

Cultural Ambiguity in the Caribbean and Japan: Notes and Reflections on a Lecture

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1 . Introduction

The concept *cultural ambiguity* emerged as a prime lesson topic on which to focus the metaphoric comparative lens in introducing theories and themes of the English-speaking Caribbean culture to university students in an English as foreign language (EFL) setting. Other related topics or themes include *cultural ambivalence*, *cultural open-endedness*, and *cultural fluidity*. However, cultural ambiguity or ambiguous actions and attitudes, which form a distinct way of life, took on a particular interest and focus as it captures a cultural value and communicative practice central to interpersonal relations in Japan. Ambiguity in communication and human relations in Japan is often considered, goes the argument, a necessary and aesthetic value: it makes for smoother, more nuanced and 'beautiful' social intercourses. To be sure, cultural ambiguity in communication and human relations in Japan especially when contrasted with Western so-called 'direct' and more 'logical' communication style has been given some critical attention. One such is Kenzaburo Oe's Nobel Prize acceptance speech titled *Japan, the ambiguous and myself*. This speech and two other examples relating to cultural ambiguity in Japan will be discussed later.

Now it is important to explain a bit about the lecture and this theme of Caribbean 'ambiguity'. The lecture introduces the background of the English-speaking Caribbean culture as primarily the result of the intermixing of African, European, Native-Amerindian, and Asian (Chinese and Indian) cultures under conditions that were voluntary and involuntary, inhumane, discriminatory, and violent. This history has made the Caribbean a region of cultural contradictions and complexities where the previously mentioned themes of ambivalence, open-endedness, fluidity and ambiguity present some useful metaphors for a better understanding of Caribbean people's way of life. Apart from the introductory style and substance of the lecture, there are other guiding factors. The most important factor is Edward Hall's dictum: "Culture hides more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants" (1990:30). Hall went on to say that, it is through learning about and experiencing other cultures, especially via episodes of 'culture shock', we can truly understand the hidden parts of our own culture.

Perhaps for the students 'ambiguity' is one of the partially understood if not hidden aspects of Japanese culture, and that by focusing the metaphorical comparative lens on what obtains in the Caribbean, a greater clarity of understanding will result for them. However, what does 'cultural ambiguity' mean? Furthermore, what is the form, character and instances of cultural ambiguity in the Caribbean compared to Japan? Finally, what have been the students' impressions of, reactions to, and reflections on this topic? The following paragraphs will attempt to shed light on these questions.

2. What is cultural ambiguity?

One general definition of cultural ambiguity states that it is primarily the "...influence of different cultures." Further, a person is culturally "...ambiguous if he or she has been influenced by different cultural groups and /or carries a cultural identity that cannot be clearly assigned to a certain territory" (igi-global dictionary). For the lecture, I define cultural ambiguity as *a way of life, which includes a particular kind of thinking, feeling, acting, and speaking that is often not easily understood because its meaning is unclear*. Whereas the former definition focuses on the external influence of other cultures leading to uncertainty about an individual's identity, the latter does not state any determining factor. Furthermore, the former definition highlights the difficulty of an individual's cultural identity being assigned to any location or territory while the latter refers to no special element. Arguably then this definition used for the lecture is more dynamic and nuanced as it incorporates the notion of cultural ambiguity as being internally as well as externally influenced. In fact, by describing it as a product of a multicultural phenomenon, the former definition embraces cultural ambiguity in the English-speaking Caribbean while excluding the form that exists in Japan. If this sounds all too abstract, then the particular forms, substances, and characteristics of cultural ambiguity that comparatively obtains in Japan and the Caribbean should offer some concreteness and therefore more clarity.

