

Reading Out for Your Audience: The Art of Effective Public Speaking

By Muramatsu Masumi

Japan is a nation of speech-readers. People like to read carefully written, sometimes even rehearsed, speeches word for word. For opening and concluding conferences, international or domestic, people read prepared texts. Most Japanese speakers' eyes are glued to the text. They don't look up and survey the audience. They don't ad lib. On more ceremonious occasions, they even announce the date (everybody knows what day it is!) and their own name and title to finish.

The Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan in Tokyo's Yurakucho is a veritable showcase of international wit and wisdom, where prominent overseas visitors—politicians, entrepreneurs, executives, economists, entertainers, and others—speak regularly to the members of this 50-year-old press club, popularly referred to by the members as the "Gaijin Kisha Club." The chairpersons, veteran members of the club, do their best to introduce the guests with a warm, humorous touch. The invited speakers respond, almost always, with interesting, humorous, or witty anecdotes or jokes. This exercise is done in the interest of breaking the ice between the podium and the audience.

When it comes to the Japanese guest speakers, however, most of them read their opening speeches, whether speaking in English themselves or through interpreters. Some of them even have their speechwriters include an obligatory, often clumsy, joke to emulate the accepted style of the club.

The Japanese often open their speeches with apologies—apologizing for taking your precious time, for your having to listen to such an ill-qualified speaker, and so on—a nice, somewhat Oriental custom of modesty but usually so ritualistic that nobody really pays any attention. By contrast, the Westerners and, in fact, many other non-Japanese speakers I have seen open their speeches with a joke.

After comparing these two opposite approaches, Dr. John Condon, an

American cultural anthropologist who divides his time between Santa Fe, New Mexico and Tokyo, once opened an international symposium he was chairing in Japan by "apologizing for not joking." Both an apology and a joke, it pleased the whole multinational audience.

It was nearly thirty years ago that I heard Jack Condon pull this trick. He may or may not have been the first to do so, but numerous speakers, including Japanese, have to date emulated this bicultural icebreaker so often that by now it has become a cliché. One American speaker said he had come fully rehearsed with a joke that he was convinced would amuse his Japanese audience but apologized for having misplaced the cue-card on which he had written it. Many other variations thereof have been tried to varying degrees of success.

Ever concerned with ceremonial perfection, Japanese public speakers more often than not prefer reading meticulously composed addresses verbatim. Eye contact between speaker and audience is not considered important. By marked contrast, Western public speaking emphasizes more non-verbal forms of communication: poise, stance, eye contact, use of the hands for emphasis and illustration, and so forth.

One of the points taught by a U.S.-based speech training institute is that public speakers should not have their hands clasped in front of them. Hands and arms should be free for gesticulation as appropriate, or should hang loose naturally when not doing so. Hands held in a "fig-leaf position" suggests modesty, lack of confidence, or subordination. One remembers General Colin Powell and General Norman Schwarzkopf of Gulf War fame standing at attention with their hands in the fig-leaf position as President Bush addressed the troops.

But conventional Japanese public speakers need not worry about the dictum as regards the hands, for they are usually employed in holding their manuscripts as they read. Inevitably, speeches read are



not as powerful, eloquent, or communicative. Sentences are carefully composed, and reading is generally more staccato and impersonal, if accurate to the letter. Abraham Lincoln probably spent hours polishing his Gettysburg Address, reading it aloud many times, delivering it with passion and poise to the maximum possible impact, I presume. Shakespeare's Mark Antony did not have any written text when he addressed his "Friends, Romans, countrymen." Professing having come "to bury Caesar, not to praise him," he ended up winning the heart of the assembled crowd. Such is the power of speech.

In this same column in the preceding issue of this magazine, I gave former U.S. President Ronald Reagan as an example of a masterful icebreaker, able to put his audience at ease and interest them enough so they could stay awake to listen. Such examples of personal charm used to win the audience's attention are legion. Some Japanese public speakers have tried to emulate this international tradition.

Prime Minister Suzuki Zenko (1980-1982), while not known as a great humorist in public, at least knew how to rely on his advisers keen on helping him capture the audience. In delivering what may have been his maiden address to a large overseas audience at a banquet organized by the Japan Society in New York during his first visit to the United States in his new capacity as prime minister, he read his Japanese text, confidently lifting his eyes at the end of every paragraph at least. He said that in his college days he

outdid all his classmates in every subject—a rather un-Japanese self-aggrandizing statement, making his listeners a bit curious—then added, in a carefully calculated anti-climactic cadence, “except in English.”

