Human Relations, Vol. 48, No. 10, 1995

Engaging in *Kenson:* An Extended Case Study of One Form of "Common" Sense

Bradford 'J' Hall[1,2] and Mutsumi Noguchi

This paper seeks to understand a subtle form of relational common sense among Japanese conversational partners. To do so we examine possible explanations of a conversation between two Japanese that at first glance appears atypical. We argue that the most satisfying explanation is grounded in an understanding of the Japanese concept of *kenson*. Using ethnographic techniques the "common sense" of *kenson* is detailed in regards to its forms and meanings. Implications of this concept for conversation are discussed as well as comparisons made between *kenson*, the American notion of modesty and Japanese indirect refusals. Finally, *kenson* is discussed as an informal ritual grounded in social norms.

KEY WORDS: conversation; culture; ethnography; Japan; *kenson;* modesty; norms; ritual.

INTRODUCTION

A common and growing concern in the world today is the development of intercultural understanding. Hall (1976) warned that a fundamental barrier to intercultural understanding is a failure to recognize the subtleties that exist within every community. Hymes (1962) has argued that the subtleties of social life may be discerned through the detailed examination of particular forms of talk. This article is an attempt to articulate and clarify one such subtlety within the Japanese community as it relates to harmony in interpersonal relations.

Both the value and means of exploring community specific forms of talk for the purpose of understanding the cultural subtleties of social re-

[1]Department of Communication and Journalism, Communication and Journalism Building, Room 235 West, Albuquerque, NM 87131-1171.
[2]Requests for reprints should be addressed to Bradford 'J' Hall, Department of Comunication and Journalism, Communication and Journalism Building, Room 235 West, Albuquerque, NM 87131-1171.

0018-7267/95/1000-1129$07.50/1

lations have been aptly demonstrated by such researchers as Basso (1979), Carroll (1988), Fitch (1990/91), and Irvine (1980). In each of the examples cited above a segment of discourse provoked a curiosity which when pursued resulted in a deeper understanding not only of the particular exchange, but of a form of talk and of a distinctive way of organizing and getting on with life.

In like manner, the current study takes as its starting point a particular segment of everyday talk which may appear curious to one unaquainted with (or only superficially acquainted with) Japanese ways of speaking. After discussing some possible explanations for the shape and nature of this segment of conversation we account for this talk through the concept of *kenson*. We do this by first articulating the common sense of *kenson* in juxtaposition with a similar, albeit distinctive, way of speaking in the United States, modesty. Second, *kenson* is discussed in terms of possible variations and in contrast to another particularly Japanese form of communication, the indirect refusal. Finally, the ritualized nature of *kenson* is elaborated in reference to both our focal conversation and other informal rituals found in a variety of cultures. In so doing, we hope to identify and articulate the subtlety of a general, albeit culturally particular, system of social interaction, thereby enlarging our understanding of a culturally diverse world.

THE CURIOSITY

In a recent review of research on Japanese communication practices, Klopf (1991) accounts for many of the differences between the Japanese and American[3] communicators by highlighting the intense concern for an atmosphere of harmony and consideration of the other. Lebra's (1976) detailed discussion of the Japanese practice of *enryo* (a type of self-restraint) is also grounded in the importance of group solidarity, conformity to group norms, and the avoidance of that which may disrupt interpersonal harmony (see also Wierzbicka, 1991). In his classic work on Japanese psychology, Doi (1973, 1986) discusses how *amae* (a type of mutual dependency) permeates Japanese interaction so as to result in an active reluctance to display disagreement and or contradiction in Japanese society.

To even the most casual reader of research on Japanese communication patterns this stress on harmony and displays of mutual agreement will be familiar. Indeed, one common example of "intercultural misunderstand-

[3]We use the term "American" to refer to the mainstream speech community of the United States of America. We recognize that this is a very narrow use of the term, but chose to use it because of the frequency with which the term is used in this manner and the ease of readability it allows.

ing" found in intercultural books and training films involves an American's lack of sensitivity to the importance of harmony in interpersonal relations when dealing with the Japanese. This insensitivity may find form through open disagreement or an inability to pick up on the Japanese person's indirect or ambiguous way of saying no to a request (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong, 1986).

With the foregoing in mind let us consider the following conversation which took place between two Japanese students. Translation is provided by the second author who was also a third member of the tape recorded conversation (see the original Japanese in the appendix). This segment is from one of many conversations recorded by the second author among her Japanese friends and acquaintances at a midwestern university. The interlocutors are in their mid-to-upper twenties and have known each other for over a year. The recorder had been running for over ten minutes before the following exchange occurred.

