

Rethinking of the Harmony: A comparative study of the Concept of Harmony in the East and the West

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This paper considers the difference of concept of the harmony in Japanese everyday interaction. Japanese culture has been discussed that it is quite unique. Harmony is one of the unique characteristics, the keynote, especially in the Japanese interaction. Actually, the origin of the word 'harmony' is a Latin word. So it is not a concept that is peculiar to Japanese culture. This paper first compares the origin of the concept of harmony in each culture and shows differences between Japanese '*wa* (harmony)' and the word 'harmony' in English sense. Then, it examines the singularity of Japanese harmony in interaction. Then I illustrate the English interaction that seems to have common nature of Japanese harmony. It can be suggested that during the interaction, Japanese people try to maintain harmonious atmosphere in the context, not limited to human relationships. Harmony can be fulfilled by participants' patience and tolerance.

1 Introduction

'Harmony' is considered to be a concept that characterizes Japan and other East Asia. In 2000, at 7th International pragmatics conference in Budapest, Sachiko Ide and Li Wei organized a panel focusing the concept of harmony, the core cultural value in East Asia. 'In East Asian cultures, 'harmony' is a keynote of existence. Individuals strive to reconcile divergent forces, principles and points of view in order to maintain harmony. In accordance with Confucian teachings, which dominate the cultural cognition of East Asians, confrontation is avoided and 'face' protected. Mutually satisfactory and face-saving outcomes are the goal of communication and take precedence over the attainment of any other goal by any one individual (Li and Ide, 2000: 288-289).' Several researchers, including me, joined the panel as panelists. All panelists made presentation on the concept harmony in discourse in East Asia. However, most of the audience was oriental people and one of the few native speakers of English asked the differences between Western concept of 'harmony' and Eastern concept of '*wa* (harmony).'

The differences still have some indefinite clarification. This paper tries to compare the concept of 'harmony' that is used in Eastern Culture and Western Cultures. Then, suggestions for research on harmony will be shown.

2 The origin of the words: Harmony VS *Wa*

At the panel session, Ide tried to explain the concept harmony writing on the blackboard 'harmony \equiv *wa*.' When translating the Japanese '*wa*' literally, a word 'harmony' is usually used. A Westerner asked that they also have the word 'harmony.' Right. Then how is it different from oriental harmony and western harmony? The word Harmony is not restricted to Japanese or East Asia philosophy, since it is an English word. However, why harmony seems to be a particular characteristic of Japanese or East Asia. What is the difference behind the word in each culture?

2.1 Harmony in Western Culture

According to 'The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary', the word has appeared in the ME period that was originated from the Latin word *harmonia* which means agreement or concord. The

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definitions are 1) combination or adaptation of parts, elements, or related things, so as to form a consistent and or related things, so as to form a consistent and orderly whole; agreement, accord, congruity, 2) the combination of sounds, as in poetry etc.; sweet or melodious sound, 3) the combination of simultaneous notes to form chords; the structure of a piece of music with regard to its chords, the branch of music that deals with these, 4) agreement of feeling or sentiment; accord, peace, 5) a collation of parallel narratives especially of the four Gospels, 6) pleasing effect, agreeable effect of apt arrangement of parts.

To discuss the cultural background of the harmony, I would like to focus attention on the definition No. 5. The definition of the adjective, 'Harmonious' seems to have more similar sense of '*wa* (harmony)'. 1) Tuneful, sweet-sounding together in harmony, of a person; singing, playing, or speaking tunefully or pleasantly, 2) forming a consistent, orderly, pleasing, or agreeable whole, 3) free from dissent, of ill feeling; amicable, cordial.

In mathematics and other scientific area, there are words such as harmonic analysis, harmonic progression, harmonic series, harmonic oscillator, harmonic proportion, and other nouns that are modified by the words 'harmonic.' The works of Pythagoras, a mathematician in ancient Greek, influences these. Harmonic function is at the same time related to natural sciences such as waves, oscillation and others. Therefore, the word 'harmony' is thought to be an order of universe.

