An Analysis of Non-Verbal Communication within the Organisational Culture of Japan

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1. Introduction

In this thesis I want to examine the impact of non-verbal communication characteristics within the organizational culture of Japan. The reason why I specifically want to explore the non-verbal characteristics of the Japanese culture is because of my own personal encounter with, in my opinion, this striking different culture a few years back. In my meeting with some fellow Japanese students, I was somewhat puzzled, and at the same time fascinated by their strange body language and appearance as a whole. I experienced some cultural traits and behaviours which I had never met before, and got rather curious about how and why this could be?

This is the initial reason why I want to examine the Japanese culture, and specifically the non-verbal behaviour of the Japanese in greater detail. Furthermore, my motivation to analyse the Japanese non-verbal culture is to provide others with background knowledge about the Japanese non-verbal behaviour and the ability to decipher the deeper meaning with their non-verbal communication characteristics and in addition, give some advice to how to act, as a foreigner, in the Japanese business setting.

But before we can look into this, I have to introduce what non-verbal communication actually is?

1.1. What is Non-Verbal Communication?

Non-verbal communication is the communication that surrounds, and supports the verbal communication. But, non-verbal communication, or nonverbal signals, can also contradict and minimize the verbal message. In fact:

“some researchers maintain that face-to-face communication up to 93 percent of an oral message is communicated nonverbally and that the nonverbal elements are a much better indicator of the true meaning than the actual words are” (Varner, 2005, p. 176)

Thus, non-verbal signals are crucial to understand in face-to-face interactions, in order to interpret what is really meant and hiding below the surface. However, this is not an easy task because non-verbal signals are different in almost every culture, and thereby interpreted differently. For instance, most western cultures interpret eye contact as a sign of honesty, while in Asian cultures it could be seen as an act of rudeness. Additionally, within a culture, whether it is in the national or
organizational culture, non-verbal signals can vary a lot. Furthermore, non-verbal signals, and the use of these, can differ extremely and is often determined by factors including: “Cultural background, socioeconomic background, education, gender, age, personal preferences and idiosyncrasies.” (Varner, 2005, p. 176) Non-verbal communication consist of non-verbal language expressed by the body and other implicit signals and in this thesis I will limit myself to examine the following distinctive non-verbal signals within the Japanese culture: paralanguage, which is vocal qualifiers and vocalization, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, timing in spoken exchange, touching, language of space, appearance, and finally, language of silence. ¹

In general, Japanese non-verbal culture is perceived to having a profound cultural heritage related to Japanese national culture. Therefore, I want to describe some common characteristics about the national culture of Japan in my introduction. In this short presentation of the Japanese national culture I have limited myself to examine the religious background and what impact this has made on modern day Japanese people.

1.2. The Japanese National Culture and Heritage
To fully understand the mind-set and values within the national culture of Japan, we have to set our eyes on the different religions found in modern day Japan. The Chinese imported religions of Confucianism, Shinto, and Buddhism have all influenced the ethics, value system, and mind-set of the Japanese people. Shinto, the oldest religion in Japan was, until the invasion of allied forces in 1946, the official state religion in Japan. In the aftermath of World War II, allied forces abolished Shinto as the national religion, and imposed freedom of religion in Japan. Nonetheless, Shinto is still regarded as the official national religion in Japan, and many rituals still remain and practised by, among others, the Emperor of Japan. In addition, after the abolishment: “Shinto was regarded as inseparable from the “Imperial Way” and inseparable from the fundamental ethical and social code of Japan.” (Shinto history, 2009). Throughout the most of its lifetime, Shinto coexisted with two other very influencing religions, or way of life namely, Buddhism and Confucianism. These three religions have influenced each other at all levels, since they arrived in Japan around the sixth century, and both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples stand in harmony side by side, and the ancient ethical rules, and way of life can be traced back to these religions in modern day Japan.

¹ (Varner, 2005)
For instance, the Confucian thought, which was brought to Japan by Chinese Buddhist monks, were adopted by the elite warrior class of the Samurai, and the thought of ancestral rights, social organization, a hierarchically based class system, and loyalty were embedded in the culture of Japan, and is still prevalent to this day. In addition,

“Japanese civic religion still include very many elements of Confucianism in its political and administrative thinking, while popular Japanese religion was a pragmatic fusion of Shinto rituals and myths with a hefty dose of Buddhism.” (Shinto history, 2009)

With the introduction of what non-verbal communication is and the description of some key elements within the national culture of Japan, I have made the following problem statement I wish to answer throughout my thesis:

2. **Problem statement**

- What are the non-verbal communication characteristics in Japan?
  - What can explain these characteristics?
- How is non-verbal communication influencing the organizational culture in Japan?
- Are there any fundamental guidelines/strategies for foreigners to ensure successful non-verbal communication in business settings?