1. A: I want you to help to organize my [essay
2. B: [No!
3. (laugh) I am not a person who can give you
4. advice because I haven't passed the English
5. Proficiency Exam yet
6. A: (laugh) But, you are taking one of English
7. classes, aren't you? English [class!
8. B: [No! It has
9. nothing to do with my ability to write
10. English I am doing a terrible job in the
11. class and (pause) I usually have to
12. spend three days for writing an essay like
13. this (laugh)
14. A: Come on! I have to submit this essay by
15. tomorrow I don't have time
16. B: You are so coercive! (laugh) ((serves as notice that the request will be granted))

At least two aspects of the conversation above stand out as seemingly anomalous to what the research noted earlier leads one to expect. First is the fact that agreement to help seems very reluctantly given (coming only after a third try), and second is that twice (lines 2 & 8) *B* engages in direct disagreement,[4] a disagreement made all the more noticeable by the fact

[4]The reader may note that the two disagreements, translated as "no" in the exchange are derived from two different terms, *muri* and *chigau*. It is recognized that these two terms are not synonymous. *Muri* conveys a sense that the request is impossible to meet, whereas, *chigau*

that both times it overlaps upon *A*'s preceding utterance. These potential anomalies evoke curiosity and point toward the possibility of unintentional cultural insensitivity.

SOME POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

There are a variety of possible explanations for the shape and nature of this seemingly peculiar conversation. One is that it is an anomaly, an idiosyncratic or rare deviation from the cultural mores of the Japanese community to which the interlocutors belong. A second explanation might be that the interlocutors involved are at best marginal members of the Japanese community that has been tapped into by previous research and, therefore, cannot really be relied upon to provide a relevant or valid example to study in this respect. Finally, one might take a typical American view and claim that this is simply a normal and eventually successful occurrence of compliance-gaining. There are likely other possible explanations. However, these seem, at least initially, three of the most plausible.

Each of these explanations will be briefly considered. First is the idea that this is a deviant incident that actually disrupted the interpersonal harmony of the situation. In support of this idea one may note that the Japanese do at times laugh as a way of covering up the inappropriate actions of interlocutors who are unfamiliar to them (see Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). However, in this specific case an established relationship exists. Indeed, both individuals engage in laughter indicating a sharing of the point rather than an act which inculpates the other. Furthermore, neither *A* nor *B* displays a view that the manner of the conversation is inappropriate (via disclaimer, challenge, apology, etc.). Contrast this with the segment of talk below:

(Hall, 1991, E-2)

76. B: Just you?
77. K: Have [they _changed in any way_?
78. B: [You allow me Mister KOPPEL (.6) you allow
79. me to continue to answer?
80. K: Of course but I must caution you we are

---

conveys more of a sense of disagreement with an opinion or idea. The common translation of both terms to "no" works best for our purposes, because it clearly conveys the outward and immediate expression of refusal which is presented in each occurrence.

Here it is obvious that both *B* and *K* orient to the fact that *K* has violated a norm regarding appropriate turn-taking procedures. The lack of such orientation in the exchange in question is one more indication (although not complete by itself) that the "deviant" explanation is itself suspect.

The second explanation questioned the validity of the membership of these interlocutors within the Japanese community which has been addressed in previous research. It is true that the interlocutors are currently residing in the United States and are, therefore, open to American influences (*A* has lived in the U.S. for five years and *B* has lived here for 3 years). However, both are in their mid-to-late twenties and lived in Japan for more than twenty years. Plus, they are speaking in Japanese with others who are also Japanese, which is likely to reinforce Japanese rather than American cultural ways of speaking. Thus, this explanation also appears inadequate.

Third is the compliance-gaining explanation. This very American view posits *A* as a strategic and persistent requester and *B* as a reluctant helper or perhaps someone who is playing for a little boost to her ego. Having shown this segment of conversation to numerous American university classes it is obvious that such an explanation makes intuitive sense in the United States. In fact, the "reluctant helper" is easily the most common first reading of the segment by the American students to whom we have shown it. This reading, however, fails to deal in a satisfying way with the apparent cultural contradictions noted earlier. In other words, based on superficial inspection it infers that the Japanese participants in this conversation are doing just what Americans would do and in the same manner. As suggested at the outset, a lack of cultural sensitivity toward the subtle meanings associated with everyday interactions can have its own discomforting backlash for those involved in intercultural interactions. The following sentiment expressed in frustration by one American manager working overseas reflects such a problem, "These people understand me. They know exactly what I'm talking about. They're doing this on purpose, *just* to me" (Copeland, Griggs, & Saraf, 1983). We will now turn our attention to what we maintain is a more satisfying account of the conversation. In so doing we will delineate the nature of one form of relational common sense.

THE COMMON SENSE OF *KENSON*

The fourth and most fruitful explanation is grounded in an ethnographic examination of the exchange. As such, it follows a growing body of research in which potentially problematic instances of talk are made

sensible through cultural analysis (Basso, 1990; Carbaugh, 1993; Philipsen, 1986). The articulation of this sense or system of resources for meaningful interaction is grounded largely on extensive participant observation (one of the authors is Japanese and brings native expertise to the present concern), interviewing, and a detailed examination of both the conversation noted above and other naturally occurring talk relevant to the issues addressed herein. The juxtaposition of each author's native understandings provided an intellectual furnace from which to forge and refine our analysis of this specific case and the larger common sense it enacts.