This, coming from a relatively unknown Japanese political leader not especially advance-billed as a humorist, caused the entire audience to burst into laughter. As I interpreted his words simultaneously into English, I carefully delivered it for the best possible synchronous effect and was pleased that it went very well. He continued by saying that that was why he had brought Japan’s best interpreter with him and mentioned my name; of course I had to repeat the client’s words, especially when he is publicly showing his trust in his language aide.

Actually, we interpreters reproduce dutifully even those remarks less than flattering to us. People do sometimes complain that they did not understand the translated (i.e. interpreted) version, some even ruthlessly claim “misinterpretation.” Here again, the dedicated members of my profession interpret such utterances, no matter how unflattering.

I remember the case of one academic seminar sponsored by the United States Information Service many a year ago. The principal American speaker was explaining the U.S. government’s view of Vietnam. At times he sounded, to the relatively young Japanese academics bent on taking a critical stand, as if he were defending, not explaining, the official U.S. policy. My colleague and I were doing simultaneous interpretation when one Japanese scholar began accusing the speaker, in a little harsher tone than his compatriots would normally use in such a case, of not answering their questions and blamed us, the interpreters, for not doing our job properly.

The American speaker snapped back, “No, I don’t think it’s a matter of the interpreting. I can tell that they are doing a perfectly intelligible job of interpreting, and the trouble is with your bias and prejudice,” or something to that effect. You can bet I translated these words in their entirety, without fear or favor. Interpreters rarely get mad at what is being said of

them. As long as we do a conscientious job, our appreciative listeners will get even with the wrongful accusers on our behalf. Forgive my digression. I shall return to the matter of effective delivery in public communication.

Jeffrey Archer, the politician-cum-successful novelist, was about to give what I believe was his first major public address in Tokyo some years ago to launch one of his popular bestsellers in this country. On the day before the speech, the newspaper publisher sponsoring the event gave me a copy of his draft, which I read three times or so and thoroughly digested.

Half an hour prior to the opening of the address to a fully packed auditorium, I met Mr. Archer. He had been told of my professional credentials, and was quite courteous and pleasant. Then he whispered to me, asking if he could have a few minutes of private conversation, and we moved to a spare lounge next to the speaker’s. I was wondering what he was up to.

There he asked me to check the speed of his oral delivery for the most effective interpretation to his Japanese audience. A few minutes earlier I did offer the advice that it might be well for him to speak a little more slowly than he would normally to an English-speaking audience, for there would be, from time to time, references not readily familiar to the average educated Japanese. But that he should take such an extra interest and ask me to check his speed of delivery surprised me, pleasantly I must say. Too many public speakers, otherwise perfectly intelligent and courteous, pay virtually no respect to the important matter of reaching their audience effectively. They should take a page from Mr. Archer’s book, not in order that they be kind to interpreters (appreciated but beside the point), but in their own best interest, and the audience’s. More effective communication will result from that little extra effort.

Mr. Archer read aloud the first page or so of his speech and asked me if the speed was all right. The text was well written, a perfect exercise in the economy of words, and therefore was best read deliberately and articulately for the audience to appreciate. I told him his pace was perfect. He

thanked me, and I thanked him for his thoughtfulness. The speech was quite successful; he enthralled the audience with his fine story telling and refined English humor. Many more copies of his books were to be sold.

When I give my own speeches, as I do nowadays more often than interpret other people’s speeches, usually on subjects such as cross-cultural communication, the role of humor in interpersonal as well as international dialogue, how the Japanese can best learn English (and enjoy the process), I practice what my colleagues and I preach when advising Japanese interested in being trained in the Western art of speech-making, particularly skills in presentation. For one thing I do not prepare a text; I only make an outline and speak extemporaneously, looking someone in the audience in the eye.

You should alter your eye contact now and then—after speaking for five seconds at least and always at the end of a sentence. Shifty eyes do not capture an audience. You concentrate your attention on one person at a time, and many in that direction will feel you are talking to them.

During one lecture I was giving a couple of years ago in the city of Fukuoka on one of my favorite subjects—the comparison of the Australian and Japanese national characters, and what we can learn (or unlearn) from each other—I noticed at one end of the front row a young woman who was obviously visually impaired. Occasionally, I looked at her as I spoke, imagining that I had her eyes engaged.

As I was leaving the hall with the audience applauding, I happened to walk by her. Quite spontaneously she and I shook hands. She thanked me for an enjoyable talk and then added, “I could tell you were looking at me every now and then.”

She made my day.

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Muramatsu Masumi is the chairman of Simul International, Inc. He has acted as interpreter for numerous important international conferences. They include the first nine summit meetings of heads of state and government of the seven industrialized nations.