3. **Method and Structure**

In this thesis I will apply studies and theories created by some of the leading theorists, and scholars within the fields of intercultural, non-verbal communication, and organizational culture in order to answer my problem statement. In chapter 4, I will give a short presentation of the central themes of the most important theories and studies in which I will use to analyze the Japanese non-verbal behavior with. It must be said, that the applied theories are more complex and wide-ranging than described in this thesis, but due to the limited space, the purpose of this thesis is not to give a detailed presentation of the various theories. Thus, the presentations of the theories applied are limited to the parts that are relevant to this thesis, namely to describe the Japanese cultural dimensions.
In chapter 5, I want to examine the particular characteristics of Japanese non-verbal behavior and try to analyze these characteristics by means of the theories, studies and national culture examined.

In chapter 6 I will present some essential background knowledge about the Japanese organizational culture and philosophy, and discuss and analyze the impact of the Japanese national philosophy, and relate the theories and studies to the organizational culture of Japan. However, it is important to note that I will not commence in a discussion or analysis of different organizational approaches like the functionalistic, etc. but merely concentrate my analysis on my readings and findings.

Finally, in chapter 7 I will attempt to give some pointers concerning what to do, and maybe more important, what not to do non-verbally in an intercultural business meeting with the Japanese according to the findings in my analysis. And in connection with this, conclude on the impact of non-verbal communication within the organizational culture of Japan.

4. Theories and Studies

In this chapter I will present the different studies and theories which I will make of to analyze the non-verbal characteristics of the Japanese. The theories and studies I want to present are the following, cultural themes by Edwin R. McDaniel, the cultural dimensions examined by Geert Hofstede, relationship orientations by Fons Trompenaars, the theory of contexting by Edward T. Hall and finally, Anne-Marie Søderbergs more modern way of studying cross-cultural communication.

4.1. McDaniel, R. Edwin - Cultural Themes

Firstly, McDaniel states that in order to comprehend other cultures, one must be aware of their cultural traits of communicative practices and behaviors, the so called cultural themes among a social group. The purpose of his study was to explain how non-verbal communication reflects, or represent the Japanese cultural themes, and how culture can shape a society’s communication usage. Additionally, the study carried out by McDaniel was to show, how cultural antecedents and motivations can shape an individual’s communication, and how the cultural traits can be used to understand, how and why a specific practice is being used. McDaniel states that Japanese cultural
and racial homogeneity has produced a strong identity and eases the communication patterns between the Japanese people. The societal closeness helps the Japanese to instinctively decode their compatriots, and to understand each other without the use of oral explicitness. Furthermore, McDaniel argues that the prevalent cultural themes in Japan consist of:

“Group affiliation (collectivism), hierarchy, social balance or harmony (wa), empathy, mutual dependency, perseverance, and sacrifice (gaman), humility, and formality.”

(McDaniel, 2006, p. 267)

Furthermore, McDaniel states that the old Confucian value system has a significant influence on the culture of Japan and thereby on the non-verbal communication pattern as well. ²

4.2. Hofstede, Geert – Cultural Dimensions

One of the benchmark cultural studies is the one carried out by Geert Hofstede. The Dutch social psychologist conducted a comprehensive study on, how values in the workplace are influenced by culture and:

“Geert Hofstede's research gives us insights into other cultures so that we can be more effective when interacting with people in other countries. If understood and applied properly, this information should reduce your level of frustration, anxiety, and concern. But most important, Geert Hofstede will give you the 'edge of understanding' which translates to more successful results.” (Hofstede G., http://www.geert-hofstede.com, 2001)

The five cultural dimensions examined by Hofstede are the following: power distance (PDI), which has to do with the acceptance of a hierarchical or unequal power structure. Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) implies how cultures deal with uncertainties of everyday life. Individualism (IDV) indicates, whether the people perceive themselves as independent or collectivistic. Masculinity (MAS) signifies, whether the culture is an aggressive, materialistic culture and whether it is a male dominated society (masculine), or whether the culture emphasizes on sensitivity and quality of life (feminine). Finally, we have the long and short-term orientation (LTO), which is explained like this:

“Long- term oriented societies foster pragmatic virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular saving, persistence, and adapting to changing circumstances. Short-term oriented societies foster virtues related to the past and present such as

² (McDaniel, 2006)
national pride, respect for tradition, preservation of "face", and fulfilling social obligations.” (Hofstede G., http://www.geert-hofstede.com, 2001)

All these values, both within the long, and the short-term orientation, originate from the Confucius value system. Below, I have shown Hofstede’s results for Japan, and the average world scores of his five cultural dimensions, and as you can see, there are some significant differences. Hofstede’s dimensions show us that the Japanese culture has a very high degree of masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation embedded in their culture compared to the world in general.