In brief, we claim that the above segment is a ritualized expression of the Japanese concept of *kenson. Kenson* is similar to the American concept of modesty. Both *kenson* and modesty involve situations in which there is a downplaying or denial of capabilities, achievements, etc., that at another level are at least assumed to exist. Displays of modesty or *kenson* are not concerned with the truth in terms of an accurate representation of a person's abilities or accomplishments. Rather those abilities or accomplishments are necessarily discounted in some way.

However, there are some subtle and important differences between *kenson* and modesty. Modesty could aptly be described as an individual shield, whereas *kenson* is more of an alliance. Modesty, for example, is primarily an individual act directed at the self and tends to protect the individual from negative attributions (such as being a showoff). It has relational consequences in that it can protect a person from social sanctions or schisms that might stem from such attributions, but it is still primarily a shield or covering for the self. This connection between modesty and shielding or covering is also commonly used in reference to a person's dress. A person who dresses modestly tends to be one who covers up more and, therefore, shields his or her body from the view of others. There is a sense in the American community in which persons who do not dress modestly are seen as putting themselves at risk. The desirability of this risk varies greatly in the American community; however, that does not change the fact that a lack of modesty is still seen as risky for the individual.

Kenson on the other hand is primarily a relational act that can be said to have consequences for the individual. Similar to an alliance, *kenson* serves as a social glue that maintains the status quo of a particular relationship. To use *kenson* in reference to dress would not be sensible. In addition, its enactment tends to be more overtly interactional, requiring a joint production. In this sense it can be seen to be more centered on or concerned with the relationship rather than the individual.

Given our present understanding of the Japanese practice of *kenson* as generated by our case study we now extend, albeit briefly, our understanding by dealing with two of the possible paths suggested by our analysis: other possible contexts in which *kenson* is practiced, and how it compares to the polite or indirect refusal within the Japanese community.

VARIATIONS ON THE *KENSON* THEME

The "request" context found in our focus case (or similar contexts such as requesting that someone write a letter of recommendation, sing at a wedding, etc.) is but one context in which the enactment of *kenson* serves to maintain the harmony and equality of the relationship. Two other social contexts generated from our research include "compliments" and "greetings." Below two Japanese women in their thirties are discussing previous jobs. As with the earlier transcript the conversation took place in Japanese and was translated by the second author.

1. C: I was the first woman who got an executive
2. position and was allowed to make a business
3. trip in the office. In that sense I was
4. [a pioneer.
5. D: That's great=
6. C: =I had a great [responsibility
7. D: [really great
8. C: No. But I was just lucky=
9. D: =But it=
10. C: =But I didn't
11. have my own time at all and librarian's world was
12. very small. When my job was specialized, my
13. knowledge became profound. But, I didn't know
14. anything about outside world. In that sense,
15. [I ~felt ~
16. D: But even though. You do other jobs.

Here again *kenson* is jointly produced and functions to maintain the harmony and equality of the relationship. *C*'s description of her work experience in lines 1-4 fit neatly into the ongoing discussion of past work and is a representational response rather than boastful initiation of a new topic. However, the work described can be taken as a basis for praise as demonstrated by *D* in lines 5 and 7. By praising *C*'s past activity, *D* highlights her abilities and accomplishments in a way that could be seen as positioning *C* as *D*'s superior.

In lines 8 and 11-15, *C* discounts her efforts, thus rejecting a position of superiority by following the accepted pattern of *kenson*. *D* then allows for the completion of this *kenson* ritual by pointing out in line 16 that in spite of *C*'s discounting, her abilities are still praiseworthy (*D* actually appears to have tried to do this as early as line 9). *C* having espoused the importance of the relationship, accepts *D*'s characterization and initiates a new direction to the conversation.

One optional move that we observed in the production of *kenson* after compliments was an expression of surprise and inquiry as to the initial source of the compliment. For example, after being told that she was the best with a computer one interlocutor replied, "Gee (pause) who told you such (pause) that I was good at computer.?" After receiving a generalized response, the interlocutor began the discounting, "Gee, I am not good at all . . . . " These types of inquiries pave the way for the discounting to come by establishing a sense of surprise or unexpectedness in regards to the compliment.

One elderly Japanese man identified three types of greetings, in which *kenson* is produced. All three were later confirmed by other informants. Following are examples of these three greeting situations.

As part of an initiating speech for a wedding reception, a host offers food and drink to his guests by saying, "These are poor/cheap food and drink. But, please make yourself at home and enjoy the meal." Due to the formal structure of a traditional Japanese wedding no direct verbal response is allowed or expected. In this case, the host avoids putting himself above the guests even though he is providing food and drink. The simple fact that he is providing food and drink highlights certain abilities of the host. The guests' appropriately enjoyed experience in turn serves as a reassertion that the host has been successful.

