

Cultural Differences Between America and Japan: Seen Through the Viewpoint of TV Commercials

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Introduction

Two years ago, 1993, a friend of mine and I visited a friend in Los Angeles and she got a great interest in American TV commercials. She video-taped many American TV commercials and carried the tape back to Japan. At first, I took little interest in the commercials. But I felt that they were much noisier than Japanese ones when I watched the tape and wondered why they were so noisy. This is how I came to choose the topic "Cultural Differences Between America and Japan: Seen Through the Viewpoint of TV Commercials" and study the cross-cultural communication from a viewpoint of TV commercials.

Using an advertisement is one of the effective tools to promote sales of the products or goods. No matter how many times a sponsor gives commercial messages, if the commercial messages don't appeal to the consumers' sense of need, they are fruitless. So sponsors desperately research what is the center of consumers' interest and what approach is most effective, and make an effort to attract consumers' attention through advertisements. The advertisement in which they compiled the various researches is probably the mirror reflecting the culture.

We will be able to understand some aspects of the culture by studying the advertisement of the country. But in this paper, I would like to focus my attention on the differences in the way of persuasion between America and Japan in TV commercials.

This is not the marketing research but a comparison of cultures. So I chose the study of TV commercials, which I was interested in on account of my friend's video tape, and will compare them in the viewpoint of the cross-cultural communication and prove the ideas by some literatures.

When we study English, it is important to learn grammar. But at the same time, since English is also a means of communication, it is very important to study culture and to understand cultural background. So I hope that studying of TV commercials in this paper helps us to understand cultural differences between Japan and America.

1. Soft Sell and Hard Sell

We can express the Japanese and American ways of approach in commercials with various words. But in short, Japanese commercials tend to use a "soft sell" approach, while Americans use a "hard sell" approach.¹ Soft sell is the way of advertisement which stimulates emotion and aims at an accumulated effect by using an indirect expression and hard sell is the way to advertise by emphasizing the strong point of the merchandise and profit of the consumer.²

A good example of this is the commercial of a car. For instance, there were not any words mentioning the horsepower and good performance in Lucino (a car) commercial. It is like a part of drama and a man drives Lucino a little bit. And the slogan is "Lucino might be good." On the other hand, in Chevrolet (a car) commercial in America, it emphasizes the mileage, resale value and horsepower. Lincoln Mark VIII (a car) commercial also appeals the payment and luxury.

Why are there these differences between Japanese and American commercials? One of the reasons is that the Japanese choose a car for its shape and comfort to drive, and the Americans attach importance to its performance. But it seems because the Japanese respond to visual messages whereas the Americans pick up oral stimuli.³ When the Japanese see Utsurndesu (a disposable camera) commercial, which has no words describing the camera, they would not regard it as a less effective commercial. They understand the good point of the camera by the colorful picture on TV. And in the case of Tercel (a car), it draws attention to the reasonable size by showing that the car goes through a narrow street. But in America, this is not a good commercial. The American consumer makes up his mind by looking at the facts, and giving thought to the arguments brought forward debating whether he should buy the product or not.⁴ In Japan, people have relatively homogeneous cultural background, while Americans have heterogeneous ones. So using statistics is very effective. They give an individual a mathematical, scientific and perfectly logical way of calculating his benefit. Facts and numbers are the reliable things to understand merchandise clearly and to compare them and judge them. And America is said to be a "culture of debate."⁵ If they can take something from visual messages, they would not trust the merchandise is good only because of the commercial. Indeed, a result researched by Roper and Good House Keeping in America shows advertisements consumers trust in the 1990's are the advertisement that gives a quality guaranteed of the merchandise, and that reports the information about included things in it exactly and minutely, and that presents the price.⁶ On the other hand, according to Reimel Okamura, in Japan "at first, they stir up mood on TV, then present the more detailed data on newspaper, finally, write the price and discount on a leaflet."⁷

2. Slogans

Japan has a culture of *haiku*, and the America has a Shakespearian heritage.⁸ And each culture influences slogans.

In Japan words are only sparks to set fire to the imagination. They do not glorify the product. A few words tell everything.⁹ Let me cite a few examples.

