

# 琉球大学学術リポジトリ

## 日本と米国のRefusal Assertionの比較

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## A Comparative Study of Refusal Assertion in the United States and Japan\*

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Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) have done an extensive literature review on interpersonal communicative competence from various disciplines. Assertiveness was found to be an important component of competence. However, they do not tell us how and why assertiveness is important. The review shows a vast amount of research in one aspect of assertion, saying what one wants. This tendency is understandable since we tend to value action more importantly than reaction. For example: speaking is more important than listening; writing is more important than reading; creating is more important than interpreting; working is more important than resting; etc. One may call it our action orientedness. The tendency can also be inferred from the definition for the verb assert in Webster's Dictionary of the English Language: 1. to affirm positively; to declare with assurance; to aver. 2. to maintain or defend by words or measures; to vindicate a claim or title to; as, to assert our rights and liberties.

As was observed, the concept of assertion is often highlighted as an ability to say what one wants, overshadowing the importance of its counterpart, i. e., an ability to say what one does not want, i. e., refusal assertion. In spite of this general tendency, one has a hunch that refusal assertion should be important in intercultural communication since it basically involves a conflict solution between two people and solutions to human conflict vary according to cultures. The comp-

lexity of refusal assertion in an intercultural context is illustrated in Doi's experience in the United States:

For example, I think it was the first year when I went to the United States, I visited an American to whom I was introduced by a Japanese acquaintance. While I was talking to him, he asked me, "Are you hungry? We have some ice cream." I must have been hungry, but I could not tell him I was since I met him for the first time and the question came all of a sudden. So, I said that I wasn't hungry. Perhaps, I must have had an expectation that he would ask me again. However, to my great disappointment he merely said, "I see," and concluded the conversation. I remember how sorry I was not to have said that I was hungry. I also thought that if he had been a Japanese, he wouldn't have asked such a question to someone whom he had met for the first time. Instead of asking whether I was hungry or not, he would have served something without asking. (Doi, 1984, pp. 1-2)

Doi's use of *no* was actually not a refusal. Such are the difficulties of refusal assertion in intercultural communication. Therefore, it is of great importance to those who are involved in crosscultural research to understand fundamentally how people of different cultures assert themselves and what kind of underlying values these people have in how they assert themselves. Without so doing, intercultural communication merely results in re-strengthening of stereotypes on one's partner culture.

This paper examines five popular publications dealing with refusal assertion from the United States and Japan. The aim of it is two fold: first, to compare how the writers of the two cultures recom-

mend readers to refuse; second, to deduce underlying values they recommend to uphold on refusal assertion. For these purposes, the present paper reviews five popular publications from both countries. From the United States, the following works were chosen: Fensterheim and Baer (1978), Smith (1988), Bower & Bower (1991), Baer (1976), and McKay, Davis, and Fanning (1983). The Japanese counterparts are; Masuda (1992), Shimada (1993), the editors of Asahi Shinnbunn Nichiyoooban Henshuubu (1991), Seikatsu Kennkyuu Saakuru (1989), and Pakira Hausu (1991). What these books recommend does not tell us every single communicative behavior of the individual. However, they give an understanding and appreciation to what one's communicative partner is attempting to do.

## Japanese Characteristics of Refusal Assertion

### Formal Characteristics

There are three formal characteristics in Japanese refusal assertion found in the texts: (1) clear refusal is avoided, (2) when a reason for a refusal is given a third party is mentioned, and (3) reasons to refuse can be fictitious. The first characteristic is obvious in the following advice. For a house wife who is bothered with her recently widowed close friend's frequent visit, an expert contributor to the book gives the advice, "... You could create a situation that does not burden [emphasis added] you. For example, you could say, 'I am a bit busy today. I must finish this up. So, please allow me to work on it while I am listening to you'" (Asashi Shinbun Nichiyoooban Hennshuubu, 1991, 41). From the context of the book, one can infer that the true meaning of "burden" is to say no clearly. The theme of ambiguous refusal runs through the other four books.

The second characteristic is prominent in the following example. The editors of Seikatsu Kenkyu Saakuru state that sometimes immediate

reply must be made for the sake of a person who is asking for a loan of money so that s/he can ask other sources without delay. The recommended way of saying no is as follows:

I understand your situation very well. I would really like to help you out since it is you who is asking, but ... Since it is a matter of money, I must talk to my family. However, my *first son* [italics added] is going to college. Considering that, I believe a result of the *family conference* [italics added] would be clear. I'm sorry, but please understand my situation. I thought I would tell you right away, considering the immediacy of the matter. I'm very sorry that I must say that I cannot help you. I'm sorry and I ask you to forgive me (1989, p. 119).