When a husband introduces his wife to his co-workers, he may express *kenson* by saying, "This is my stupid wife, Michie." Although not all of the co-workers would verbally respond to this introduction, typically one or two would say something like, "No. No. You have such a nice wife." Again, the *kenson* serves to circumvent any claims that the focal person is trying to place him/herself above the other(s) and thereby change or disrupt the relationship.

Finally, there are greetings in which a person gives a gift to a friend or co-worker. She or he would present the gift by saying, "This is a cheap gift, but this is my thankful feeling." This may be responded to appropriately by something like, "No, this is such a nice present," or "It is enough for me." In either case the value of the gift is reestablished, but the relationship is not disrupted in the giving. As with all the situations noted above, the Japanese patterns of gift giving and the related concepts

of *on* and *giri* are rich in significance and protocol (see Befu, 1971; Wierzbicka, 1991). Our brief references are meant only as illustrative examples of appropriate contexts in which *kenson* is produced, and to highlight the common concern displayed in each for relationship maintenance.

KENSON VERSUS POLITE REFUSAL

One question which may arise to a Western eye is, "How do you ever know if the person is really refusing a request for assistance, etc., if the immediate no and discounting so characteristic of *kenson* are not to be taken literally?" To help answer this question, an illustrative example of a polite or indirect refusal will be presented and contrasted with *kenson*.

1. K: Miss Konishi, are you busy now? I have to get this
2. paper finished by noon. Uh::: Could you help me a
3. little bit?
4. L: Gee, uh:: uh:: a little (slight pause) but my boss
5. also wants me to finish this paperwork as soon as
6. possible (slight pause) but (slight pause)
7. K: I have only two hours to work for this. Only two
8. hours for this.
9. L: Uh:::: after I finish this, I soon, well I uh I can
10. help you anytime, but (pause)
11. K: Okay, alright, thank you anyway.
12. L: I am really sorry.

Using the above exchange as a reference point, six differentiating aspects between polite refusals and *kenson* will now be articulated. First is the avoidance of a direct "no." No direct "no" is used in the conversation above, however, that does not prevent the request from being refused. Because a blatant, direct refusal is potentially very threatening to the other's face in most conversations, situations in which persons know or expect that they will have to refuse a request demand an indirect approach. On the other hand, with *kenson* the eventual and expected agreement appears to negate the face threat.

Second, the recipient's final utterance is often marked by the occurrence of *demo* or "but." Although this term is ambiguous, it tends to signal a certain unwillingness in the person using it. This term was repeatedly found in refusals, but not once in the production of *kenson*. By using it the recipient of the request leaves space for the initiator to fill in for him/herself the proper interpretation of what would be the recipient's following sentence. *L* uses this term in both lines six and ten, although it is not appropriately picked up on until line eleven. It is worth noting here

that some of our informants responded to questions about the above exchange by expressing surprise that *K* did not in fact pick up on the refusal after the "but" in line six.

Third, is the use of hesitation fillers such as "uh::." Work in conversation analysis has indicated that responses which are not socially desirable are often marked by these types of hesitations (Heritage, 1984). These fillers found in both of *L*'s replies to *K*'s requests help to fill the silence and soften the recipient's answer.

Fourth, the recipient displays eagerness to accept the request, yet inability to do so. In contrast, our examples of *kenson* indicate anything but an eagerness to help. By showing his or her willingness to help the person making the request, the recipient attempts to preserve the relationship even in the face of a refusal. The above example is perhaps not the strongest example of this characteristic aspect of a polite refusal, but even so, the comment "help you anytime" seems geared to showing this type of eagerness. In addition, the apology after the refusal is recognized further indicates a willingness to help.

Fifth, the inability noted in the point above is situational. In other words, the recipient attributes the reason for refusal to the situation. There is no degrading or discounting of self here as is found in *kenson*, rather circumstances are portrayed so as to force the refusal. In the case above it is the demands of her boss and job which are used to suggest the refusal.

Sixth, the example above contains no overlapping utterance. Although not every example of *kenson* in our experience or data base involves an overlapping on to the request, a definite majority do, and in no case does a polite refusal involve such an occurrence. The production of *kenson* seems to pick up the pace of the conversation, whereas polite refusals slow it down. Perhaps by taking more time in constructing polite refusals the person displays how hard this act is, whereas in *kenson* the very speed moves the conversation along quickly to a mutually agreeable position.

In addition, there are set or conventional phrases with which a polite refusal may be made. One such example of this type of refusal is given by Lebra (1976), "It's very kind of you, but would you please let me constrain myself" (p. 125). In this case, the refusal is an expression of *enryo,* a type of self-restraint which involves an avoidance of bringing attention to oneself by keeping outward manifestations of personal desires to a minimum. Although *kenson* and *enryo* have some similarities, Wierzbick's (1991) review of the literature on *enryo* highlights a key difference. *Enryo* always involves an effort to avoid explicit opinions, assessments, or other displays of personal feelings, whereas *kenson* may explicitly make use of personal feelings and opinions to discount one's own ability. Further, *kenson* may do this in

a way which explicitly (at least initially) brings attention to a difference of opinion.

