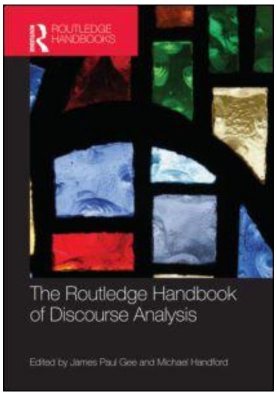

The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis

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Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203809068.ch32
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Published online on: 16 Nov 2011

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Asian business discourse(s)

Hiromasa Tanaka and Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini

Situating the new discourses

This chapter engages with some of the issues and challenges raised by a new body of research on interactional practices in business contexts in East and Southeast Asia, which has been conveniently subsumed under the banner of Asian business discourse(s)—or ABDs. The discussion first situates the development of the 'new discourses' both historically and geographically, and then moves on to identify some salient debates that ABDs have brought to the attention of interpretive researchers and business practitioners. It will be argued that the multi-perspectival nature of business discourse (analysis) benefits from an intersubjective epistemology, according to which interpretation of the manifold relations informing business practice can eventually only emerge through deployment of several analytical tools and in dialogue with a number of co-interpreters, situated practices and ideological traditions. An illustration of the interpretive processes involved in the analysis of a Japanese business is offered before concluding the chapter with reflections on future directions.

Space constraints are inevitably guiding and limiting our discussion of ABDs, therefore in this chapter we will not deal with conceptual and ideological issues which are examined elsewhere (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011). Instead, the aim is to provide an accessible and informative introduction to a new development in the discourse studies tradition, which thus far has been dominated by Western scholarship. (The field of politeness research is probably a notable exception and one that has potentially a great deal to offer to ABDs.)

In choosing illustrative material inspired by Japanese business interaction we are aware that there are several other 'local realities' that space prevented us from representing here; we refer keen readers to the analyses of and references to business discourse in Malaysia, Korea, China, Vietnam (and Japan) included in the *Handbook of Business Discourse* (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009).

Before embarking on the discussion of ABDs proper, a brief historical introduction is in order. In the early stages of business discourse research, in the seventies and eighties, linguists, especially but not exclusively in Europe and the US, focused on the study of English as the most widely used language of business. Although local languages have been analysed in various business contexts, English continues to be seen as the dominant or official business language even among Asian countries.

In the early days, lexis and genres of written business English were the main concern of linguistic research, which was based on the assumption that language encodes a decontextualized and static body of knowledge. Mizutani (1994), for example, argues that business people's language reflects organizational views and values; a perspective such as this prioritizes transactional over relational exchange. Linguistic studies were driven by pedagogic priorities and therefore were largely prescriptive in nature; many business communication textbooks have been published in this tradition. The notion of 'business communication' as a set of arbitrary prescriptions also raised researchers' interest in quantitative methods that tested and measured business language competencies (Nakasako, 1998). Such studies were fuelled by the conviction that English language competence is a crucial element of business success.

Following increased intercultural contact, management scholars have sought to address the complex issues affecting culturally diverse teams. A large body of attitudinal research was undertaken in the eighties and nineties using self-reporting questionnaires; this method was employed to capture the views and perceptions of business actors within specific work sites. One such study in Japan was carried out by Daiichi Kangyo Bank (1986). Using questionnaire data from 300 foreign business practitioners in Japan, it unveiled that many respondents used Japanese in the workplace as well as English. Although English is frequently used in international trade documents and intercultural business encounters, more and more non-Japanese use Japanese in business activities (Lee, 2002). Arguably a more significant finding was that taken-for-granted Japanese meeting procedures and decision-making systems, rather than language competence, were problematic for non-Japanese participants. A number of other studies followed that employed large-scale questionnaire-based surveys. However, since then such studies have been criticized for assuming accuracy in participants' self-understanding and self-perceptions and honesty in self-reporting (Du-Babcock, 2005).

More ambitious studies have tried to analyse specific components of organizational culture such as differences attributable to local management philosophies and business customs. So ideological and procedural differences in Asian business practices such as decision-making (Takahashi and Takayanagi, 1985), human resource management (Huang, 1998) and career development systems (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 1990) have come under the spotlight. Even though largely based on survey data, cultural approaches to business practices are less likely to oversimplify or ignore the interplay of management and communication strategies, emotions, politics and power relations that manifest themselves in verbal human interaction.

Globalization and technological development has led to diversification in business communication; in turn, multimedia communication has forced researchers to pay more attention to intermodal meaning-creation in business situations. The diversification of business roles and functions also requires that we regard business interaction as more than just transactional communication; 'doing business' is now viewed as a process of meaning-making infused with cultural and ideological influences. Single-method research approaches are no longer sufficient to grasp communication phenomena taking place at the intersection of language and managerial systems and based upon indigenous philosophies, cultural values and first language (L1) pragmatic transfer. Moreover, conventional research approaches have tended to overlook the complexity and sophistication of intercultural communication practices. More recently, alternative multi-method approaches, focusing on actual organizational practice, have become less rare in spite of the difficulties related to accessing authentic interactional data for use in research projects and publications.