There are followings in the consent words of harmony; agreement, accord, concord, synchronization. Furthermore, the consent word of these words is as follows; conformity, union, concurrence, accordance, unity, friendship, peace, and harmonization, bringing together, organization, management. In addition, there are the following words among the consent words of the words above; conventionality, traditional values, traditionalism, orthodoxy, compliance, consistency, obedience, submission, unison, consensus, unison, unanimity, companionship, amity, acquaintance, comradeship, camaraderie, closeness, familiarity, alliance, end of war, freedom from strife, reconciliation, coordination, bring together, orderliness, order, method, regulation, neatness, tidiness, running, administration, supervision, managing, equivalent, identical, like, the same, one and the same, different, peer, match, keep pace with, counterpart, similar, equal, corresponding, correspondent, alike, the same, comparable, indistinguishable, equal, matching, like, impossible to tell apart, one and the same, like peas in a pod, duplicate, akin to, approximating, in the vein of, reminiscent of, resembling, colleague, contemporary, friend, cohort, equal, counterpart, equivalent, complement, foil, matching part, corresponding item, like, comparable, parallel, analogous, related. Looking at these words, it can be said that the circumference meaning of harmony is similar with the meaning of the harmony used in Japanese.

2.2 Harmony (*wa*) in Japanese Culture

The western word of harmony is related to natural science, whereas Japanese, '*wa* (harmony)' is not related to such natural science but it is related to more nature, religion, human relationship, and other cultural background. When arguing about Japanese '*wa* (harmony)', Prince Shotoku's (574-622)¹ Seventeen-Article Constitution (enacted in 604) is surely referred to. This constitution was not written for the citizens. This was written for the government official workers as office regulations. It is written to the first article that becoming good friends ('*wa*' is the most precious) is the most important and not opposing each other is also important. If the older person and a younger person may become acquaintances, casual relationship and reason will clarify and we can accomplish anything. It is written to the 10th article, 'Don't get angry. Don't complain that others opposed you. Even if you think you are right, others may think you are wrong. Or if others think they are right, you may think they are wrong. If other people hurt their feeling,

you had better consider well whether you had negligence. Therefore, whenever you think that you are right, you had better respects others' view and cooperate and perform with others together.' It is apparent, this article shows that one must always respect others' judgment and cooperate. That is 'Don't act alone, don't decide anything alone.' The emphasis on cooperation is repeated in article 17th, the last article in the Seventeen-Article Constitution. 'As for the politics, you had better not conclude anything by yourself. Be sure to consult with many persons. These are for preventing failure. After consulting in great numbers of people, the conclusion will have logical reason which is supported by all members.' These three articles are said to be including concept of harmony. These articles contain 'the prohibition of an independent action' and 'importance of sympathizing with other people.' We never know how interactions were going in the meeting in his era that was more than a thousand years ago. However, these two messages are well associated with the feature of present-day Japanese interaction.

Although the concept of '*wa* (harmony)' among people might have had existed before him, his codified-out contribution is large when considering Japanese culture, according. It is said that Confucius's precept and Buddhism influence it. However, neither Buddhism nor Confucianism has the precept of '*wa* (harmony)².

Japan was not unified yet. Skirmish, wars rather than arguments had continued. It is thought that Prince Shotoku who made this constitution tried to improve the conflict among people of his time. He thought that the ethics of the relation among people was necessary. For that reason, '*wa* (harmony)' had been an original morality view in Japan even it was influenced by Buddhism and Confucian. Even if it being seen from its origin, '*wa* (harmony)' can be called a concept completely different from Occidental harmony.

If we see how the concept of the Japanese '*wa* (harmony)' is classified in a synonym dictionary, the feature of Japanese '*wa* (harmony)' will be more clarified. The word is classified under the category of *kyoryoku* (cooperation, to do something together for the same goal and purpose). In the same category, there are words such as; *kumu* (to become partner by supporting each other as in 'I was partnered up with him in tennis' and 'I teamed up with my friends'), *te-ni-te-o-toru* (to join hands, to do things and to go places with together, going hand in hand at peace) *kyoudou* (a partnership of more than two people of the same status and qualification, requirement, and capacity by bringing each other's power together and do something together), *kokoro-o-awaseru* (to unite the feeling and to support each other), *te-o-nigiru* (do something hand in hand), *kessoku* (bonds between partnership), *danketsu* (union, bringing each other's power together and do something together). Most of these words are often heard in a sport's player oath and cheers in sports match, especially in team sports.