KENSON AS RITUALIZED EXPRESSION

We suggested earlier that *kenson* can be understood as a ritualized form of interaction. Ritual, as used here, refers to a sequence of symbolic acts which when performed correctly pay homage to some object (Philipsen, 1987). Further understanding of the ritualized nature of *kenson* can best be accomplished in connection with a close examination of the specific case under consideration.

1. A: I want you to help to organize my [essay
2. B: [No!
3. (laugh) I am not a person who can give you
4. advice because I haven't passed the English
5. Proficiency Exam yet
6. A: (laugh) But, you are taking one of English
7. classes, aren't you? English [class!
8. B: [No! It has

A initiates this episode by requesting B's assistance in a writing project. She does this with the knowledge, as displayed in lines 6 and 7, that *B* is enrolled in an English writing class. In addition, it is common knowledge among the three interlocutors present that *B*'s class is a more advanced class than the one *A* is taking and that *B*'s English writing skills exceed those of *A*. Thus, it may seem strange to an American who is expecting cooperation and harmony for this request to be followed so abruptly by a negative response (one that actually overlaps onto the last of *A*'s request). This "no" is followed (see lines 3-5) by laughter and an explanation of why *B* would be unqualified to help *A* with her essay. Both the laugh and the explanation serve to soften the negative response, but neither eclipses it. At this point we apparently have a request followed by a refusal.

Going back now to the notion of *kenson* we can begin to see how it is jointly produced. Given *A*'s request, *B* finds herself put in a position that would disrupt the equality/harmony of the relationship as it exists at this point. To immediately accept would be to openly acknowledge that she is superior to *A* and that the relationship is of a one-way nature. By immediately rejecting *A*'s request she rejects a position of superiority, thus maintaining the existing symmetry of the relationship. It should be stressed here that although looking back on *B*'s move it can be identified as *kenson*, it would not have been so without the interactive participation

of *A*. If *A* were to act on *B*'s move as if it was final ("Oh you're right. I'll get someone else.") *kenson* would not have been achieved. Indeed, such a closure would have been extremely face threatening to *B*, as it portrays *B* as uncooperative and incapable. In doing so, *A* also would have acted inappropriately, opening herself up to such negative attributions as being insincere, insensitive and even acting somewhat superior herself ("*B* cannot help *me*").

On the other hand, an American interlocutor could have engaged in modesty at this point and still explicitly agreed to help. If the American is acting modestly, but is willing to help there is likely to be some discounting of ability, etc., but extremely unlikely to be an explicitly direct refusal (at the semantic level). For example, a response in line 2 such as, "Well, I don't know how much help I can really be, but I'll try," or, "Okay, but I'm not really all that great myself," allows for both agreement and modesty. It also gives the American a protective out if the help does not prove to be as useful as might have initially been expected. This immediate agreement would be seen as too eager to a Japanese interlocutor, even though a personal disclaimer is attached. It does not allow for the *kenson* to be worked out interactively. The examples of modesty given above were responded to by Japanese informants as not really *kenson*, but merely a "reluctant agreement" on the American's part. Interestingly, this was virtually the same evaluation given to our focus episode by many Americans. Namely that the episode below is best seen as reluctant agreement, not modesty.

6. A: (laugh) But, you are taking one of English
7. classes, aren't you? English [class!
8. B: [No! It has
9. nothing to do with my ability to write
10. English I am doing a terrible job in the
11. the class and (pause) I usually have to
12. spend three days for writing an essay like
13. this (laugh)
14. A: Come on! I have to submit this essay by
15. tomorrow I don't have time
16. B: You are so coercive! (laugh)

Returning now to the episode. We see that *A* does cooperate in the production of *kenson* by continuing to pursue the request. In lines 6 and 7 *A* responds to *B*'s negative answer with a laugh and a reference to the shared knowledge noted earlier. In doing so she displays her knowledge and familiarity of the situation in a way which encourages cooperation. In

line 8 *B* again responds with an explicitly negative exclamation before *A* has even finished speaking. This "no" is again followed by an explanation of why she is not qualified to help *A*. Thus, *B* continues to reject the position of helper/superior, and by so doing further cements her own unwillingness to disrupt the symmetrical nature of the relationship as it currently exists. This latter move would not technically be required for the enactment of *kenson* as a self-effacing acceptance could have been performed without losing the existence of *kenson*, however by repeating the denial/discounting stage the *kenson* is more firmly established. This repeated denial further protects the harmony and in this case the equality of the relationship.