(Asian) business discourse (analysis)

Researchers applying a combination of discourse methods to the analysis of business interaction have probably been more successful than their predecessors at ferreting out some of the intricate issues underlying business interaction, especially when communication takes place across cultures. Thanks to qualitative, interpretive approaches, business discourse researchers have been able to appreciate, describe and analyse communication practices as they happen, be they intercultural or intracultural meetings (Emmet, 2003; Fujio, 2004), intraorganizational written communication

(Kong, 2001; Chakorn, 2006), corporate communication (Jung, 2005) or interaction at training and development sites (Nair-Venugopal, 2006).

Elsewhere (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009a; Tanaka, 2009) we have engaged with the concept of 'business discourse' (BD) and the advantages and limitations of a multi-disciplinary approach to the analysis of human interaction in business and organizational settings. Rather than claiming that BD is a well-defined field of study with a distinctive methodological profile, we have opted for a definition that emphasizes the dynamic, unbounded and eclectic nature of BD as a 'a metaphor for dialogue' (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009a: 2). This characterization is especially important in light of the wide-ranging (Western) disciplinary interests that BD is accommodating while at the same time fostering the smaller but growing body of research that is now going under the acronym of ABDs. The use of shorthand to encompass a myriad of distinct countries, communities and languages has not come to pass without a good measure of self-critical reflection (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2006).

The plural form of the ABDs acronym is intended to alert us to the dangers of essentialist, totalizing ethnocentric labels. In its current form, ABDs acknowledge the distinctiveness of indigenous voices, which in the past tended to be incorporated in scholarly traditions ideologically rooted in the West (e.g. business communication, discourse studies). At the same time, ABDs challenge us to recognize and move on from persistent and often pernicious conceptual dichotomies such as East v. West (Hendry and Wong, 2006), which have hampered collaborative research for too long. In this sense, ABDs is a first step towards an enlarged, truly international business discourse community, which values the original contribution of its newer members and encourages the inclusion of world views other than those that have dominated research and scholarship up until recently.

The role of English in international business interaction also comes under scrutiny. If English is used as a lingua franca (ELF) in intercultural business encounters, the working assumption may be that Anglophone business and management norms apply, even in an Asian setting. This in turn may give rise to serious misunderstanding, which can degenerate into tension and conflict. ABDs recognize the practical value of ELF but are also aware of the politics surrounding the choice of a former colonial language that is still often taught according to the norms imposed by the centre (Britain, US; see Bargiela-Chiappini, 2006). On the other hand, observation of business practices shows that local Englishes, and at times also local languages, are in fact adequate for performing a whole range of tasks in the workplace (Nair-Venugopal, 2009).

Reflecting the mood in critical organization and management studies, postcolonial studies and anthropological theory, Asian business discourse(s) apply a poststructuralist notion of discourse in order to glimpse the dynamics of verbal interaction in Asian business sites. They combine insight from socio-economic, socio-political and critical theory with multi-method analyses of discursive practices. Researchers working under this banner draw from various methodologies and disciplinary traditions, including conversation analysis, ethnography, organizational studies, management studies, pragmatics, and politeness studies (see e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini and Gotti, 2005; JAPC, 2005, 2006). Discourse analytical approaches, of which there are several (Stubbe *et al.*, 2003; Glynos *et al.*, 2009), can be effective in highlighting the interplay of contextual, situational and interpersonal factors in power-laden, strategic communication. For example, Boden (1994) applied conversation analysis to the interpretation of interaction in organizational settings, and Cooren (2001) documented the realization of organizational practices through speech acts.

Within ABDs, discourse strategies that have been documented by both intercultural and intracultural research have been shown to be attributable to interpersonal, situational and contextual factors, but also to underlying management, educational and historical ideologies that, once brought to the surface, can provide a much richer, situated understanding of business practices.

In order to engage more fully with the multi-dimensionality of business discourse, ABDs researchers are increasingly moving towards social constructionist and interpretive approaches designed to face the epistemological issues raised by the field. In so doing, they inevitably tangle with issues of power, gender and 'culture' that underlie practice in actual job sites. In this sense, ABDs, like business discourse (BD), are inherently critical in their approach to the analysis of communication, even though analysis does not always translate into transformative action.