3. Specificities of cultural ambiguity

What then are the specificities and instances of human relations and communication both in Japan and the Caribbean that evidence each culture's uniquely ambiguous way of life? Expressed in interpersonal relations, reflected in the indirectness and subtlety of their language, as well as a deep consideration for the feelings of others, cultural ambiguity in Japan is primarily influenced by their history of being a closed society; a cultural sensitivity to people and things; and a collective belief in the value of social harmony. It seems cultural ambiguity exists organically in daily-life interactions in Japan and becomes more pronounced in cross-cultural communication settings. On the other hand, occasioned by people's language use as well as their feelings, thinking and actions about their identities, cultural ambiguity in the Caribbean is influenced mainly by its colonial history, plantation slavery, and the resulting multi-

racial society. Cultural ambiguity is integral to Caribbean existence both as a method of coping with its multi-racial realities and a valued trait of Caribbean people.

3. 1 Examples of the Caribbean

As already mentioned, cultural ambiguity in the Caribbean results from the history of slavery, racial discrimination, and the cultural intermixing of people. Caribbean people are, for example, uncertain about their identity and sense of self. Here are two cultural practices in the Caribbean, especially in Jamaica, that instantiate ambiguity.

One is the *image or definition of a beautiful body*. Especially for female beauty, it is a complex mix of both European and African physical features. Skin bleaching is popular despite the many health risks associated with this practice. Dark-skinned women try to change their facial skin color to a lighter complexion, which is considered more European and therefore more attractive or beautiful. At the same time, huge buttocks which is a physical feature among African women is highly valued, and some women have gone to the extreme of trying certain medicinal products which they hope may induce larger buttocks. This double meaning and consciousness about female beauty is a prime example of the Caribbean's ambiguous existence.

The other example is the *Creole language and Standard Caribbean English*. Creole is a language derived from a mix of European languages—English in the case of the English-speaking Caribbean—and African languages. Caribbean Creole English was born out of slavery and plantation life: it was the language of the slaves, the underclass, the uneducated, and it has therefore carried a negative image. Today, however, Caribbean Standard English is the language of media, business, education, making it the official language of the English-speaking Caribbean territories. Cultural ambiguity and ambivalence (love-hate / double feeling) are characteristics of language use among especially the educated class, who in their knowledge and understanding of the history of slavery and colonialism have come to think of the English language as a tool of oppression. Members of the educated class sometimes choose to use the Creole as a means of retaliation, to confuse or criticise, which can be ambiguous as the real meaning and understanding of their motives are not always clear. Yet, in certain situations, they would have no choice but to use Standard English as it is the official language. What is more, English is now the *lingua franca*, and the language of the world of opportunities.

Through the concepts of skinned beauty / color and a particular attitude toward language use, the lecture identifies two examples of cultural ambiguity in the Caribbean.

3. 2 Examples of Japan

In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature (1994), Oe seeks to explain the rationale of

a perceived cultural tendency for the Japanese to be ambiguous in human relations and language use when compared to the Western world. Sensitivity rather than clarity is given priority in interactions, whether among each other, or to non-Japanese. It can be very frustrating to a Westerner, Oe argues for example, to eventually learn the lesson that a 'yes' response from a Japanese person may actually mean 'no'.

Inspired by Oe's speech, Nozomi Hayase, a Japanese living abroad writes about her experience of living in a state of 'in-betweenity' in trying to maintain her Japanese 'ambiguous identity' while simultaneously adapt to the ways of Western logic and clarity seeking tendencies. The skill of 'flexibility', she concludes, is necessary to maintaining a balance and achieving success while living in a foreign country.

Yet another example of the culture of ambiguous thinking and acting in Japan is reflected in a particular scene in *Norwegian Woods*, a novel by Haruki Murakami. In this classic novel, one dramatic scene captures succinctly the *sensibility* and *restraint* that are among the main reasons for Japanese people's tendency to be unclear or indirect in their communications or to be intentionally and strategically ambiguous. The exact quote is given below, but here is the background to it. Tokyoite Toru, the novel's protagonist, distraught and mentally drained after wandering around Japan because of the suicide of his girlfriend, was discovered on a shore in the Shikoku area by a kind old man. The old man not only engaged Toru in conversations, reminding him that life goes on, but also went away and returned offering him some delicious sushi and sake. Depressed and being hungry for days, this old man was a heaven-sent to Toru. He thanked him for his kindness. However, to Toru's amazement the old man returned the next day offering more than he would have imagined: money. Take it, go get yourself a room at the nearby hotel where you can take a shower and get some good, well-needed sleep, the kind old man counsels. Toru's initial response, the old man's reaction to it, and Toru's final decision about taking the money is captured in the quotation below.