It also becomes obvious in *B*'s subsequent explanation (lines 9-13) that her "no" in line 8 is not in reference to *A*'s question regarding her enrollment in an English class. Instead, *B* tacitly acknowledges the validity of the implicit familiarity claim in *A*'s candidate answer by again responding in a way directly relevant to *A*'s initial request. At the end of her explanation *B* again somewhat softens the seriousness and negative nature of her answer with laughter. *A*'s continued requests in lines 14 and 15 for *B*'s assistance indicate that she does not take *B*'s negative replies as completely serious or final. She does at this point change the focus of her request from that of *B*'s capabilities to the shortness of time available in which to fulfill the assignment. In line 16 *B* accepts in a way which highlights *A*'s abilities, rather than her own which are, of course, implicitly acknowledged in the acceptance and subsequent help given. Finally, it should be noted that the acceptance was done without overlapping on *A*'s previous utterance. To have done so would have displayed an eagerness that could spoil the carefully negotiated continuance and harmony of the relationship.

The above discussion may be summarized in a way which suggests a four step process for the enactment of *kenson*. First, there was a request which highlighted a particular ability of *B*. Second, there was an immediate denial and explanation by *B*. Third, this was followed by a reassertion of the request. The second and third moves were then repeated before *B* implicitly agreed to help (the fourth step). By following this form, *A* and *B* work together to display *kenson* and avoid disrupting the status quo of the relationship.

Subsequent analysis of requests which were identified by Japanese informants as involving *kenson* further supported the following four part ritual: 1) Highlighting of some ability or achievement, 2) Dis(ac)counting, 3) Reassertion, 4) Indirect or implicit acknowledgement. Steps 2 and 3 may often be repeated before moving on to step 4. The correct performance

of these steps pays homage to the relationship between the interlocutors involved.

The reader can now see how the case under consideration is not only suggestive of, but in turn made sensible by, an understanding of the ritualized nature of *kenson*. Although one cannot be sure of accurately assessing the internal desires of the interlocutor at that moment, the cultural conventions of the community provide a framework in which the "no's" in this episode are not taken as the personal desire of *B,* but as expressions of the appropriate *tatemae* (See Doi, 1986), or public presentation, thus enabling the recipient (*B*) to accept the speaker's (*A*) request without endangering their equality.[5]

FURTHER NOTES ON RITUAL

Although *kenson* may be understood as a ritualized form of communication, this does not mean that it is institutionalized as a ritual per se. Indeed, it is better understood as the type of informal ritual based largely upon tacit understandings of appropriate behavior, that may be found in a wide variety of communities. For example, Fitch (1990/91) details a form of leave-taking in Columbia which she terms *salsipuede* or leave if you can and Katriel and Philipsen (1981) explore a form of talk in America termed *communication.* Neither of these rituals is formalized to the point where one could simply ask, "What is the *salsipuede* ritual?" and expect to get a clear answer. In fact, individuals would not likely view the form of talk they were engaged in as "ritual." To further this comparison we will briefly sketch the basic steps involved in both the *salsipuede* and *communication* rituals.

In the case of *salsipuede* a person may announce to the host that he or she must leave the party. This move is followed by an inquiry by the host as to why the guest must leave. In turn the guest provides a reason, which is then followed by discounting of that reason coupled with an insistence on staying. Fitch (1990/91) demonstrates how this may be done even with guests who the host hardly knows and, depending on the size of the party, may have no further direct interaction with during their extended stay. Fitch explains that the ritual highlights the importance of interpersonal

[5]*Kenson* is also applicable in hierarchical relationships based on position and age such that a subordinate or younger person would be expected to engage in it so as to maintain the status quo of the relationship in the face of a request. However, the exact dynamics and expectations associated with these situations may vary from our current findings which are concerned only with how *kenson* is manifested in relationships of relative social equality. The form and nature of *kenson* in distinctly hierarchical relationships would be an appropriate topic for research in the future.

connections or ties within the larger community and that those who violate this ritual become the targets of severe negative attributions.

The *communication* ritual discovered by Katriel and Philipsen (1981) involves four moves which must proceed in the appropriate sequence. These are: the raising of a concern or problem by one person, the acknowledgement of the concern as legitimate, an expressing of personal opinions upon the concern (may be done by any of the participants, but must at least include the thoughts of the person who initiated the ritual), and finally some sort of acknowledgement of the self worth of each participant, regardless of differing opinions. When this ritual was violated, Americans were shown to describe it as a "lack of communication," "communication breakdown," or to note a need for communication. The value that was shown to be supported through this ritualized expression was that of the inherent dignity of the individual.

Of necessity, we review these rituals in a simplified manner. However, there is an important point to be made through these brief comparisons, both for our understanding of *kenson* and cultural communication in general. As suggested earlier in defining ritual, *kenson*, *salsipuede,* and *communication,* involve a series of symbolic acts which are normatively sequenced and point toward important cultural values. The normative, rather than lawlike, nature of these rituals is important to understanding their position in facilitating human relations.

Cialdini, Kallgren and Reno (1991) summarized two major types of norms discussed in the social sciences, descriptive and injunctive. Descriptive norms deal with typical behavior, whereas injunctive norms focus on what people should or should not do. Although these two types of norms appear to generally coincide, there is no logical necessity for this connection. Cialdini et al. argue, after reviewing the literature and conducting a series of nine tests, that given saliency, both types of norms powerfully influence human behavior. They further argue, however, that given saliency, injunctive norms have a greater power in more situations.