The process of 'seeing' in which discourse analysts are implicated is a political one, especially when it entails cognizance of phenomena that were previously ignored, dismissed, or silenced (Parker and Grimes, 2009). 'Seeing' as an epistemological stance also entails engagement with the manifestations of affect in human interaction, a long-neglected yet pervasive aspect of organizational life (Iedema and Scheeres, 2009; Samra-Fredericks, 2004). The analysis in Section 4 shows how affect permeates a business meeting, for example in the way speakers show discernment for listeners' sensitivities while tactically positioning themselves and others in response to the seemingly conflicting demands of hierarchy and harmony.

The contribution of Asian business discourse(s) to discourse analysis—and vice versa

For a deeper understanding of work practices that can be subsumed under ABD, the study of local business discourses points to the influence of indigenous philosophies and management traditions that in turn affect both intracultural and intercultural encounters. As an illustration of the advantages and challenges of a multi-perspectival discourse analytic approach to ABDs, Section 4 charts the interpretive process implicated in the analysis of a business meeting held in a Japanese company.

If several large-scale quantitative surveys uncovered foreign business practitioners' unease with Japanese business communication norms (Chikyu Sangyo Bunka Kenkyujo, 1993; Akiyama, 1994; Dowa Kasai Kaijo Hoken, 1988), qualitative studies of naturally occurring data also concluded that Japanese communication style is often perceived as ambiguous, if not downright inaccessible (e.g., Marriot and Yamada, 1991; Marriott, 1995). Yamada's comparative study of Japanese and American meetings (1992) points to several interactional style differences, including linear versus circular logic development and group versus individual orientation; these are factors deeply rooted in different value systems and manifested in conversational routines. Intercultural management studies indicate that 'culture-bound' discourse potentially excludes foreigners (Kopp, 1999). At the same time, Japanese are also constrained by their business discourse and may potentially end up being excluded from other discourses; for example, research has shown how Japanese are marginalized in meetings conducted in English (Tanaka, 2006).

A normative management approach such as the Japanese one, inspired by indigenous philosophies claiming to emphasize interpersonal relations over atomistic individuals (Hamaguchi, 1985), clashes with business discourses developed in other parts of the world, in particular in Western countries and countries heavily influenced by Western values. Because of Japan's extensive business contact with such countries, appreciation of the differences in management styles and of their practical consequences is critical. Intercultural management research points to two fundamental principles in Japanese business discourse that potentially clash with Western capitalist discourse: hierarchy and harmony. Kleinberg (1999) notes the importance of conforming to a vertically graded social order and the great concern for social harmony that characterizes Japanese societal culture. Ybema and Byun (2009) describe the uneasiness experienced by Dutch managers employed by a Japanese company's subsidiary in the Netherlands, who perceive Japanese organizational communication to be inherently hierarchical. Similarly, Kopp (1999) writes about the invisible power wall in Japanese organizations that segregates natives from non-natives.

While hierarchy is considered as a critical element in Japanese business, several researchers point to 'egalitarianism' as one of the basic concepts underpinning harmony in Japanese organizations (e.g. Aoki and Dore, 1996; Washimi, 2004). These researchers dwell on the ways in which Japanese organizations practice egalitarianism, the shared work space being one of them: in many companies, executive managers including presidents, use the same cafeteria, lavatories and parking lot as lower-ranking employees. The seemingly conflicting notions of hierarchy and harmony based on egalitarianism are reified in the practice of *Omikoshi* management. The *Omikoshi* is a portable shrine carried on the shoulders of perhaps a dozen men. It is impossible to identify the leader or those who are, or are not, carrying their fair load. All are anonymous contributors to the group's effort (Anderson, 2009). This management style is often seen in Japanese businesses, in which top management may seem to be aloof (Goto, 2004). In this system it is not clear who is actually in charge. In an earlier study (Tanaka, 2001), the first author observed a Japanese general manager who took no turns in an important inter-organizational meeting—in fact he remained completely silent—a good example of a manager engaging in *Omikoshi* management by letting his subordinates attend to the discussion.

Studies of Japanese local business discourse reveal that Japanese communication often becomes ambiguous due to participants' attempts to avoid potential conflict and maintain harmony (e.g. Kondo, 2007). In Japanese business interactional data, topic shifting is used as a strategy to avoid conflict in both inter-firm meetings (Kondo, 2007) and internal meetings (Yamada, 1997). Other studies have concentrated on the strategic use of honorifics in Japanese meetings, a complex linguistic system absent in English (e.g. Tanaka, 2011).

The data analysed in the next section are extracted from what could be defined as a hierarchical, yet harmony-oriented and egalitarian, Japanese business meeting. As already mentioned, the two seemingly conflicting elements of hierarchy and harmony co-exist in the value system of Japanese management discourse. Suzuki (2007) argues that showing consideration for others is crucial to achieving social equilibrium. It is thus essential for interlocutors to demonstrate discernment (*wakimae* in Japanese). Discernment is, according to Ide (1989), the acknowledgment of one's sense of vertical and horizontal place and role in a given situation, as prescribed by social convention. Yamada (1997) found that some Japanese speakers tend to value reticence and orderly turn-taking and are less inclined to claim the floor. This could be interpreted as a demonstration of discernment on the speakers' part, which affects their approach to conversational engagement.

