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The Manual of Love: Shocking Discourse Styles

Chiara Zamborlin
Nagoya University of Arts



Introduction

The term ‘discourse’ refers to spoken (or written) communication. Considering that in my paper I also focus on instances of non-verbal communication I should slightly change the title of my presentation: From “Shocking Discourse Styles” into “Shocking Communication Styles.” Therefore, I will use the term ‘communication styles’ to describe the ways in which individuals convey messages to each other through verbal and non-verbal behavior.

Depending on the communicative situation in which they are involved (i.e., a job interview? a party with friends?), speakers select a particular **style**. The selected form of talk is usually validated among speakers sharing the same linguistic code, and cultural background. Under the same circumstances however, people interpreting a given situation according to different framing strategies may perceive these very same stylistic choices as dissonant and possibly misunderstand them altogether.

In my paper I explore a case of cross-cultural mismatch and **re-framing** stemming from dissimilar beliefs (i.e., **ideologies**, cf. Silverstein 1979) as to the way speakers are expected to behave when expressing feelings and opinions at the onset of a heterosexual romantic relationship (cf. Zamborlin 2011, July 07; 2011, September 26-27; 2011, September 30; 2011, November 06; 2012). The study is based on a questionnaire I administered in some of my classes of Italian at Nagoya University of Arts, after showing the students in Italian with Japanese subtitles “L’innamoramento” (Falling in Love), an episode of the movie *Manuale d’amore* (The Manual of Love) by Giovanni Veronesi (2005). The movie is divided into four episodes of approximately 25 minutes each, and is a typical contemporary Italian comedy starring popular actors. “L’innamoramento” is the first one.

It tells the story of Tommaso, a 26 years-old Italian boy, who one day meets a girl of the same age named Giulia in Rome by accident. For Tommaso it is love at first sight, and for most of the plot we witness his fumbling attempts at approaching Giulia, who, in the beginning overtly avoids him, before eventually agreeing to become his friend and date him. Finally the girl is fascinated by Tommaso’s frankness, and the two fall in love. At the end of the story they get married.



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In the past few years I used this episode in my classes, with the purpose of showing the students an example of how young Italians may communicate their feelings of affection when falling in love (or, at least, when a boy is attracted to a girl and wants to get involved with her romantically). To my surprise I found that, despite showing an interest in the story, which in general was considered hilarious, many students admitted that they felt rather uncomfortable (“*iwakan ga kanjiru*,” “*kimochi ga warui*,” “*kowai*”) with the straightforwardness of the protagonists, especially with Tommaso whose techniques of courtship were perceived as somewhat harassing by both male and female students. A female student who happened to see the whole movie on TV told me that she was literally shocked.

I carried out informal interviews with four Italian native speakers familiar with the movie (in Italy it was a hit and many people have seen it), asking them to evaluate the credibility of the narration and the characters. From their responses I concluded that the story is convincing, and that the characters may be said to portray mainstream young Italians, notwithstanding the distinctive personalities of each of them.

In September I had the chance to teach two classes in intercultural pragmatics at the University of Parma, in Italy, during which I talked about this ongoing study. I showed students some scenes of the target movie and asked them to express judgments about the plausibility

of the characters and their communication styles. I obtained responses from more than 150 students. So far I was able to read only a sample of the responses, but the comments I went through seem to indicate that Italian students consider the protagonists of the movie, and their communication style as absolutely normal.

I have also found the remarks of an Italian colleague of mine teaching Italian at a University in Tokyo to be quite significant. Upon learning that I was conducting a cross-cultural study on *Manuale d'amore* this colleague told me that she had shown the episode “*L'innamoramento*” several times in her classes, and admitted to having been disappointed by the unexpected reactions she observed among her pupils, especially with regard to the male protagonist whom most of the students defined without hesitation “a stalker,” a definition she disagreed with (she was unaware that I had experienced the same perplexity at my students comments).

Based on the above, I developed the following hypothesis which served as a starting point for the present research:

There are situations, such as those recounted in “*L'innamoramento*,” in which the way speakers communicate their feelings may be perceived as too explicit by Japanese people, sometime even shocking, presumably due to different values put into operation while building rapport.

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Tommaso and Giulia, the protagonists of “L’innamoramento”

The study

Research questions

I decided to explore the answers to the following questions:

- To what extent do young Japanese perceive the protagonists of the movie as being dissimilar to themselves, with respect to the style the characters employ across different frames (i.e., quarreling, making up after an argument, etc.) and activity types (i.e., trying to establish a friendship, going on a date, etc.)?
- Do students tend to evaluate differences between them and the characters only in negative terms, or do they look for positive attributes as well?
- Do students focus on differences only, or are they likely to look for similarities?