Our data is too limited to claim that following the *kenson* (or *salsipuede* or *communication*) ritual is a descriptive norm. However, the ways in which native members may be seen to attend to these forms of talk suggest that each of these rituals are grounded in injunctive norms. All of this may start to suggest a view of individuals as cultural robots. Given that the pattern of appropriate behavior outlined in these rituals can be and is violated, albeit with negative consequences, we maintain that such a view would be severely misleading. Instead of assuming a social world made up of dependent social effects produced by independent causes, we assume one made up of intersubjective rules and choices to which individuals are held accountable.

Such a view is harmonious with Etzioni's (1993) recent discussion of the role norms play in decision-making. He argues that norms do not force specific choices, but rather point to zones of appropriate behavior. Bilmes (1975) also studied the use of injunctive norms in decision-making. His work in a Thai village suggests an additional function of norms beyond guiding behavior. He shows through the competing use of apparently conflicting norms (negotiation over which norm should be salient) that norms serve as a resource for public sense-making, whether that sense-making be focused on events of the past, present, or future. Thus, rituals, such as *kenson*, not only guide behavior, but tacitly make meaningful and appropriate behavior possible.

It is easy to see how intercultural interactions which fail to recognize the subtle cultural differences in such communication patterns as *kenson* and "being modest" may result in unintended and negative attributions.

CONCERNS FOR A CONTINUED CURIOSITY

As a result of the attention given to a particular instance of discourse above, the reader can understand how the practice of *kenson*, which may appear to an outsider as problematic, is a resource for maintaining interpersonal harmony in a society. By discounting one's own ability, the recipient degrades his/her position and shows respect to the relationship with the speaker who has recognized the recipient's superiority. By asserting the recipient's ability, the speaker creates the ground upon which the recipient can gradually accept the request without losing face. In this respect, the consideration for interpersonal harmony embedded in *kenson* is manifested through a cooperative work between a speaker and recipient.

Our discussion of *kenson* is not meant to predict or generalize to all conversations, rather it is meant to illuminate one meaningful part of that common sense for the Japanese community. As such it claims to articulate a particular way of creating shared meaning and coordinating action that resonates with the members' common sense.

Superficially, questions may be asked like, "Why do the Japanese go through all this elaborate work just to say no or yes or maintain a relationship?" Such a question, of course, misses the fundamental point that every community has deeply patterned ways in which to relate to one another; ways which are "only common sense" (see Hymes, 1962; Geertz, 1973; and Philipsen, 1989, for an ongoing development of this thought). We are reminded of Bateson's "conversation" between father and daughter regarding why Frenchmen wave their arms about while talking to each other (Bateson, 1972). One of the outcomes of that metalogue is that the

French are saying something about the relationship through these gestures that could not truly be accomplished through supposedly more straightforward means. Every community is characterized by deeply textured ways for accomplishing this same task.

The very notion of a community necessitates certain shared ways in which members can create a sense of shared meaning and coordinate action. One potentially universal form through which membership is expressed and maintained is the informal ritual as described above. Ritualized resources such as *kenson, salsipuede,* and *communication,* are both reflective and revealing of a given community's "common sense."

Carroll (1988) discusses ways in which French and American common sense views concerning conversation differ. She argues that Americans tend to use conversation primarily as a tool to gain and pass along information and that, as such, conversation is ideal for changing the nature of the relationship: creating distance when personal space is limited or for gathering the knowledge upon which greater intimacy can be founded. Conversation for the American is a verbal exchange for changing the relationship. For the French, however, conversation reveals or expresses the ties that exist between the conversants. To converse with someone is essentially to "live with" them and thus explicitly expresses one's belief about the intimacy of the relationship. Our brief look at a particular Japanese way of speaking tentatively suggests another primary focus on conversation, that of maintenance. At its core Japanese conversation is serving to maintain relationships, rather than to change or express them. Certainly evidence of all three, expression, maintenance, and change, can be found in each of the three communities; however, the primary focus that a community gives to one or the other may differ and provides a potentially insightful dimension along which to compare particular speech communities.

Recognizing the differences along this dimension may help to explain the force that *kenson*, as explained above, has in the Japanese community as opposed to the force modesty has in the American community. Used as a shield, modesty empowers the self, allowing an individual to change the nature of a relationship from one involving great expectations to one involving little if any expectations. *Kenson* on the other hand is more overtly a multi-party endeavor and is directed at maintenance. In addition, even the polite refusals as described above appear directed at this maintenance. Americans may view these activities as an unwillingness to be yourself and "go for the gusto" of life. A so called stagnant relationship is a great evil in American society.