In Japan, talk and behaviour based on discernment rather than self-centred motivation is of the essence for hierarchically ordered, harmonious work relations. When we investigate business discourse using individuals as the basic unit of analysis, harmony and hierarchy appear as conflicting values. If, on the contrary, one applies the notion of 'relation' as a minimum unit of analysis, harmony and hierarchy emerge as two important and complementary tenets of business interaction in Japan—and possibly in other Asian contexts.

The multi-dimensionality of ABDs requires a commensurate epistemological and methodological response. The emphasis on relation-building and maintenance, which characterizes many Asian societies, is an epistemological stance that underpins the analysis in Section 4. Meeting participants are seen as operating within a complex relational network predicated upon age, seniority of employment, experience and expertise, which are some of the factors that determine a person's status and hierarchical position in a Japanese organization. Meeting participants will have been educated to show sensitivity to matters of hierarchy and status; arguably, the latter can only go unchallenged if the status quo is maintained. Personal interests and preferences may be required to be set aside for the sake of preserving good, that is, harmonious interpersonal and group relations.

This vivid awareness of one's own position in the system and of the interdependence of individuals and groups, forged through painstaking relational work, seems to us to call for a multi-perspectival discourse analytical approach, couched in an intersubjective interpretive epistemology. Intersubjectivity has been conceptualized as 'the variety of relations between perspectives. Those perspectives can belong to individuals, groups, or traditions and discourses, and they can manifest as both implicit (or taken for granted) and explicit (or reflected upon)' (Gillespie and Cornish, 2009: 19–20). Intersubjectivity is more than a 'situation in which two or more persons share knowledge reflexively' (Reich, 2010: 41): it describes the human condition of being 'connected' and dependent, of being a 'node' in a web of relations with individuals and groups in contact with which we reflexively make sense of our own being as 'related'. The analytical focus then is not the individual and her self-reflexivity, but her 'relatedness' (to others), the processes through which such relatedness is effected and their outcomes, for example co-constructed knowledge. Intersubjectivity is performed in situated interaction and often expressed in attributions of intentions and feelings to others; a discursive approach is well suited to capture the manifold perspectives animating the intersubjective condition in which we are immersed.

This epistemology is particularly useful in charting the multiplicity, dynamics and characteristics of relational traffic in organizational settings, but it is also useful as a way of expressing and mapping the conditions that make 'discernment' (*wakimae*) possible. Intersubjectivity is central to social science, but methodological approaches to its study have suffered from a marked individualistic bias, so that relations between people and groups have escaped analysis. Within ABDs intersubjectivity inscribes not only the relations between academic researchers and their collaborating business partners but also between business practitioners situated in their locales and the wider societal contexts, as well as between the disciplines and epistemologies called upon in the research and the local traditions and values in which business practices are embedded. In the illustrative analysis that follows, specific discourse analytic tools, multi-party interpretation and ethnographic knowledge are drawn upon to make sense of situated meeting behaviour cast against the complex web of (Japanese) intersubjectivity.

Data and interpretation

The data

The excerpts are taken from a regular monthly meeting held at Toyoko Network, a consulting company with 12 employees located in Yokohama, Japan. The meeting was held on 25 June, 2008. The first author asked Kasai, one of the participants, to record the non-confidential part of the meeting (22 minutes and 38 seconds).

Below is the list of the meeting participants, all men ages between 26 and 65, whose real names have been replaced by pseudonyms:

Company President: Hanawa, 65
Senior Vice President, Research: Nojima, 59
Senior Vice President, Sales: Kasai, 54
Sales Director: Umemoto, 48
Sales Associate Director: Taneda, 44
Sales Representative: Ochiai, 26
Intern from Local Board of Education: Tsuda, 50

Given the intersubjective epistemology adopted here, personal narratives, historical accounts, local management philosophies, contextual knowledge and so on, as well as interviews, email exchanges and the meeting agenda are all considered as 'data'. At the same time, they all contribute to the ongoing interpretive process that, given native language and extensive contextual knowledge, has centred mainly on the first author, with a later dialogic stage where both authors were involved in extensive email discussions.[1]

Interpreting intersubjectively: mapping the relations

Personal stories, corporate trajectories

This section of the article illustrates the extent to which interpersonal relations matter to this meeting and to its interpretation. The narration begins in the first person because it involves the first author and several of Toyoko's members as well as two of his postgraduate students.