うれしい	Delightful
楽しい	Joyful
新しい	New
幸せづくり研究所	A Laboratory Makes Happiness
ホンダ オデッセイ誕生	Honda Odyssey

ヒラメの縁側	<i>Engawa</i> of Flatfish
マグロの中落ち	<i>Nakauchi</i> of Tuna
ビールの中...	In the Ichiban Shibori
おいしいとこだけ一番搾り	The tastiest part of beer

CHASER changes CHASER

“Nice car.”

CHASER changes CHASER

In Odyssey (a car) commercial, the words show that we feel happy when we buy and drive Odyssey. And in Kirin Ichidan Shibori (beer), *engawa* and *nakauchi* are the tastiest parts respectively. So the slogan suggests the beer tastes good by citing the typical examples of good taste. Both of them only line up words without using verbs. But they are lyric and rythmical, so that these words stay in our mind naturally.

The slogan of Chaser (a car) commercial is also very rememberble. But it has no meaning. What do you think when you hear “Chaser changes Chaser?” You might think what parts change and how the Chaser changes. It would be the aim of the commercial maker. He tries to interest us in the car by presenting a strange phrase. These lyric, rythmical and strange slogans are effective in Japan. But in America, these kinds of slogans might be criticized for being too vague and obscure.¹⁰

There is a commercial which has a slogan like Japanese one. Lexus (a car) commercial is one of the examples.

A VERY BIG SPACE

A VERY COMFORTABLE SPACE

A VERY QUIET SPACE
A VERY BIG COMFORTABLE QUIET SPACE
AND IT'S PORTABLE
VERY VERY PORTABLE

This slogan is lyric and rythmical and Japanesque. But the slogan emphaizes the car is portable. The word portable is realistic. And this commercial doesn't end yet. Following the slogan, it tells us. In America, language is the voice of logical thought.¹¹ And in Japan, words are used to build an image.¹² Chris Mosdell describes the American and Japanese words cleverly. In America "language is a wonderful plaything; to be handled, shaped and pulled and pushed into different forms"¹³ and "the Japanese are gardeners with their words. They make spacious and clever gardens. Words are plants. They are not to be cut up and stems broken if they are to grow."¹⁴

3. Commercial Songs

I would like to quote Mosdell's expression, "Commercial songs are designed to stick inside your brain. They become the voice of your subconscious reminding you to a certain product or shop at a certain store. They can turn the public into "consumer junkies." They are, quoting Karl Marx, the 'opium of the people.'"¹⁵

The American commercial maker aims at effect in this 'opium of the people' with commercial songs more than the Japanese one. The hard sell philosophy is still there. They are songs that push the product directly into the consumer. They are commercial chants.¹⁶ Let me cite the example of Chicken Tonight (ketchup) commercial song.

I feel like Chicken Tonight,
Like Chicken tonight
Chicken Tonight

On the other hand, Japanese commercial songs do not push the products. Some commrcials use songs popular singers sing: for example, Hondashi (a seasoning), Asahi Super Dry (beer), Skyline (a car). The product's name appears less often in the songs than in American ones. They use the lyrics and music to build an image and to help communicate a total image. The song of Rasheen (a car) commercial is probably made for only the commrcial, but the product's name is not in the song.

どこへ行ったのだろう I used to long for the blue sky
遠く 遠く 遠く Where has it gone?

いつか夢見た
あの青い空

The commercial maker is selling a package by using a kind of atmospheric music.

Why does the Japanese commercial use image lyrics? And at the same time, why does American commercial use commercial chants? It is because in American and Japanese cultures people listen to music in different ways. The Americans are interested in the commercial song as a symbol of life,¹⁷ while Japanese enjoy their sounds themselves.¹⁸ In Japan sound is used sentimentally.¹⁹

4. Comparative Commercials

The one of characters of American commercials is probably a comparative commercial. The American commercial maker uses it in the commercials of many things such as cleansers and cars.

This is one of examples.