The effectiveness of the discourse is doubled by bringing in two third parties: the first son and the entire family. Masuda (1992) offers an business situation. When one must refuse a business deal, he advises by saying, "*Kacho* [a sectional chief] is disagreeing with your idea. I think it is good, though." (p. 31). If the same person says that s/he will talk to the boss, one is advised to say that not only *kacho*, but also entire executives are disagreeing. Other third parties that are recommended by the editors of Pakira Hausu (1991) and Shimada (1993) are: father, mother, parents, brother, sister, relatives, and the company where one works.

The third characteristic which notes that reasons to refuse can be fictitious is most clearly articulated in Masuda's (1992) following remark, "In order not to hurt others' feelings and still refuse requests, there are cases where one may lie. In these cases, your health conditions can be made up. This is an effective way to refuse and not to hurt

others" (p.33). However, these reasons are not obvious lies. They should be ones that are most likely to happen in one's daily life. For example, Shimada (1993) recommends by saying the following when one is asked to work on a holiday: "To tell you the truth, my mother is coming to visit me and I'm planning to take her out to show her Tokyo;" "I must go back to my parents' house in my hometown to attend a *hooji* (service);" or "I'm sorry. I'm supposed to go for a *omiaï* (marriage meeting)" (p. 107). These reasons feature the third parties mentioned previously but they are labeled by the author as "convenient" reasons. Pakira Hause (1991) also recommends anyone who is not present as a reason to refuse a door-to-door sales person (p.202).

#### Value Characteristic

There is one theme which cuts across all the Japanese texts. Refusal assertion can endanger human relationships. Shimada (1993) recommends a ready made phrase of "I understand your situation, but ..." as an essential "idiom" to use when one does not wish to discontinue a relationship after refusal (pp.100-101). He also advises readers to show an attitude that they are sorry to refuse as a good manner. At the outset of the section "Refusing," Masuda (1992) offers an episode of a young business man who was refused to be heard by the president of a successful business, who was treated by the former in the same manner ten years ago (p.27). The text by Pakira Hausu (1991), as in the other texts, lists words of apology and self-devaluating expressions when one says no to requests of a loan of money (pp.186-187). Obviously, these words are offered as a social lubricant to lessen the impact of refusal assertion. Incidentally, *dan*, the Chinese character that the Japanese language has borrowed to mean to refuse is also used to break off personal relationships. This suggests that in this culture refusing not only means no to a request but also to personal relationships. The

previous example of a house wife who was bothered by her friend illustrates this point. Her worry was to say no to her friend's frequent visit and still keep the relationship with the friend (Asashi Shinbun Nichiyooiban Hennshuubu, 1991, p. 39). The editors of Seikatsu Kenkyuu Saakuru (1991) advises people on how to socialize with those one feels uneasy to refuse their requests so that s/he will not often be exposed to situations to say no and how to create an atmosphere from which others can infer no (pp. 112-113). These concerns also imply that Japanese feel that refusal can hurt personal relationships.

### American characteristics of Refusal Assertion

#### Formal Characteristics

Two characteristics of refusal assertion were found in the American texts: (1) clear and constructive refusal must be articulated, (2) reasons to refused do not have to be offered. The first characteristic is evident in the example from the text by Bower and Bower (1991). As in the case of the Japanese wife, a woman is bothered with her friend who has recently lost her husband and become dependent on her in driving. The recommended steps that the woman took from Bower and Bower were as follows:

DESCRIBE Joe and I have driven you to many events this year, and sometimes We even rearrnged our schedule to sccommodate you.

EXPRESS we want to be friends, but we'd like you to know that we can't be responsible for all your transportation to these events.

SPECIFY Could we work out a plan that will allow both of us to feel more independent in arranging transportation?

CONSEQUENCES Positive: That way we'll be able to enjoy more fully the times we do go out together.

[Negative: Otherwise, we'll feel increasingly uneasy about your dependence on us.] (1991, pp. 113-114).