About ten years ago Hanawa, Nojima and Kasai quit a large consultation institute (of which I was also an associate) and started Toyoko Network. The reason Kasai gave me for quitting was that they wanted to work for themselves rather than for the institute's owners. Kasai's annual income suffered a drop but he is happier because in his new role as vice-president he can provide leadership for the new company. Kasai left the institute two years after I did and then contacted me to share some business; he sells training and consultation programmes and I currently act as an external consultant for his company for 15–20 days a year. Toyoko only has one internal consultant in its company, Nojima, and uses external consultants for most of its business.

The company is a small business, therefore the travel expenses issue raised by President Hanawa in the meeting in question is an important matter. Hanawa is always worried about Toyoko's financial status. I have known him for 12 years, since he was a general manager in the company we used to work for, and he is known to be attentive to detail. Umemoto and Taneda also quit the same institute, after which they worked for two different companies for a couple of years before joining Toyoko. The fact that most of the meeting participants are former colleagues and have long-standing relations means that they consider team harmony as extremely important.

Kasai and I were both *Kacho*, middle managers, in the institute we worked for; it is on the basis of this long-standing relationship that I have been granted access to the company's meetings. Having been in the consultation business for 20 years, I also share Toyoko's values and norms. All meeting participants were informed of the purpose of the recording and I promised to use pseudonyms throughout; only the part of the meeting which did not contain sensitive personal material was used for this article.

Negotiating multiple interpretations

I conducted a preliminary analysis of the data, then I listened to the audio-recording again, first with two of my postgraduate students and later with an American colleague and consultant. They all contributed new insights such as the observation that low-status employees appear to start a turn after significant pauses.

Within the company, I talked to Kasai and exchanged emails with him about the data. For example, I wanted to find out why he dared take the chair's role when it was not him who called the meeting (in Japan the meeting host usually also acts as chair). I also discussed the *Omikoshi* management approach with him, and he was comfortable with the idea that it applied to how business was conducted at Toyoko. Finally, I exchanged emails on data interpretation with the second author, on the basis of the English translation and of Francesca's listening to the original recording. Bearing in mind that she does not understand Japanese, her role was to catch instances of simultaneous and overlapping talk. In spite of the overall relaxed and even informal register of

Table 32.1 Meeting turn distribution and topics

Topics	*Finance*	*Tsuda*	*Seminar Review*	*A New Client*	*Next Meeting*	*Total*
Hanawa	42	1	18	9	20	90
Kasai	50	8	26	11	19	114
Nojima	17	2	20	0	13	52
Umemoto	25	2	8	0	2	37
Taneda	10	0	1	0	1	12
Ochiai	11	0	18	13	0	42
Tsuda	0	10	24	1	1	36

the meeting, a native speaker embedded in Japanese business practice will not fail to perceive a strong sense of hierarchy in the interaction.

A further and more important finding of the multiple interpretation effort is that the participants' topic shifting and development seem influenced by hierarchical power relations, concern for harmony within the organization and an egalitarian view of topic management. It is therefore unsurprising that the participants responsible for the highest numbers of turns were company President Hanawa and Vice-President Kasai (see Table 32.1).

Omikoshi management in action

On a close examination of turn distribution topic by topic, it appears that participants' turn-taking patterns were mainly topic-related.

As Table 32.1 shows, the top three scores in the total column correspond to the three higher-status managers. The frequency of participation of two of the managers was particularly high when their individual expenditures were discussed. On the other hand, lower-status employees took a comparable number of turns to the higher-status participants when the topic under discussion concerned employees' responsibility. For example, when the topic was Tsuda's learning experience through his internship, Tsuda took ten turns, the largest single turns count for topic 3.

In the post-meeting interview, Kasai mentioned that the last part of the meeting, from which the excerpts were taken, was '*yuuzuu muge*', which in Kasai's vocabulary means 'flexible'. Many of the topics discussed were not on the agenda, or at least Hanawa, the formal meeting chair and host, was not informed of them prior to the meeting. Kasai reported: '*Kaigi no shusaisha wa tooji shacho no Hanawa san desu. Hanawa san ga ajenda wo sakusei shi toojitsu haifu simasu.*' ('The meeting was called by Hanawa, who was president at that time. Hanawa drew up the agenda and distributed it.') However, Kasai took the largest number of turns. He also voluntarily took on the role of facilitator. Kasai later explained the reason for his frequent interventions thus: '*Kasai*[2] *ga debaru no wa omo ni eigyo kaigi no shikisai ga tsuyoi tame.*' ('The reason why Kasai talked a lot was that the topics were related to sales.')

