

# The Art of Silence

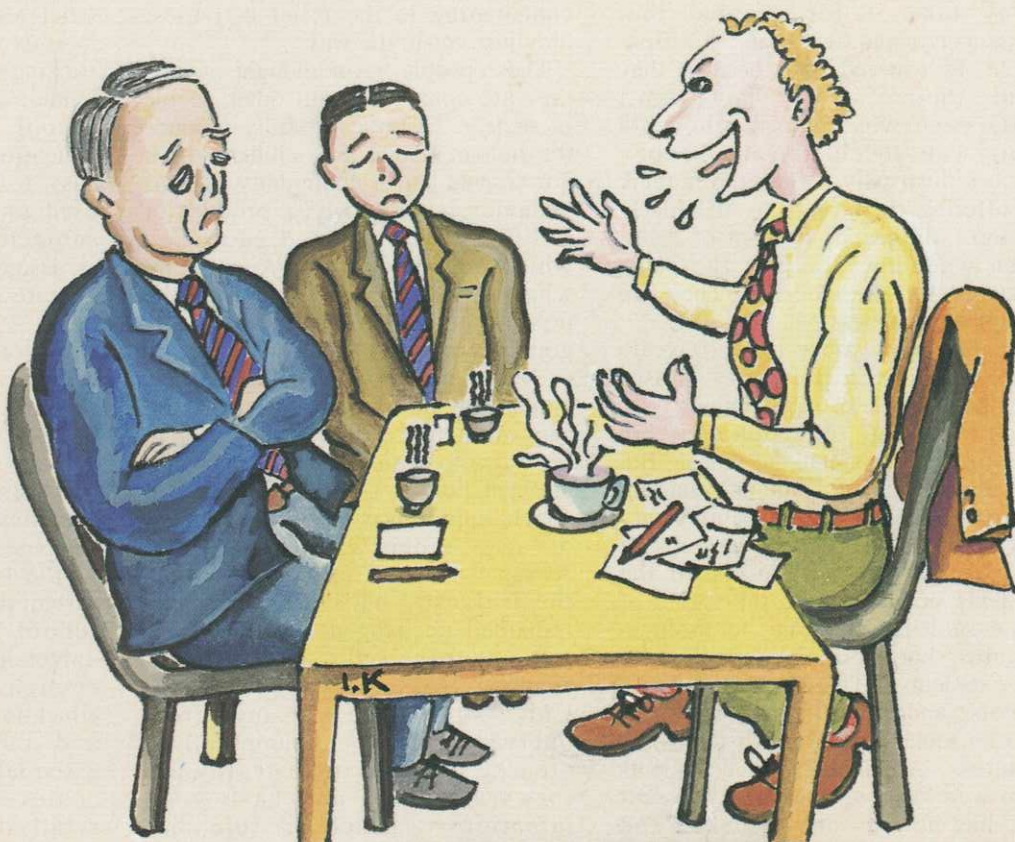
Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

Ways of talking differ from country to country. I never realized this until my second or third year in Japan when I found myself puzzling over the difficulty I had in keeping conversations going.

The biggest problem was topics. Things that I was used to talking about elicited little interest in Japan. Having been brought up in an East Coast American family, I had been taught from an early age that debate, politics and controversial topics about which differing opinions would emerge were the right sort of conversation to have at the dinner table and elsewhere.

Yet I became aware that suitable topics were entirely different in Japan. Here it is best not to talk about your personal problems or dreams. Neither should you proffer theories on politics, or strong opinions. These kind of topics are not the sort of fare that polite people talk about. Travel, nature, the weather and seasonal topics, popular trends, things of informational value but without personal evaluation are better choices.

Agreement is an essential ingredient to exchange. Maintaining a mood of consensus is important. The bedrock of conversation that I was brought up on in the U.S. — the lively exchange of differing opinions — is inappropriate. Back home, we pride ourselves in being able to come up



with a different viewpoint on whatever topic is on the table. Through this we assert our personality and identity. Lively conversation is highly evaluated, and the basis of this liveliness comes from challenging each other's views.

In Japan, though, to challenge someone on any kind of topic is considered rude. Disagreement is taken as an affront, and herein lies my biggest problem in communication. I've discovered that my basic method

of communication is that of "catch ball," in picking up on someone's comment and changing directions on it.