Here the actual word no has not been said, but DESCRIBE, EXPRESS, SPECIFY, and CONSEQUENCES has replaced it. The content of these capitalized categories are to be filled out by those who must assert themselves (Readers have no way of being sure whether the woman has said Positive or Negative effects in the CONSEQUENCES). Needless to say, these four steps converge into one point, i. e., Clear and constructive refusal. This is also evident in an actual dialogue example between two friends given by Smith (1988):

Ralph: As far as I'm concerned, it [receiving a loan from Alan] won't.

Alan: I'm sure you won't let it affect you, but it's me that's the problem, If I lend you that money, I know my feelings for you will change, I know it's dumb, I know it shouldn't be that way, but That's me. That's the way I feel about it (pp 238-239).

What is made clear in Alan's refusal assertion is both his idea toward loaning money to friends and how he evaluates his own feelings. The actual dialogue continues even to the point that Alan offers his help to ask others for Ralph, which shows constructiveness of refusal assertion. Fensterheim and Baer (1978) in their example stress four principles in saying no: brevity, clarity [emphasis added], firmness, and honesty (p. 79). A person who followed their advice, Mark Butler, is mentioned as a case and praised for his new improved way of saying no. This

improved way is in fact not merely a flat no but an alternative, i. e., constructiveness (p. 81). McKay et al. identify three components of an assertive statement, including that of refusal: an asserter's perspective of the situation, an asserter's feelings about the situation, and an asserter's wants regarding the situation. In the case of refusal assertion, the example below is given:

When I think about giving a speech I get nervous. I've been feeling butterflies in my stomach since yesterday when I told you I would talk at the next general board meeting. I realize that I don't want to give that talk. Please find someone else (p. 120).

The asserter's feeling is clarified and a constructive alternative is offered. This is also seen in Baer's (1976) book on assertiveness for women. She relates her own experience of making a refusal assertion:

One Friday I came home after a particularly taxing day, took one look at that mangy chicken in the refrigerator, went upstairs, took a bubble bath, and retired to bed with a highball and a good spy story. Herb [her husband] arrived some time later, took a look at me, and inquired with concern, 'Are you sick?' I answered, 'I feel fine. I just don't want to cook tonight. You have a choice. There's a chicken. You can cook it. You can order in. Or we can go out. I'm not doing anything' (p. 19).

Baer's feeling is clearly expressed along with her constructive alternatives.

The second characteristic, not giving reasons to refuse, is not recom-

mended by all the authors, but emphasized by some. Although Smith (1988) acknowledges the difficulties of not giving reasons, he discourages his readers to give reasons for the following reason:

Give reasons for what you want and your friend will come up with equally valid reasons for what he wants. Giving reasons during conflict to justify or defend a viewpoint is just as manipulative as giving reasons to attack that viewpoint. Neither of these routes is an honest, assertive *I want* that can lead to a workable compromise of interests to quickly resolve the conflict (p. 234).

Here not giving reasons is believed to promote constructive communication instead of a continual spiral of destructive argument. Bower and Bower (1991) shares the same belief in giving and not giving reasons:

Passive people often feel they have to justify with rational argument every opinion and statement they make. ... Although reason giving is a valuable educational practice, it has limited value in interpersonal relations. In interpersonal relations, feelings and rights are every bit as important as are reasons. We think you have a right to say, 'Because I just feel that way' as your ultimate reason (p. 83).

Obviously Baer (1976) in her singly authored book maintains the same view, which can be seen in her refusal to cook. The only reason that she has said is her feeling of not feeling like cooking. Seen previously, MaKay et al.'s (1983) three components of an assertive statement do not include reason giving.

The assertive technique called broken record was coined first by Smith (1988). What this technique does is simply repeat the same thing as a broken record does. For example, following the technique, Alan's last remark that's the way I feel about it will be repeated without a change. It strongly tells others that the asserter's position is nothing but no. As odd as it may seem to readers, however, this technique is the combination of the first and the second characteristics. Not giving reasons and repeating the same message is the clearest expression of refusal (2) and emphasizes the most constructive alternative available is to accept refusal (1).

#### Value Characteristics

There are two characteristics extracted from the texts with regard to values of refusal assertion: (1) honest refusal assertion can maintain or enhance interpersonal relation, (2) to refuse is your right.

