

In Different Games, Different Rules: Why Americans and Japanese Misunderstand Each Other, by Haru Yamada. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

FOREWORD

I first met Haru Yamada in 1981 when she was a student in my Cross-Cultural Communication class at Georgetown University. Of the more than 50 students in that class, she stood out: I can still see her looking attentively from her seat at the rear right of the large classroom, and coming to my office to show me the article she had discovered that she felt described her. It was about "third culture kids"—young people who had been raised so completely in two cultures that they belonged exclusively to neither, in a sense to both, and in a larger sense to a "third culture" made up of individuals who spanned two cultures.

The daughter of Japanese parents who moved in three-year cycles between the United States and Japan in connection with her father's employment, Haru Yamada grew up in both countries. As a result, she sounds American when she speaks English, and she sounds Japanese when she speaks Japanese. Yet the impression that she is a "native speaker" of each language is actually misleading, because she harbors within herself a deep understanding of the other culture that the vast majority of native speakers lack.

In the years since that first meeting, I have gotten to know Haru Yamada better and better. She graduated from Georgetown University with a major in linguistics, then went on to do both master's and doctoral studies in our sociolinguistics program. At the end of her studies, she wrote her doctoral thesis under my direction, comparing Japanese and American business meetings.

Having spent her life moving between these two cultures and getting caught between them, and possessed of an inquisitive spirit as well as an observant eye, Haru Yamada found herself trying to understand the differences and similarities that were catching her up. She applied her professional expertise to a phenomenon that had personal as well as universal significance.

The desire to use academic training to shed light on one's own cross-cultural frustration is an impulse that has driven my own career as well. My doctoral thesis compared New York Jewish and California conversational styles—a culture clash I was experiencing as a New York Jew studying linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. This became my first linguistics book. Later, the first book on conversational style that I wrote for a general audience, *That's Not What I Meant!*, began with the misunderstandings that I had experienced living with my first husband, who was Greek. These projects consumed me because I couldn't

think of a topic more important than cross-cultural understanding. As the countries and economies of the world become more intimately interconnected, and as individuals move more freely between countries through travel and immigration, the need to understand how growing up in different cultures results in different ways of communication becomes more and more urgent.

But even those who will never travel to Japan, never do business with a Japanese company, and never talk to a person from that part of the world, will find the insights of this book illuminating and helpful, because the greatest benefit that comes of understanding another culture is a better and deeper understanding of one's own. This is parallel to the better understanding of one's own style that results from examining conversations between women and men, or between New Yorkers and Californians. I am often told by readers that they didn't realize there was any other way to say or do things than the way they said or did them. Their own ways of speaking seemed "only natural." But learning that others' ways of saying or doing the same thing could be so different, and yet have a logic of their own, they see that their own way of speaking is not "only natural" but rather represents a particular set of habits and assumptions. Realizing that there are other, equally natural ways of saying or doing the same thing gives them the option of trying out a new way, as well as the opportunity to avoid the frustration and misjudgement that results from cross-cultural misunderstanding.

If this is true for speakers of different subcultural groups—men and women, people from different parts of the country or different ethnic or regional backgrounds—imagine how illuminating it is to understand deeply the logic of those who grew up in an entirely different culture—speaking a different language, living in another part of the world. That is the great gift that Haru Yamada gives us in this book, and it is a gift she is ideally placed to give. Her own life has given her a rich source of cross-cultural encounters, and her ability to identify and deconstruct the telling scene, together with her linguistic training and research, have given her the means to unravel the tangled threads that create the cross-cultural knots she so deftly describes.

Through innumerable vivid examples, Dr. Yamada shows that the Japanese and Americans are playing different games, following different rules, yet judging each other by their own goals and rules. The result, frequently, is frustration and mutual misjudgement.

A particularly fascinating aspect of this book is that many of the patterns Dr. Yamada describes that distinguish Japanese and American communicative patterns are reminiscent of the gender-based patterns that tend to distinguish women and men in the American context alone. For example, Dr. Yamada tells us that many conversational patterns that typify the Japanese grow out of a focus on care, whereas contrasting ways of speaking that typify Americans grow out of a focus on action. Immediately one hears echoes of studies, influenced by the work of Carol Gilligan, showing that girls and women often operate on an "ethic of

care," in contrast to boys and men. Another example is the expectation in Japanese conversation that a listener will utter far more vocalizations like "uhuh" and "yeah" than an American listener will. This parallels the finding that American women tend to offer more such listener-noise than do American men. Even the explanation and consequences are parallel. Many men, it has been shown, are inclined to say "yeah" when they agree, whereas many women emit a stream of "yeahs" to show they're listening and following. If it later emerges that an apparently-assenting woman really didn't agree at all, a man may feel misled—exactly the impression made on many Americans by a Japanese who was eagerly nodding and assenting in response to statements that he later turns out not to agree with at all.

Many of Dr. Yamada's insights are based on her original research on Japanese and American business meetings. One of her numerous observations is that the teasing she observed among American businessmen was a way of negotiating their relative status and power, whereas the teasing she noted among Japanese businessmen was a way of negotiating how relatively intimate their relationships were. Here again readers familiar with my work on gender and language (such as, for example, *You Just Don't Understand*), will hear echoes of patterns I described that tend to distinguish American women and men.

Seeing these and other parallel patterns yields the vital insight that the motivations and conventions that tend to be associated with women or men in a given culture are not absolutely tied to gender but rather are part of a wider system of motivations and conventions that can be differently apportioned in different cultures. In other words, the specifics that characterize one or another group within a given culture can vary considerably in a different culture: what we consider "masculine" and "feminine" can vary widely from what seem to reflect these qualities in another culture.

Especially challenging and fascinating to Americans interested in issues related to gender will be Yamada's chapter on the image of women in Japan. She shows that women in Japan cannot be facily pressed into a Western mold of "oppression-subordination." The situation is far more complex and nuanced. Japan, she notes, is not bound by an ethic that sees worth in being paid for work, and consequently being financially independent. As a result, women who have traditionally not worked outside the home for pay are not seen as powerless for that reason. Individual worth in Japan is, in a larger and deeper sense, not a matter of independence at all; instead it is tied to the notion of *amae*, which has been translated as "dependence" but which Dr. Yamada aptly refers to as "sweet interdependence." In a system of *amae*—the model for Japanese relations in public as well as private, in business as well as in friendship—each individual has worth because of an interlocking set of relationships in which both individuals are dependent on each other. Strikingly, Dr. Yamada tells us, "In contrast to the working man in the United States, the national role model in Japan is the nurturing mother."

These are just a few of the ways that this book will not only help Americans and Japanese understand each other—and help anyone who engages in cross-cultural communication—but also make readers examine their own assumptions about themselves and about communication in the largest sense.

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