According to the dictionary, although '*wa* (harmony)' is not in the same sub-classification, we are usually emphasizing the following aspects when we talk about '*wa* (harmony)'. They are *dakyo* (compromise, middle ground, half measure), *jouho* (concession, compromise, to concede, to appease, to give way), *ayumiyoru* (literary walk toward each other, to compromise), *oriau* (literary bend together, to compromise, to split the difference, to get along), *kyocho* (cooperation with, partnership), *docho* (literally the same tune, sympathizer, to sympathize with, to join with, bring each other around to each other's way of thinking), *ikigaau* (literary same rhythms of breathing, to get along with each other).

The English word 'harmony' and the Japanese word '*wa* (harmony)' have been thought that the two have almost the same concept. They share certain similarities in that they are both related to the concept of 'no confrontation'. The most important between the two is that in Japanese '*wa* (harmony)' involves 'understanding, supporting each other' and 'sympathies' before compromising. Now we have to think what

is the difference of concept of harmony in interaction. If the Japanese pursue attain harmony, what the westerners pursue in interaction as for the human relationship.

3. The similarities and differences in harmonious atmosphere in interaction in English and Japanese

Deborah Tannen (2001) presents a wealth of detailed evidence for interactions in families. She assumes that family connotes closeness, being connected to each other. 'We all seek connection: It makes us feel safe; it makes us feel loved. But being close means you care about what those you are close to think. Whatever you do has an impact on them, so you have to take their needs and preferences into account. This gives them power to control your actions, limiting your independence and making you feel hemmed in (Tannen, 2001: 11).' It is probably said that this assumption might fit any Japanese human relationship in the interaction.

Especially, in a family, conversation goes different from others. That 'conversations between—spouses—or between any two people who have a history' — are always part of an ongoing relationship. (Tannen, 2001: 15). She explains this particular situation using the terms 'connection, control and alignment.' One way to understand both the wonderful feeling of connections and the painful feeling of rejection that family entails is what she calls alignment. (Tannen, 2001: 29) The power of alignments is that participants (in this case, family members) work indirectly to strengthen ties among participants (family members). But they can also strengthen ties among some members, leaving others out.

Tannen (2001) also suggests that family is likened to a fortress. A "fortress" captures the sense in which a family is a bulwark against the world—a protective barrier that no one can penetrate to harm you. The fortress walls are built when family members align with each other against the world, often through the world, often through talk (Tannen, 2001: 30).

It is generally said that Japanese human relationship is based on the hierarchy. Even one-age difference leads a variety of honorific usages. According to Tannen (2001), such hierarchy influences family conversation also in American culture. 'Let's start with the drive toward control we can think of any utterance — or any relationship — placed somewhere on a continuum between hierarchy at one end and equality at the other. At the hierarchy end every relationship is a power struggle: Someone is one-up, and someone is one-down. The one-up person gets to tell the one-down person what to do. In this sense the one-up person keeps control (Tannen, 2001: p.68).' She limits this type of human relationship to only family conversation in her culture; however, we can see such relationships in any context in Japanese.

Both in English and Japanese, age is one factor determining who is up and who is down. As Tannen says, families almost always include people of different ages. Parents (or other adult caretakers) are one-up, children one-down, older siblings are one-up as well, and younger siblings are one-down. In addition, in Japanese context, in any participant frames, we always calculate where we are and where should we be in each context. When the factor determining up-and-down is obvious, any participants accept the differences. However, even when the factor determining up-and-down is not obvious and when all participants seems to be equal, participants align themselves in the context with the factors, such as; she is smarter, I am good at this, I am not good at that, she always goes to lunch with them but I have been with them only a few times and so on. The problem is that each participant admits differences, sometimes a slight difference, either others or their own, they try to be the same. It is the harmony: In another words, equality. E. T. Hall and M. R. Hall (1987) point out that the paradox (here) is that the Japanese appear to be very egalitarian in certain situations (when they work together as a team) and rigidly hierarchical in others. However, a closer

examination reveals ever-present, subtle but binding status distinctions. The hierarchy is always there (p.42).