I said he had done more than enough for me and I could not accept the money on top of everything else, but he refused to take it back. 'It's not MONEY' he said, 'It's my feeling. Don't think about it too much, just take it.' All I could do was thank him and accept it. (2000: 362)

It seems that once 'money' ambiguously became 'feelings' Toru interestingly thought he had no choice but to accept it from the kind old man. Based on Toru's character in the novel, and his state of depression, he is the type who would have rather been left alone to suffer. However, not wanting to hurt the old man's feelings, he accepted the money. Consideration for others' feelings seems to be both a prominent cause and occasion of the sensibility that undergirds cultural ambiguity in Japan. Arguably, this scene extracted from Murakami's novel exemplifies this hallowed Japanese spirit and sense of ambiguity.

4. 0 Conclusion: receptions, reactions, and reflections

Selected themes, theories and cultural practices of Caribbean culture with a particular focus on the English-speaking territories, is the course's broad outline within which this complex topic of cultural ambiguity was introduced in a lecture. Applying a comparative lens in such introductory lectures is implicitly if not explicitly done. Moreover, quite often the scope and depth of analysis in an introductory lecture cannot be anything but narrow and at a surface level. Nevertheless, this topic of cultural ambiguity sparks interest and intrigue as it allows the students to directly think about and reflect on the form that is said to exist in Japan while learning about that which characterizes the Caribbean.

For the most part the majority of students seem to understand and accept the Japanese ambiguous ways in human relations and everyday life as necessary and natural. In the case of the Caribbean's version, students understand it well enough, especially from the standpoint of its colonial history and multi-culturalism.

Interestingly, a small minority of students consider their Japanese ambiguous ways to be burdensome and should therefore be abandoned especially in intercultural relations and communication. They relate their own experiences of the difficulties being precise, clear and direct in communicating their thoughts to their non-Japanese counterparts: for example when interacting with international students in Japan or host families while studying abroad.

As for my own reflections and in ending this essay-cum-report, it might be useful to be more specific or unambiguous about the key focus points and goals of this lecture. First, among Japanese students, there is a paucity of knowledge of the Caribbean as one of the core English-speaking regions. Through structured lectures like this one, gaps can be bridged little by little. Second, the stimulation of cross-cultural thinking as well as allowance for direct use of the comparative method of learning influence the lecture topic selections. Third, learning about other cultures can provide deep cultural learning about the hidden or the out-of-awareness aspects of one's own culture. This classic Edward Hall's theory serves as a signpost for the lecture. Finally, the lecture offers practical content EFL learning as English accounts for over ninety-five percent of the language of oral instruction while written and verbal feedback from students is entirely in English.

Introducing Caribbean cultures to students generally, and focusing on cultural ambiguity as cross-cultural topic specifically, have piqued students' interest as well as served as a platform for increasing inter-cultural knowledge and understanding.

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【Abstract】

カリブ地域と日本の文化的曖昧さ——講義ノートおよび考察

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文化的曖昧さは、日本およびカリブ地域での人間関係とコミュニケーションの諸例を理解する上で有効な概念であるといえる。

カリブ地域の文化的曖昧さは、アイデンティティについての人びとの感情、思考、行動や、人びとの言語使用に表われ、おもにカリブ地域の植民地としての歴史、大農園奴隷制度、地理、そして結果的な多人種社会がおもに影響している。日本の文化的曖昧さは、対人関係に表れ、閉鎖社会という歴史、人間や事物への文化的繊細さ、社会調和の価値への集合的な信頼が、おもに影響している。この論は、日本の学生のEFLクラスに対してこの話題を講義した際の報告である。