This phenomenon can be interpreted as *Omikoshi* management practice. President Hanawa could be seen as the shrine on the shoulders of his men—sacred and respectable. Thus Kasai took it on himself to act as facilitator, to avoid inconvenience to the meeting's host. As Kasai wrote to the first author: '*Gutai teki na katsudo nitsuite hanashiai no shikiri wa shosei ga tantoo.*' ('I facilitated the discussion on our actual activities.') Kasai also added that in order to emphasize his (Hanawa's) position as the meeting's host, Hanawa formally declared the meeting open. Kasai's description of Hanawa's role sounds like that of a god controlling the world from his shrine. According to Kasai, Hanawa's role is '*sore wo mimamori karini yappari fukuzatsu na baai wa Hanawa san ga hyoka saitei suru katachi ni narimasu*' ('to watch over the whole meeting and intervene, evaluate, and judge when issues become complex'). Kasai demonstrates his discernment as a vice-president whose role is to support Hanawa by voluntarily taking on the role of facilitator or 'acting chair', inviting lower-status participants to initiate their topics. Not only does turn-taking reflect the hierarchical order, it also shows the participants' concern for relations maintenance in terms of confirming relative positionings within the interaction.

Silent moves

The participants' topic opening strategies in the current meeting appear to contradict Yamada's (1992) findings: according to which, in an American meeting, the person responsible for a deal initiates his or her own topic, while in a Japanese meeting there is no person in charge of a topic; any employee can initiate one. In the present meeting, topic initiation depends on whether the formal chair had been notified in advance of the topics. In the interview, Kasai confirms that Hanawa had been made aware of some topics while others were raised without prior notice being given to him. In the case of 'advised' topics, it was Kasai who raised them and invited the relevant speakers to take the floor:

Excerpt 1

112. (3.0) Kasai: *Eeto. koko made ii desuka. ja. shucchouhi no ken.* (3.0) Well. Are we okay so far? So, on to travel expenses.

113. Hanawa: *Aa. korewa desu ne. ichioo uchi wa shucchoo kitei tte no wo. oozappa na mono wo kimete run desu kedo.* Er. That is, for the present, we have, a so-called a travel expense regulation. A very simple one.

In the interview, Kasai disclosed that he and Hanawa had already discussed the issue of travel expenses and had planned to inform the meeting of the change in the company's reimbursement system. In this sense, then, the meeting has a rubber-stamping function for a new policy that senior management are set on introducing regardless.

As excerpt 1 shows, topic shifts tend to take place after a relatively long silence, in this case of three seconds. This finding resonates with Yamada's observations (1992). She points out that Japanese use silence to signal the end of a topic. Participants in the Toyoko meeting similarly use silence as a postlude to a topic discussion. In the interview Kasai explained that he uses silence to find out whether anyone else in the meeting has anything to say. A pause of three seconds is sufficient to confirm that nobody wishes to speak, so the chair moves on to the next topic. There were three instances of junior managers opening a topic. According to Kasai, these topics had not been agreed with management prior to the meeting. Since Kasai knew that a couple of such topics could be raised, he intentionally used silence to give the opportunity to lower-status employees to initiate them. The transcript indicates that lower-status employees read his silence as confirmation that the previous topic is closed and that they can initiate a new one. In contrast with junior managers, senior managers open new topics without waiting for a significant pause; in so doing, they use the privileges afforded by their hierarchical status.

The role of silence in meetings has been the focus of several studies that investigate interaction involving Japanese (Yamada, 1992; Fujio, 2004; Nakane, 2007). The agreement seems to be that Japanese speakers send a message by not talking. Our interpretation of the current meeting suggests that the participants use silence to express consideration for others and to show discernment. Silence may also contribute to maintaining equilibrium in social relations; while this function may not be apparent to non-Japanese meeting participants, the harmony achieved as a result of significant pauses is instrumental for Japanese to achieve a productive synergy. When a person sends a message by keeping silent, others interpret the message and react accordingly. This kind of silent exchange is based on individuals showing discernment and is believed to play a vital role in facilitating 'friction free' communication among insiders in Japanese business organizations (Ray and Little, 2003).

When Japanese transfer this normative behaviour to intercultural meetings conducted in English, they might come across as inscrutable to non-Japanese participants. On the other hand, Japanese find Anglo-Saxon-style meeting management difficult to operate in, because tolerance for longer silent pauses is low, and thus the opportunities to initiate a new topic or to voice their ideas are considerably reduced. Consequently, in intercultural meetings Japanese are usually set apart by their low participation, following self-marginalization (Tanaka, 2006; Nakane, 2007).