Although she mentions that fortress walls do not ensure harmony within, and that might also be true in Japanese family, for most of the Japanese interaction, fortress walls around any context ensure harmony. These walls are called *uchi-soto* distinction in some literature. It is because that we can assume that each participant always apprehends that there will be some difficulty in their interactional context. As a result, some participants sacrifice themselves in the situation to draw back, tolerate the inconvenience and become patient.

As Tannen says that in English ‘on the equality end of the control continuum, no one is dominant and no one subordinate, so either gets to tell the other what to do.’ But this is an ideal that is rarely achieved. She adds ‘equality’ is a goal continually negotiated through talk another in others. As ideal goal is equality in English, it is equality too in Japanese. In Japanese, harmony is required from the beginning, to exaggerate, before the beginning and all through the interactional context to the end.

Whereas this goal is negotiated through talk in English, this goal is adjusted through the talk in Japanese. For saying, in Japanese, “The nail that sticks up gets pounded down.” Actually, it is always observed when the speaker himself sticks up and moreover he or she tries to pound down by himself or herself. Repairing offers the key to an understanding of the negative societal view of self-assertiveness. Generally, to praise oneself in conversation is not considered to be an acceptable practice in Japan, even though people may privately wish for approval. If speakers unintentionally points out their honorable achievement, they repair their utterances during the course of the conversation (Shigemitsu, 2001).

It can be found that both Japanese and English participants pursue ‘equality rather than harmony,’ in interaction. We have to focus the conversational style in both languages. According to Tannen’s another book called *The Argument Culture: Stopping America’s War of Words*, in English interaction, in English, people find it enjoyment to start argue to the opposition. “The argument culture urges us to approach the world—and the people in it – in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is best way to be done: The best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate; the best way to cover news is to find spokespeople who express the most extreme, polarized views and present them as “both sides”; the best way to settle disputes is litigation that pits one party against the other, the best way to begin an essay is to attack someone; and the best way to show you’re really thinking is to criticize (p. 9).”

If this is the English conversational style, Japanese conversational style is quite different. For some, arguing means there is something wrong with the relationship. But for others, arguing means you are involved, and the end of anger means the end of involvement (Tannen, 2001; 91). The best way is to avoid conflict, the best way to never pick an argument, the best way to pretend to be the same with others. If other people praise you, you have to deny it. Even an observable fact such as height should be denied or should be averted from.

4. Directions for future research

I suggest that the concept of harmony, or ‘*wa* (harmony), or possibly equality should be studied as follows. First, we should define the term exactly. When commentators try to explain Japanese concepts in terms of English, as Anna Wierzbicka points out (1997), the effect is to obfuscate the term rather than clarify. Secondary, it is advisable that linguistic behavior should be divided in the researchable element. Such a phonological element, lexicon, and other linguistic level transmit harmonious atmosphere. And last but not by no means least, from the pragmatics point of view, back-channeling and turn taking are also

influenced by 'harmony' since all linguistic behaviors are influenced by the keynote 'wa (harmony).' Harmony is synthesized by many level of linguistic behavior.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the difference of concept of the harmony in Japanese and English everyday interaction is considered. Japanese culture has been discussed that it is quite unique. Actually, the origin of the word 'harmony' is a Latin word. So it is not a concept that is peculiar to Japanese culture. This paper first compares the origin of the concept of harmony in each culture and shows differences between Japanese 'wa (harmony)' and the word 'harmony' in English sense. Both Western culture and eastern culture, especially Japanese culture tries to avoid conflict. However, the quality of the harmony is different from each other. 'Wa (harmony)' in Japanese culture is not a goal of action but it is the required attitude of interaction. During the interaction, Japanese people try to maintain harmonious atmosphere in the context. In order to maintain harmony, people use various maneuvers to maintain such an atmosphere. Being harmonious is performed by the participants' endurance and drawing back. This study may shed some light on the rethinking of 'harmony.'

Notes

- 1 Some researchers argue that *Shotoku* is an imaginary person and did not really exist.
- 2 In the precept of Confucianism, 'wa (harmony)' between people and nature is stated, not people and people.

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