We are not Perrier
We are Aqua Vie
We are not evian
We are Aqua Vie
We are not Coca Cola Classic
We are Aqua Vie
A spring pure
A certain flavor
Non-carbonated water
With the deepest thirst within you
Aqua Vie

The hard sell approach has become intense and the competition so fierce that companies are almost cutting each other's throats to stay on top. In America, an advertisement will constantly talk about competitors; it will compare merits, and by facts and logic it will say its product is undoubtedly the best.²⁰ But indeed, according to a result researched by Roper and Good House Keeping, only twenty percent of people regard a comparative commercial as persuasive.²¹ They would think that a comparative commercial is one of the ways of expression.

In Japan, putting down other products is thought to be tasteless and bad manners.²² But it seems that kind of comparative commercials have been on the increase, although they compare products with those of other companies. They tend

to be used for the commercials of products which we choose by its effect like cleansers and disposable diapers; for example, Ariel (a cleanser).

5. Crossing Culture

Japanese culture and American culture adopt or learn the advertising techniques and styles from each other. A comparative advertisement is one of American techniques Japanese advertisement maker adopted. And we can also find similarities in the commercial of medicines and cosmetics. They are products which we choose by its effect like cleansers. So both in Japan and America, these commercials emphasize effects of the products. A director of the Tokyo office that produced such advertisement said, "The Japanese economy is no longer on the roll. There is less room for fantasy in advertising. The ad must make the product stand out against the other competitors."²³ It seems that, as for Japanese "mood" advertisements, many Americans believe that these will be Japan's next major export to the United States. Good examples of this are 1994 Acura Integra (a car) and Honda New Accord (a car) commercials. Both of them have a few words and they are fantastic. Now the viewers can cut off the sound by remote control devices when the commercials come on, and many U.S. homes have video recorders that let the users pass over a commercial after they have recorded it. Thus it follows that highly visual advertisements with crazy images and wild fantasies may perhaps stop people doing this.²⁴

6. Culture of Persuasion and Culture of Realization

According to the classification of communication, commercials are actions of persuasion to achieve a sponsor's aim.²⁵ So finally, I would like to consider TV commercials from a viewpoint of the rhetoric.

A rhetoric in America aims to persuade an audience by speech. By using a symbol strategically, a typical American speaker tries to inform and strengthen, and change the audience's attitude. So the American rhetoric is basically logical. To persuade audience is to contend with rhetoric of speech. While Japanese scarcely have the way of thought that by using a strategy of rhetoric they must set up their contention and emotion, and persuade an audience on purpose. It is because while America is the heterogeneous culture in which people think each person must have the different ways of thinking and feeling, and desires, Japan is the homogeneous culture where most people must have the same way of thinking and feeling. In the homogeneous society, in Japan, the function of rhetoric is to establish or keep harmony in the human relations by grouping unanimously. While American rhetoric is logical, Japanese one is flexible and intuitive. And persuasion is the key point in

American rhetoric, on the other hand realization is in Japanese rhetoric.²⁶

In the form of proof, Americans tend to use logical proof and Japanese to use emotional proof. In America they generally acknowledge the great value of clearness, precision and objectivity, so that in order to insist on and prove the point, speakers are required to include much proof like facts, statistics, individual experiences, illustrations and quotations from the authorities as supporting materials in speech. In short, it is necessary in American rhetorical communication to have the ability of using effectively logical proof to persuade.

In Japan, they value subjectivity and ambiguity, so that they tend to avoid including much proof like concrete facts, numbers and exact quotations in messages speakers construct. And the Japanese are good at stimulating emotion like sympathy, understanding, appreciation and encouragement in audiences, and expressing a delicate nuance.²⁷

From these rhetorical character, it might be natural that the American commercial emphasize the price and discount directly, while the Japanese commercial should be atmospheric and not push the product on consumers.

Conclusion

In this paper, I investigated TV commercials in the viewpoint of messages, slogans and songs. It was revealed that soft sell approach and hard sell approach are used in all of them. In Japanese commercials, a visual message is preferred to an oral message. The slogans are used to build an image, and the songs are also used to create a comfortable atmosphere. In Japanese commercials, the total image of the product is created by the visual messages, slogans and songs. And this approach is acceptable to Japanese culture which is the culture of realization.

On the other hand, in American commercials, oral messages are given generously. And the slogans and songs are used to push the product. In a word, the American commercial pushes the product by using all means. And such approach is acceptable to American culture which is the culture of persuasion.