Mitigating bad news

In excerpt 1, Hanawa tentatively prefaces the announcement of the new policy and then moves on to state that the company is now going to reimburse only those travel costs actually incurred. Employees potentially stand to lose financially because they will no longer be able to take advantage of the price difference between a standard ticket and a discount ticket. Immediately after Hanawa's announcement, Kasai intervenes with a personal anecdote of his experience of travelling with an economy airline, thus apparently deviating from the main topic (excerpt 2). Kasai explains how uncomfortable the experience was, a stance which he reinforces in turn 68. Umemoto and Ochiai bolster the argument against cheap flights in short, empathetic turns:

Excerpt 2

114. (2.0) Kasai: *Konkai ano sukai maaku ano mukoo to no okyaku san tono settingu no jikan mo atta nde sukai maaku maaku ni shitan desu yo. moo katte atta ndesu kedo mo ano kekkyoku ne. nyuusu ni atta yooni futari pairotto ga inain'de sorede nanbin mo kekkoo shiteiru wake desu yo.* (2.0). This time, Skymark. I used Skymark because of the time set for the other party, the client. I had already bought a ticket but eventually as you saw in the news, they were short of pilots and cancelled some flights.

115. Umemoto: *Un.* Yeah.

116. Kasai: *De soreni ataru kanoosei mo attanda.* I could be on one of such flights.

117. Umemoto: *Uun a soka soka.* Yeah. right right

118. Kasai: *De. Sukai maaku ni denwa shitan desu yo. zen zen tsuuji nain desu yo. maa demo hoomu peeji mitara dore to dore ga kekkoo ni narutte noga atta kara. de. kinoo kinoo Jaru de kaette kitan desu kedo ne. Jaru wa niman nisen happyaku en nan dakedo ano yappari ne suchuwaadesu wa ippai iru wa ano juusu wa deru wa de Sukai maaku wa hajimete nottanda keredo suchuwaadesu wa nisan nin datta shi seibi in wa tarinaitte iwareteru shi pairotto wa nisanwari futsuuno pairotto yorimo yobun ni yatteru shi de juusu nanka derukato omottara uruni ikun dayone are hyaku en toka* (laughter) And I called Skymark. Never connected. But their webpage informed of which flights were cancelled. And, yesterday, yesterday, I came back by JAL. JAL cost 22,800 yen. Well, you know, there were many flight attendants and they served me juice. I used Skymark for the first time and there were only a few flight attendants and it is said that Skymark lacks sufficient maintenance and I thought they'd served me juice but they sell juice, like 100 yen (laughter).

119. Umemoto: *Aa* Ah.

120. Kasai: *Anmari kimochi no ii mon ja nai.* It was not so comfortable.

121. Umemoto: [*Nanka kowai yo ne.* [It's kind of scary.]

In line with Kondo's (2007) findings, Kasai's temporary digression from a potentially controversial topic can be interpreted as a strategy to avoid friction among employees. The personal touch and humor detectable in excerpt 2 are directed towards mitigating the negative impact of Hanawa's announcement. Having provided a temporary buffer between Hanawa and junior employees, Hanawa confirms the new policy (128) before Kasai moves on to the next topic (133):

Excerpt 3

128. Hanawa: *Hikooki ni noru shucchou tte soo nai shi ne*. Business trips on airplanes do not take place so often.

129. Umemoto: *Nai Un*. No. Right.

130. Hanawa: *Ii desu ka jippi shugi toyuu koto de* Okay with this refund for the amount paid.

131. Kasai: *Hikooki ni tsuite wa*. About airplanes.

1322. Hanawa: *Hikooki ni tsuite wa*. About airplanes.

133. Kasai: *Hai. Yoroshii desu ka. Ja hoomu peeji no mentenansu* Er. Okay. Then, on to the maintenance of our webpage.

As sales director, Umemoto supplies positive if short comments on the policy change to which other employees and lower-status managers react with silence, thus showing discernment of their superiors' position. Once again, managers and employees collaborate to preserve organizational equilibrium. Had non-Japanese participants attended this meeting, the strategic use of silence and the (apparent) circularity of topic development might have possibly confused them, even if they were highly competent in Japanese. As the non-Japanese respondents in Kondo's survey (2007) noted, outsiders might think of meetings such as the current one as ambiguously structured, time-consuming and producing 'unclear decisions'.

Ybema and Byun (2009) discuss cultural differences and reactions to them among employees of Dutch and Japanese companies' overseas subsidiaries in Japan and the Netherlands. In their study, the participants' identity talk reflects different perceptions of power relations: Japanese employees think that Japanese management is egalitarian, while Dutch employees think that Japanese managers are hierarchical. The multi-perspectival interpretation illustrated in this chapter shows how Japanese can in fact be both hierarchical and egalitarian, but these apparently contradictory positionings only become obvious with substantial contextual and situational knowledge. Ethnographic diachronic knowledge accumulated through participation in a dense network of relevant relations, as well as direct personal experience and observation of business practices, proved essential in order to recover the pragmatic meanings from the contextual and situational embeddedness of a particular fragment of human interaction. The value of an intersubjective epistemology extends to co-interpretation as an act that blurs the boundaries of authorship in research findings presented as a multi-authored 'text'.