Method

Participants

In order to collect my data I designed a questionnaire in Japanese, and administered it in several classes I was teaching at NUA the last semester. Among those returned, a total of 166 questionnaires were considered valid for the study.

The participants happened to be distributed among five classes of Italian (level A1). Some dialogues of the movie might have been relatively easy to understand among the students notwithstanding their basic linguistic competence in Italian. The dialogues in fact featured lexicon and syntactic structures related to functions covered in the A1 syllabus, such as greeting, introducing oneself, asking/providing personal information that young people may be likely to exchange when building friendship (i.e., age, cell-phone number, etc.).

However, since my inquiry did not focus on problems of filmic translations (at least not from a strictly linguistic

point of view), I did not regard students’ low level of proficiency in Italian as a factor having a potential impact on their judgments.

Instruments

The questionnaire was divided into two sections.

Section 1 consisted of eleven closed-ended questions in which participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed/disagreed with the items on a six response options Likert scale.

Section 2 comprised two open-ended questions aimed at disclosing the ideological patterns underlying the students’ judgments.

(cf. Zamborlin 2012 for a detailed description).

Preliminary findings and discussion

Results from the quantitative analysis

Consistent with the responses obtained for Section 1, I assume as follows:

The students indeed perceived the protagonists of the movie as being dissimilar to themselves. However, this perception did not necessarily always entail negative judgements. For example, although Tommaso was unquestionably seen as “a stalker” while applying his courtship techniques, his enterprising attitude and perseverance were also seen in a positive light. Nevertheless, students did not appear particularly willing to accept Tommaso and Giulia as potential friends. Analysis of the qualitative data may help in finding out an explanation to this unanswered question. Moreover students perceived the characters as unlikely to fit into the Japanese society, and as remarkably deviant from the idea of “average” Japanese. Overall, the communication style of the characters (not only Tommaso and Giulia’s, but also their friends’) was perceived as moderately “aggressive.”



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Results from the qualitative analysis

Interesting findings are now emerging from the answers to the open-ended questions, the content analysis of which is still in progress. I can anticipate the following:

Students perceived the characters as “*sekkyokuteki*” (‘proactive,’ ‘uninhibited’) and antagonistic, displaying a behavior remarkably different from their own behavior in similar circumstances, and deviating from the norms of the Japanese etiquette. However, this diversity was expressed in positive terms by some students who formulated affective judgements using expressions such as and “*urayamashii*” (‘I am jealous’), and “*sugoi*” (‘that’s impressive’)—the latter term however is ambiguous and can imply some negative connotations.

One comment caught my attention. The respondent said that through schooling Japanese children are trained to “*gaman suru*” (‘endure’) in order to avoid open conflicts, and build harmonious relations. However, the same respondent admitted that this pedagogy can be criticized for causing distress .

Another cluster of intriguing comments concerns the perception of intentional lying. Giulia and Tommaso, in the process of courtship, lie to each others on several occasions. I found their lies to be rather innocent, or at least, justifiable. Students however appear to perceive such behavior negatively in each of the occasions. In a brief follow up interview I had with a female student who participated in the survey, I asked

some explanations specifically about this. She said that she liked Giulia very much but was disturbed by her lying, especially in one scene, at the beginning of the story, when Tommaso is doing his best to get to know her. When, after giving Giulia a ride on his bike, Tommaso politely asks Giulia for her cell-phone number, she gives him a wrong number. The above students judged such a strategy as “*gyaruppoi*,” that is, ‘typical of a *gyaru*’ (i.e., a type of superficial girl who follows a garish fashion, wearing blond wigs, fake lashes, fake nails, etc.) and inconsistent with Giulia’s coolness (“*shikkari shite iru noni*”).

From this I assume that students reframed Giulia according to parameters quite different from mine (and presumably from the movie director’s).

The analysis is underway. I hope to be able to discern a set of socio-cultural values shaping my students believes as how the language is supposed to be used by speakers depending on the context. From a pedagogical viewpoint my conclusion might hopefully point to the importance of using movies in foreign language classes as a means for fostering students’ interest in diversity, and for developing intercultural awareness, that is, the learners’ attentiveness and willingness to engage in a critical reflection of the values, behaviors, and forms of talks of people from other societies in comparison to their own (Byram, 2009).

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