I was trained as a child never to agree fully with any statement. This would stop the conversation. If someone mentions that the weather is lovely today — even if I agree — I am beholden to add or subtract something like: "Yes, but don't you just hate this humidity?" or "Yes, but I preferred yesterday's." This type of

response throws the conversation back so that my companion can easily give another comment on that comment. Thus, the ball passes back and forth and we can easily chat away.

This type of "catch ball" is not suitable for Japan. Here the best communication seems to come from jumping onto the same wave length as the speaker and, if anything, augmenting what is being said. But, once one does so, the conversation dries up immediately. There are pauses and silences that I, from my western upbringing, feel should be filled.

My Japanese friends have no such compulsion to fill in silences with chatter. In fact, many Japanese pride themselves in not having to talk in order to understand each other. It's been explained to me that a quiet silence between friends is comfortable as well as an important form of communication in itself. Perhaps this is part of what "wa" or harmony means here.

The West is verbal. These days the phrase "silence is golden" is used mainly in reference to children's and other unwanted noise. In Japan the phrase takes on a far broader meaning. In Japan, silence IS golden. In fact, a great deal of talk is referred to in pejorative terms: "kuchi kazu ga ooi," or too many words in the mouth; and "nobenka," a smooth talker — a comment with a negative nuance.

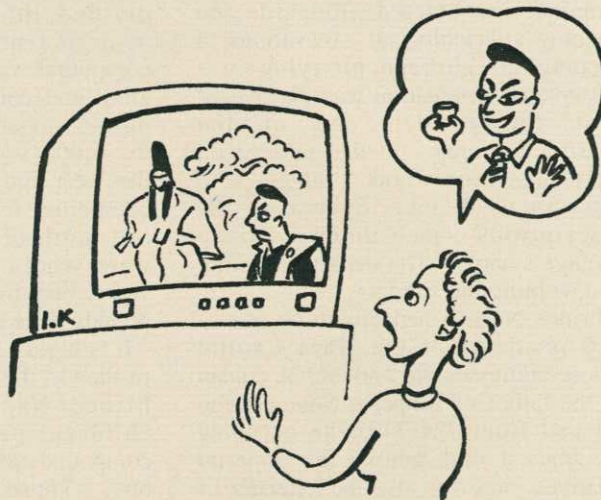
Silence is seen as a sign of erudition. Whereas many Americans just assume that the quiet person is one without many thoughts or much to say, Japanese see silence as strength. When Diet matters are aired on TV, the silent

types who look like they are sleeping are given credit for thinking deep thoughts.

It is very difficult for me to master the art of silence when I am with one or more people. This is because I have been assiduously trained to talk and to entertain when I am with others. If I analyze the quality of my chatter I begin to understand how the Japanese feel. They have no such training and they lack my fear or unease in maintaining quiet.

Bit by bit I am coming to the point where I can appreciate quiet. Slowly over these past 20 years I am beginning to react to western-style verbal patter in a Japanese way. Yes, what IS wrong with quiet? It makes me nervous, but it's something to which one can become accustomed.

Selling oneself and one's ideas has basic value in the United States. We are a verbal people and we show a tendency for self promotion. There is nothing wrong with this. Yet, in Japan, this self-based patter is perceived as indiscreet. Our means of relating to each other is an entirely



different style from that of the Japanese. It would be arbitrary to state that one is better than the other: They are merely different customs.

In Japan, we Westerners make a bad impression by maintaining our own cultural standards. Here, one should center one's attention on the other person and not bring up one's own interests and accomplishments. Japanese are usually fastidious about this. One example is Masafumi Hosoi, a friend of more than 10 years, who one day mentioned that if I were at home on a certain Sunday, to please turn on the television. He was performing Noh, an ancient theatrical tradition, on the most respected of all the TV stations, one that prides itself on the quality of its cultural programs. Yet, for over 10 years Mr. Hosoi had never once mentioned that he was even interested in this highly esoteric tradition, not to mention that he has attained the level of a professional.

This kind of surprise rarely happens in Boston, anyway, where we all talk about what we are working on and what we are gifted in, often magnifying our talents many times over. Imagine the Japanese reaction when Westerners claim that they "can speak Japanese" when they only know a few words and phrases. In this culture, people deny that they can speak English even when they are on the verge of being bilingual. Modesty is viewed in a favorable light. Showing your cards is not the best way to go about your business in this culture.

Nevertheless, it's hard for me — even after 20 years — to change my basic responses. I do my utmost to tune down my comments on the economy and the general news. And I hold back on talking about my personal life. By doing so, I have become closer to my Japanese friends.

J.K.

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