ABDs: where we are now and where we may be going

This chapter has sought to frame the recent development of Asian business discourse(s) within a context of intensified contact between the West and Asia, where the promotion of English as a lingua franca of international business and of Anglo-Saxon-style management often belie ignorance of, or resistance to, local practices and preferences. And on this note we should perhaps also add that the authors do not subscribe to the view of much prescriptive literature that intercultural communication is inherently problematic and more likely to generate conflict than intracultural communication. Instead, the underlying assumption of our work is that the meeting of 'cultures', for want of a better word, is rich with opportunities for knowledge of both self and other in the respect of differences.

In representing both East and West in this chapter, we are aware of the ideological dominance of the latter over the former in international business practice, but also of the ethnocentric bias of the related vocabularies of management and business. Elsewhere (Bargiela-Chiappini and Tanaka, forthcoming) we have been exploring some of the historical and ideological cross-currents underpinning the development of Japanese management thought and practice, and in so doing we have uncovered patterns of mutual influence between Europe, the US and Japan—a reminder of the longevity of intercultural contact.

Discourse analytic approaches to business and organizational practices in Asia have a distinct place in ABDs research, where an eminently Western set of methodologies is being deployed to 'get close' to business practice as it unfolds; a growing number of Asian scholars have been able to access work sites and to write about their experience. It would be unwise to attempt any generalization on the basis of the illustrative material discussed in this chapter. Instead, we offer a few observations for reflection and further research, but also as an antidote to the enduring prescriptivism of influential scholarship on intercultural (business) communication.

First, in ABDs analysis "what we see is not what we get." An analysis of meeting interaction based on a Western conceptualization of sociological categories such as hierarchy and egalitarianism would have yielded a different (and probably misguided) interpretation of Japanese business relations and practices. The delicate mechanisms implicated in the negotiation of power, hierarchy and egalitarianism in Japanese corporate settings must be understood against participants' pervasive concern with maintaining (organizational) harmony. In turn, such interpretation is only recoverable as a multi-authored text that reflects the microcosm of the researcher's experiential and relational world. Far from engaging in 'objective', detached analysis, the researcher is able to exploit his closeness to the phenomenon under observation through an epistemology that prizes intersubjectivity.

Second, the tool-kit provided by discourse analytical approaches, deployed against an epistemology of intersubjectivity, allows the analyst to zoom into the interaction as it unfolds, and to zoom out into contextual, situational and interpersonal dimensions that illuminate local practice. As the multiple interpretive effort described in this chapter has shown, ethnographic and native knowledge are required to unlock deeper layers of meaning. Once again, the researcher is able to exploit his closeness to the phenomenon under observation in ways that are not available to an outsider looking in.

Third, while East–West collaborative research is important for the development of ABDs, what is urgently needed is more inter-Asian collaboration concentrating on interpreting the use of local languages in business, with or without English as a lingua franca, and including Asian Englishes. Finally, future Asian-based research should also aim at exploring the contribution of indigenous philosophies, religions, and traditions to business practice as well as taking on board local developments in the social sciences that can lead to a deeper appreciation of human interaction, and therefore also of business interaction.

Transcription conventions

[interruption or
[overlap
(1.0) one second pause
(.) micro pause
= immediate latching on

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Sandra Harris and to the volume editors for their insightful comments on an earlier version of the chapter.

Further reading

The bibliography on (Asian) business discourses is still quite small but growing. Listed below are indicative titles:

Bargiela-Chiappini, F. and Gotti, M. (eds.) (2005) *Asian Business Discourse(s)*. Bern: Peter Lang.

The first collection of essays on Asian business discourse under one cover.

Tanaka, H. and Fujio, M. (forthcoming) ' 'Harmonious disagreement' in Japanese business discourse', in J. Aritz and R. Walker (eds.) *Discourse Perspectives on Organizational Communication*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

An illustration of business discourse analysis of an inter-firm meeting held in a Japanese company.

Journal of Asian Pacific Communication (2005–2006), 15:2 and 16:1 (special double issue on Asian business discourse(s)).

Notes

1 The agenda only included a selection of the topics eventually discussed: (1) figures of the company's turnover, expenses, and profits for 2005–2008, and sales and profit objectives for 2009; (2) actual sales results for April–May, 2009; (3) current market situation; (4) other issues. For reasons of confidentiality, the data recorded and analysed refer to the last part of the meeting only.
2 In the email exchange, Kasai refers to himself by his last name.
3 Tsuda is a high school in-service teacher. The area board of education sends teachers to local business corporations for training for a whole academic year. Tsuda was placed at Toyoko Network as an intern. In the interview, Kasai speaks of his concern about Tsuda's learning progress.

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