the Hong Kong Chinese used an indirect communication strategy to express disagreement whereas in the L2 meetings, they used a relatively direct communication strategy. For example, turn 219 in Excerpt 3 (L2 meeting) is an example of direct disagreement. Participant E clearly disagreed with the chairman's decision to recall and destroy the drug by arguing that although recalling the drug might seem to resolve the issue, other consequences might occur if the recall decision were made too soon.

In examining strategies for direct–indirect topic management, we drew on the notion that the languages that communicators choose can influence and change message content. In this case, Hong Kong bilinguals reveal different topic management strategies when switching between Cantonese and English. Findings suggest that when Hong Kong bilinguals switch between languages, they adjust their perceptual and thinking processes to fit the language they are using and to introduce different content into their L1 and L2 messages (see also Du-Babcock, 1999, 2006; Kay & Kempton, 1984; Matsumoto, 1994). On the other hand, the disagreement strategy of posing questions is interpreted as a pragmatic transfer from Cantonese. A study that investigated a Japanese intracultural business meeting (Fujio & Tanaka, 2012) identifies various indirect disagreement strategies employed by Japanese business professionals who are concerned about the face of other participants. The findings indicate that Japanese who work in an environment where English is used as a foreign language may have difficulty adjusting their communication behaviors and strategies according to the language chosen for business communication.

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Discussion and Conclusions

This study is the first comprehensive empirical study that investigates the communication of Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals. As such, the study (a) contrasts the communication practices of cultural groups previously categorized as collectivistic, high-context communicators and (b) updates the research on the L1 and L2 communication practices of Hong Kong Chinese, adding Japanese communication to these research findings. The study lays out the fundamental elements of Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese communication and, in doing so, establishes a framework for follow-up empirical investigations and theoretical development.

The overall finding of this research is that culture and language use interactively affected the communication behaviors of the Japanese and the Hong Kong Chinese business professionals. We first look at culture's influence. The Japanese consistently used a HCC as they communicated with each other in either Japanese or English and with the Hong Kong Chinese in English. The Hong Kong Chinese unexpectedly deviated from this pattern and used both high-context and low-context communication styles. In Cantonese meetings, the Hong Kong Chinese used a combination of low-context and HCC whereas they used low-context communication in English communication with each other and with the Japanese. These distinctions are illustrated in the differing ways that the Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese handled disagreement. These findings on culture's influence strongly suggest that the high-context to low-context dimensions should be thought of as existing on a continuum rather than as distinct or opposite categories. On our suggested continuum, both the Japanese and the Hong Kong Chinese would exist on the collectivistic side of the continuum, but the Hong Kong Chinese would be more toward the individualistic end of the continuum.

We next look at the language use of the Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese business professionals. The Japanese communicated differently in the three different language use situations. When communicating in their first language, the Japanese engaged in a fluent, high-context exchange of information in which all of the meeting participants initiated interactions and responded to each other. When communicating in English with each other, the Japanese exhibited a sharp contrast in their communication behavior from that of their L1 exchange. The conversation flow was rough as participants searched for vocabulary and sentence structure to adequately and completely express themselves. Apparently, their HCC style compensated for their difficulty with communicating in English. In English communication with the Hong Kong Chinese, the Japanese engaged in interactive dialogues

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with adequate vocabulary and more complete sentence structure. In this situation, the Hong Kong Chinese provided a framework that enabled the Japanese to participate at a higher and appropriate language level. Taking a reactive role in the discussions, the Japanese responded to the initiatives of the Hong Kong Chinese.

These findings on the language use in intracultural and intercultural meetings suggest that further research needs to be conducted so as to more adequately define L2 communication competency in intercultural business communication. In our study, the Japanese had higher listening than speaking competencies. Consequently, their speaking skills were enhanced when they listened to and interacted with the Hong Kong Chinese, who had higher language competencies in intercultural communication. In contrast, the Hong Kong Chinese exhibited fluent interchanges in all three communication situations. But we found that in L2 meetings, the Hong Kong Chinese took more turns and spoke longer than they did in L1 meetings, which contradicted my earlier findings (Du-Babcock, 1999, 2006) that Hong Kong Chinese took more turns and spoke longer in Cantonese meetings than they did in English meetings. We believe that because the Hong Kong Chinese provided a structure for their interchange with the Japanese, they needed to take more turns in the intercultural meetings.

With regard to culture's influence on handling disagreements, both the Japanese and the Hong Kong Chinese business professionals reflected their collectivistic cultural orientations but to a differing degree. The Japanese consistently strived to achieve an atmosphere of group harmony by not directly disagreeing with others' opinions whereas the Hong Kong Chinese were more assertive in expressing their disagreement. The Japanese showed reactive communication behavior and often used hedging when expressing disagreement in both intracultural and intercultural meetings whereas the Hong Kong Chinese exhibited differing patterns for disclosing disagreement in intracultural and intercultural meetings. That is, in intercultural meetings, they expressed disagreements directly, but in intracultural meetings, they expressed disagreements both directly and indirectly.

Limitations

We want to point out two limitations of this study. First, we used a case study simulation to generate dialogue. Some may argue that in simulations such as we used, the participants communicate and make decisions that are not influenced by the realities of the real-world business environment, so

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the data on their communication and decision-making patterns can only yield unrealistic and misleading conclusions. But research has consistently shown that such is not always the case and that collecting data through simulations can provide valid data (see, e.g., Abdel-Khalik, 1974; Alpert, 1967; Ashton & Kramer, 1980; Eijkman, 2012; Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine, & Haywood, 2011). The quasi-experimental design of this study mitigated this limitation by making possible the direct comparison of (a) L1 and L2 communication behaviors of employed professionals and (b) the effect of culture on intercultural and intracultural communication. We also carefully screened the participants and tested their English proficiency. The second limitation of this study is that we only reported on the handling of disagreement in our qualitative analysis and not other factors associated with HCC.

Implications and Future Research Directions

This study provides a framework to guide the development of a research stream that more completely describes Asian business communication. Against the background of the findings and limitations of the study, we suggest that additional research be conducted to determine the culturally and language-influenced business communication behaviors of people from different Asian societies. This research should study not only the communication between different Asian societies but also the communication of Asians with societies from other world areas. It should include (a) studies based on experimental designs such as we used to directly compare different cultures and (b) field studies to add real-world realities to the findings. Using and combining the results of this research, we will then be able to more accurately place the various Asian societies on our suggested continuum and better distinguish and describe communication behavior along the spectrum of that continuum. The research should also aim to better define and describe the relationship of language use and culture on communication behavior. We offer these overall suggestions: Researchers could distinguish the language proficiency needed to perform different communication tasks and, as the results develop, place these tasks on a language proficiency continuum. Researchers could also identify specific high-context or low-context communication that might introduce misunderstanding or conflict into intercultural communication. Specific examples could be drawn from the Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese communication described in this study. Such research could lead to a more complete elaboration of language competency in intercultural communication.

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