

# When conveying a message may hurt the relationship: Cultural differences in the difficulty of using an answering machine

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## Abstract

Cultures differ in their emphasis on the two core functions of communication, conveying information and maintaining the relationship. Because answering machines primarily serve the former function, their use may show cultural differences. Leaving a message is cognitively more taxing for Japanese than Americans, as indicated by poorer performance on a secondary task (Study 1). This performance decrement reflects that Japanese allocated more cognitive resources to tailoring the message to the recipient, consistent with their culture's higher emphasis on relationship goals. Such cross-cultural differences were not restricted to the laboratory situation. Although equally likely to own an answering machine, Japanese reported a higher rate of hanging up when reaching an answering machine than Americans (Study 2). The difficulties that Japanese experience when leaving a message on an answering machine are partly due to the lack of feedback channel. Theoretical implications are discussed.

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Have you ever made a large request over an answering machine? Did you worry about how the recipient of your message would feel and react? And did you suddenly find yourself being cut off by the time limit of the answering machine? If you are Japanese, this may sound more familiar to you than if you are American. The present studies address this possibility. In all cultures, communication serves informational as well as social-relational functions. However, interdependent cultures put more emphasis on the relational function of communication than independent cultures (Scollon & Scollon, 1994, 1995). This is likely to impose higher attentional demands on interdependent communicators, in particular in situations that lack the feedback channels crucial to monitoring the other's responses. Leaving a message on an answering machine is a common exemplar of such communication situations and we expect, and find, that interdependent communicators find the use

of answering machines more demanding than independent communicators.

## Culture and communication practices

How people relate to each other is culture dependent (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Members of independent cultures view themselves as bounded entities mainly defined by their internal attributes, whereas members of interdependent cultures view themselves as dependent on the relationship between self and others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Persons with an independent self-construal are assumed to be motivated to express themselves, whereas persons with an interdependent self-construal are assumed to be motivated to enhance their relatedness to others. These different social orientations are reflected in different communication practices (Becker, 1986; Kim, 1993, 1994; Kim & Wilson, 1994). For example, Scollon and Scollon (1994, 1995) suggested that there are two key functions to communication: one is to convey the information, and the

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other is to maintain the relationship through the act of communication. While both are relevant in all cultures, American culture places more emphasis on the informational function of communication, whereas Japanese culture places more emphasis on its relational function. In addition, Kim and her colleagues (Kim, 1993, 1994; Kim et al., 1996; Kim, Sharkey, & Singelis, 1994; Kim & Wilson, 1994) suggested that whereas people with independent self-construals tend to place more emphasis on outcome-oriented aspects of the communication, such as clarity and effectiveness, people with interdependent self-construals tend to place more emphasis on other-oriented aspects of the communication, such as avoiding hurting the hearer's feelings and minimizing imposition. Furthermore, Japanese attention to the relational function is reflected not only in communication practices but also in language use, in particular the use of honorifics (e.g., Ide, 1982). Japanese speakers have to attend to the hierarchy and intimacy between the interlocutors to decide, for example, which verb to use when they describe the interlocutors' behavior.

Empirical findings are consistent with the high emphasis on relational aspects in Japan. Kitayama and Ishii (2002) used a modified Stroop task in which the emotional tone and the meaning of the word had either negative or positive valence. Whereas the emotional tone of the spoken word interfered more with Japanese participants' performance, Americans' performance was more disrupted by the meaning of the spoken word. If Japanese listeners place emphasis on maintaining the relationship, they may constantly provide feedback to the speaker to indicate their attentiveness to the relationship. In support of this conjecture, White (1989) observed that backchannels (i.e., listener responses, such as "uh-huh" and "yeah") are displayed more frequently by Japanese than by American listeners.

In addition, Holtgraves and Yang (1992) and Ambady, Koo, Lee, and Rosenthal (1996) observed that Americans adjust the politeness of their response to the content of the message, whereas Koreans adjust the politeness of their response to the relationship. For example, Koreans' politeness strategies were influenced by the relationship with the receiver of the message (e.g., boss, peer or subordinate), whereas Americans' politeness strategies were influenced by the content of the message (e.g., whether it was good or bad news; Ambady et al., 1996).

#### *Cultural differences in answering machine communication*

These conjectures and findings suggest cultural differences in the use of answering machines. Answering machines are communication devices that deprive the speaker of backchannel responses from the recipient of the message, thus making it difficult to monitor the relational aspects of the communication (Kogo, 1993). To compensate for the lack of backchannels, speakers may need to allocate attentional resources to mentally simulate the recipient's likely responses, resulting in a more complex task (for a review see, Krauss & Chiu, 1998). Given cultural

differences in the emphasis on the relational function of communication, Japanese speakers may therefore find it more taxing to leave an important message on an answering machine than American speakers.

Study 1 tests this possibility in a dual-task paradigm and assesses if leaving a message on an answering machine interferes more with Japanese than Americans' performance on a concurrent secondary task. If so, we may further expect that Japanese speakers are more likely to avoid the use of answering machines in daily life. Study 2 tests this prediction and further examines the factors that make it difficult for Japanese to leave a message on an answering machine.

#### **Study 1**

For the reasons discussed above, we predict that leaving a message on an answering machine presents a more demanding cognitive task for Japanese than for American speakers. While all speakers need to attend to conveying the intended message, Japanese speakers may need to allocate more attention to the relational aspects of the communicative act than American speakers. If so, leaving a message on an answering machine should interfere more with the performance of Japanese than of American speakers on a concurrent task.

To test this hypothesis, we asked Japanese and American participants to leave a message on an answering machine while working on a concentration test. We compared their test performance while leaving a message to a baseline measurement, thus controlling for possible cultural differences in task performance. The key hypothesis holds that leaving a message results in a more pronounced performance drop for Japanese than for American speakers, relative to baseline.

To obtain direct evidence for cultural differences in participants' attention to their relationship with the recipient, we asked participants to call either a professor or a peer and coded the content of each message. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, speakers who pose a request to others can use several politeness strategies, which serve to protect face. One of them is to emphasize the closeness between the speaker and the hearer (positive politeness) and another is to minimize the perceived imposition on the hearer (negative politeness). Based on Holtgraves and Yang's (1992) findings, we hypothesized that Japanese become more positively polite when they call their peer but more negatively polite when they call their professor. In either case, they need to spend cognitive resources on tailoring the message to the recipient.

#### *Method*

##### *Respondents*

Participants were 36 American undergraduates (16 male and 20 female) from the University of Michigan and 41 Japanese undergraduates (20 male and 21 female) from

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