English is a means of communication. So when we study English, it is necessary to learn cultural background of people who speak English. Not until we understand culture well do we have good communication. In this paper, I studied TV commercials, and realized cultural background has a great influence on them. But this is only one of examples. I would like to continue the study of the cross-cultural communication in various viewpoint.

TV Commercials of Reference

Japanese Commercials=[J]

American Commercials=[A]

I. SOFT SELL AND HARD SELL

- Lucino (a car) [J]
- Chevrolet (a car) [A]
- Lincoln Mark VIII (a car) [A]
- Utsurundesu (a disposable camera) [J]
- Tercel (a car) [J]

II. SLOGANS

- Odyssey (a car) [J]
- Kirin Ichiban Shibori (beer)[J]
- Chaser (a car) [J]
- Lexus A (a car) [A]

III. COMMERCIAL SONGS

- Chicken Tonight (ketchup) [A]
- Hondashi (a seasoning) [J]
- Asahi Super Dry (beer) [J]
- Skyline (a car) [J]
- Rasheen (a car) [J]

IV. COMPARATIVE COMMERCIALS

- Aqua Vie (drink) [A]
- Pampers (a disposable diaper) [A]
- Wisk (a cleanser) [A]
- Tide (a cleanser) [A]
- Alier (a cleanser) [J]

V. CROSSING CULTURE

- Liquid Plumber (a cleanser) [A]
- Look (a cleanser) [J]
- Monistat 7 (medicine) [A]
- Sutona IB (medicine) [J]
- Loreal Lip Colour (cosmetics) [A]
- MAX FACTOR impact (cosmetics) [A]
- Perfect Rouge (cosmetice) [J]
- Lip Aventure (cosmetice) [J]
- 1994 Acura Integra (a car) [A]
- Honda New Accord (a car) [A]

NOTES:

1. Chris Mosdell, *The Mirror Makers: Cultural Differences between America and Japan Seen through the Eye of Advertising*, (Tokyo: Macmillan Language House, 1986), p.7.
2. *Ibid.* p.86.
3. *Ibid.* p.4.
4. *Ibid.* p.5.
5. *Ibid.* pp.4-5.
6. Sebiru Kaede, "Transgenerational Family Value" (*Advertising*, No. 448 November 1993, Dentsu) p.70.
7. Gyou Furuta, *Ibunka Communication Keyword*, (Yuhikaku, 1990), p.171.
8. Mosdell, p.55.
9. *Ibid.* pp.58-59.
10. *Ibid.* pp.59-60.
11. *Ibid.* p.54.
12. *Ibid.* p.58.
13. *Ibid.* p.54.
14. *Ibid.* p.56.
15. *Ibid.* p.45.
16. *Ibid.* p.48.
17. *Ibid.* pp.48-51.
18. *Ibid.* p.54.
19. *Ibid.* p.51.
20. *Ibid.* p.10.
21. Kaede, p.70.
22. Mosde, p.10.
23. *Ibid.* pp.10-11.
24. *Ibid.* p.11.
25. Gyou Furuta, *Ibunka Communication Keyword*, p.170.
26. Gyou Furuta, *Ibunka Communication: Shin Kokusaijin heno Joken*, (Yuhikaku, 1987), pp.169-170.
27. *Ibid.* pp.178-179.

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Furuta, Gyou. *Ibunka Communication Keyword*, (Yuhikaku, 1990).

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1993, Dentsu).

Mosdell, Chris. *The Mirror Makers: Cultural Differences between America and Japan Seen through the Eye of Advertising*, (Tokyo: Macmillan Language House, 1986).

この論文に取り上げられたTVコマーシャルは音声と映像を appendix (収録) としてビデオテープにまとめられ本稿と併せて提出されている。紙面でそれが表現できないのが残念である。言語 (ここでは英語) が日本人にとって外国人との異文化コミュニケーションの一手段であることを考える時、文字言語と共にそれに付随する音声表現、身体動作表現、その他非言語メッセージの要素を異文化比較の観点から考察することは興味深い。

(卒論指導 野村啓治講師)