However, these last few musings are still in their infant stage and must be recognized as such. They point to a continuing curiosity, not a

completed one. The importance of these dimensions for understanding the patterns of communication that develop in a community seems promising, especially given Carroll's (1988) use of them to explain *inter*cultural communication. Surely, despite continued growth, there is much more work needed in our efforts to understand the variety of common sense in which we as inhabitants of this earth find ourselves enmeshed. The ethnographic treatment of a specific case adopted in this paper and the concerns it serves to illuminate provide one effective avenue to simultaneously satisfying and igniting our cultural curiosity.

APPENDIX

A: Kumitateru no wo tetsudatte hoshii n [desu
B: [Muri da yo
(laugh) Atashi advice nanka shite a geru ningen ja nai mon
Atashi proficiency nimo mada ukatte nai shi
A; (laugh) Demo Tomoko san native totte ru kara
native [language wo
B: [Chigau. Kankei
nai n da mon Atashi kurasu no naka dewa mechakucha da shi
Atashi datte koiu essay wo kaku toki mikka kurai kangae
naito ikenai mon (laugh)
A: Iidesho Tomoko san teishutsu ashita nan desu
Ashita madeni dasanai to ikenain desu Kangaeru hima
nai n desu
B: Honto ni tsuyoi n da kara (laugh)

REFERENCES

BATESON, G. *Steps to an ecology of mind.* San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1972.

BASSO, K. *Portraits of "the Whiteman."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

BASSO, K. *Western Apache language and culture: Essays in linguistic anthropology.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990.

BEFU, H. *Japan: An anthropological introduction.* San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1971.

BILMES, J. Rules and rhetoric: Negotiating the social order in a Thai village. *Journal of Anthropological Research,* 1976, *32,* 44-57.

BRISLIN, R., CUSHNER, K., CHERRIE, C., & YONG, M. *Intercultural interactions: A practical guide.* Beverly Hills: Sage, 1986.

CARBAUGH, D. "Soul" and "Self": Soviet and American cultures in conversation. *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* 1993, *79,* 182-200.

CARROLL, R. *Cultural misunderstandings.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

CIALDINI, R. B., KALLGREN, C. A., & RENO, R. R. A focus theory of normative conduct: A theoretical refinement and reevaluation of the role of norms in human behavior. In

M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology.* San Diego: Academic Press, 1991, pp. 202-232.

COPELAND, L. (Producer), GRIGGS, L. (Executive Producer), & SARAF, I. (Director). *Going international: Beyond culture shock* [film]. San Francisco: Copeland Griggs Productions, 1983.

DOI, T. *The anatomy of dependence* (translated by J. Bester). Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1973.

DOI, T. *The anatomy of self* (translated by M. A. Harbison). Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1986.

ETZIONI, A. Normative-affective choices. *Human Relations,* 1993, *46,* 1053-1069.

FITCH, K. A ritual for attempting leave-taking in Columbia. *Research on Language and Social Interaction,* 1990/91, *24,* 209-224.

GEERTZ, C. *The interpretation of cultures.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

GUDYKUNST, W. B., & KIM, Y. Y. *Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication.* New York: Random House, 1984.

HALL, E. *Beyond culture.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1976.

HALL, B. J. An elaboration of the structural possibilities for engaging in alignment episodes. *Communication Monographs,* 1991, *58,* 79-100.

HERITAGE, J. *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984.

HYMES, D. The ethnography of speaking. In T. Gladwin and W. Sturtevant (Eds.), *Anthropology and human behavior.* Washington, D.C.: Anthropological Society of Washington, 1962, pp. 15-53.

IRVINE, J. How not to ask a favor in Wolof. *Papers in Linguistics,* 1980, *13,* 3-49.

KATRIEL, T., & PHILIPSEN, G. "What we need is communication": "Communication" as a cultural category in some American speech. *Communication Monographs,* 1981, *48,* 302-317.

KLOPF, D. W. Japanese communication practices: Recent comparative research. *Communication Quarterly,* 1991, *39,* 130-143.

LEBRA, T. *Japanese patterns of behavior.* Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976.

PHILIPSEN, G. Mayor Daley's council speech: A cultural analysis. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech.* 1986, *72,* 247-260.

PHILIPSEN, G. The prospect for cultural communication. In D. L. Kincaid (Ed.), *Communication theory: Eastern and Western perspectives.* San Diego: Academic Press, 1987, pp. 245-254.

PHILIPSEN, G. An ethnographic approach to communication studies. In B. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B. J. O'Keefe, and E. Wartella (Eds.), *Rethinking communication.* Newbury Park: Sage, 1989, pp. 258-268.

WIERZBICKA, A. Japanese key words and core cultural values. *Language in Society,* 1991, *20,* 333-385.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

BRADFORD 'J' HALL is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of New Mexico. His principal interests are intercultural communication, ethnography of speaking, discourse analysis, and organizational culture. He has published in a variety of journals, including *Communication Theory, Communication Monographs,* and *Research on Language and Social Interaction.*

MUTSUMI NOGUCHI is a translator for Nihon Unisys in Tokyo, Japan. Her principal interest is in the cross-cultural contrasts between Japan and the United States. She has recently published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations.*