All the authors concur on (1). Smith's (1988) example of Allen was reported as a success in maintaining his friendship with Ralph. Bower's (1991) case of the house wife was reported to have enhanced her friendship to the point that her friend has started giving her a ride. When Baer (1976) related her story of refusing to cook, her husband actually made an appreciating remark, "Thank God you're not playing martyr again!" (p.19). Fensterheim and Baer (1978) warns that saying yes when one wants to say no leads to a lack of communication since it is dishonest (p. 78). In other words, honest refusal assertion promotes communication and good interpersonal relationships. McKay et al. (1983) claims that assertive statements neither blame nor attack others (p.120). Here refusal assertion has no room to disintegrate interpersonal bonds. All these emphases on refusal assertion made by the authors are based on the belief that saying no is beneficial to both asserters and assees.

The right to say no is emphasized and encouraged unanimously.

Smith (1988) lists ten assertive rights that all of us have. Among which pertinent to refusal assertion is Assertive Rights II and X. The former is the right to give no reasons or excuse to justify one's own behavior. The latter is the right to say, "I don't care." The former has been mentioned as one of the formal characteristics. The latter can be translated into the right to refuse, which has been done by McKay et al. (1983) as the thirteenth right among the eighteen legitimate rights that all of us possess (p. 115). At the outset of the book, Bower and Bower (1991) stresses assertion as our human right or moral right (p. 6). Fensterheim and Baer (1978) define five basic rights, of which the right to say no can be derived from (3): "You always have the right to make a request of another person as long as you realize the other person has the right to say *no* [italics added] (p. 19). Baer (1976) acknowledges the seven basic inalienable rights, in which she derives the right to reject impossible situations, i. e., the right to refuse (pp. 62-64). All say in once voice, "You have the right to assert no."

## Discussion

The ideal refusal assertion in Japanese style recommended by the texts was found to have three formal characteristics: (1) clear refusal must be avoided, (2) when a reason for a refusal is given a third party is mentioned, and (3) reasons to refuse can be fictitious. The underlying value was that refusal assertion can endanger human relationships. These findings, if they are conceptualized in isolation, only create an incorrect image of the Japanese personality. For instance, the third characteristic can be misunderstood as that Japanese tend to lie. However, if it is conceptualized in terms of a dynamic interplay with an underlying value, one can appreciate the Japanese tendency in communication in the following manner. The Japanese choose to be careful not to hurt

others' feelings by avoiding to put forth their feelings against others' requests. To avoid it, they may carefully create a fiction as a tacit understanding for no.

The ideal refusal assertion in the American style recommended by the texts has two formal characteristics: (1) clear and constructive refusal must be articulated, (2) reasons to refuse do not have to be offered. There are two distinctive underlying values: (1) honest refusal assertion can maintain or enhance interpersonal relationships, (2) to refuse is your right. This finding, too, has a chance to be misunderstood if each characteristic is conceptualized in isolation. However, again, taken with a dynamic view a proper appreciation can be derived. For example, not giving reasons to refuse can be thought of as a sign of arrogance. However, combined with the first value, one can say that Americans may not give reasons to refuse in order to be honest and clear in communication, which sets a ground for mutually respecting communication.

Problems of American-Japanese intercultural communication still remain. If one party persists in its way of refusing, the other's "natural" reaction will be perceived within the former's value system. For example, if a Japanese avoids saying a clear no, an American may think that s/he must be more forceful in making a request. If this communication continues, the latter might only be labeled as arrogant. If an American continues not to give reasons to refuse, a Japanese may stop making any request, then the former might think that s/he is being shunned. A possible hope would be for educators of the English language and the Japanese in Japan and/or the United States to incorporate cultural refusal assertion techniques in order to lessen the burden of misunderstanding.

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### 論文要旨

## 日本と米国の Refusal Assertion の比較

兼本 円

本論では日本と米国における Refusal Assertion の形態と文化的特徴を比較検討した。データとして一般に広く親しまれているそれぞれ五点のペーパーバック類を採用した。その結果各々の文化が Refusal Assertion に関して次の四つの特徴を持っていることが分かった。日本において Refusal Assertion は、

- (1) はっきり断わりだと分かる表現が控えられている。
- (2) 断わりの理由として第三者が引き合いに出される場合がある。
- (3) 断わりの理由が架空なものである場合がある。
- (4) 人間関係を損ない易い行為だと見なされている。

米国において Refusal Assertion は、

- (1) 明瞭で建設的でなければならない。
- (2) 断わる理由を与えなくともよい。
- (3) 正直であれば人間関係を保持または高めることができると思われている。
- (4) 権利であると思われている。