### 4.3. Trompenaars, Fons – Relationship Orientations

Fons Trompenaars, another leading Dutch professor within the field of intercultural communication, made a quantitative classification of cultures including a questionnaire given to 15,000 managers, in 28 countries, and he identified five orientations, which are covering the general characteristics in which people deal with each other. These are universalism vs. particularism, which indicate whether the culture places more importance on formal rules (universalism), or value relationships (particularism). The Japanese are found to be a particular culture that emphasizes relationships more that formal rules in contrary to most western cultures and: “in Denmark it is important to follow universal rules, while rules that are particular to the

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4 http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_japan.shtml
situation are important in Japan.” (Clausen, 2006, p. 55) The Individualism vs. collectivism orientation is, to a great extent, the same as Hofstede’s individualism dimension. The neutral vs. emotional orientation imply, whether the culture is liable to show feelings and emotions (emotional), or whether the culture is hiding emotions etc. (neutral) which the Japanese tend do. The Specific vs. diffuse orientation is a taxonomy which indicates whether the culture has a clear separation between work and private life, and whether people are straight forward (specific), or whether relationship building is important when doing business, and whether people are detached and indirect within the culture (diffuse), which is where the Japanese are positioned. The achievement vs. ascription orientation entail, whether status is obtained by accomplishments and record (achievement), or whether status is gained due to family connections, gender or/and age, and seniority (ascription). The Japanese are living in an ascribed culture and moreover: “Japanese manager’s advance due to years of employment, family and school connections and/or seniority.” (Clausen, 2006, p. 55) These five orientations are taxonomies which categories the relationships between people, and how they act according to their culture.\(^5\)

4.4. Hall, T. Edward – Contexting

I now want to introduce anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher, Edward T. Hall’s theory of contexting in communication. Firstly, a short definition of context:

“Context is “stored information”… it is “the amount of information the other person can be expected to posses on a given subject”, while the text is” “transmitted information“.

(Katan, 2004, p. 245)

Hall states, that every culture can be divided into either a high-context or a low-context culture. A high-context culture is a culture where there is a lot of information surrounding the explicit verbal message. This denotes that people in a high-context culture understand each other without saying too much, or given in-depth, background information. Additionally, high-context cultures are the ones having a wide-ranging network of family, friends, colleagues, customers and are keeping themselves up to date with the people important to them:

“…members of the group know each other exceedingly well. One’s family life, love affairs, even the limits of one’s capacity for cocktails are intimately know to others.

\(^5\) (Clausen, 2006, pp. 52-67) (Morrison, 2006, pp. 192-194)
Among fellow members a single word would suffice for the whole sentence. The mutually sensitive response goes so far that each easily recognizes the other’s slightest change in behavior and mood and is ready to react accordingly” (Hall E. T., 1987, p. 59)

On the other hand, low-context cultures are cultures, which need explicit verbal words and information, in order to fully understand the message. Hall’s context triangles show us that, the more high-context a culture is the lesser explicit information is needed and vice versa, the lower the context culture is, the more information and text is needed, and:

“as context is lost, information must be added if meaning is to remain constant”. Hall suggests that Contexting is a fundamental aspect of culture; and also that members of a culture will have a shared bias, either towards communication through the text or the context.” (Katan, 2004, p. 247)

Furthermore, low-context cultures are seen as shallow rooted and importance is placed on; text, facts, directness, consistency, substance, rules and a monochronic time perspective which is to:

“do one thing at a time, concentrate on the job, take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously,... emphasize promptness.” (Hall E. T., Hidden Differences, Doing Business with the Japanese, 1987, pp. 18-19). On the contrary, high-context cultures are said to be deeper rooted, and put their emphasis on; context, relationship/feelings, indirectness, flexibility, appearance, circumstances, and they seem to follow a polychronic time perspective, which is to:

“do many things at once, are highly distractable and subject to interruptions, consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible,... base promptness on the relationship.” (Hall E. T., Hidden Differences, Doing Business with the Japanese, 1987, pp. 18-19)

4.5. Chart of Hall, Hofstede, and Trompenaars Cultural Dimensions

In the chart below, we have a simple overview of the Japanese cultural dimensions examined by Hall, Hofstede, and Trompenaars in comparison to a Danish/western context.6

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6 (Clausen, 2006, p. 53)
Generalizing Studies | Denmark/West | Japan
--- | --- | ---
Hall (1959)
Dimensions of communication and culture | Low Context | High Context
Hofstede (1980, 1991)
Dimensions of national culture | Feminine, low risk avoidance, individualistic, egalitarian | Masculine, high risk avoidance, collectivist, hierarchical
Trompenaars (1993)
Dimensions of culture | Universal, Individual, affective, specific (low-context), achieved status | Particular, collective, neutral, diffuse (high-context), ascribed status

4.6. Søderberg, Anne-Marie - Rethinking Cross Culture Management

Anne-Marie Søderberg argues for a new way to describe cross cultural management, and she states that:

“The prevailing concept of culture-as-essence, which in this scientific context is heavily associated with national cultures (and, by extension, nation-states) is out of touch with the theoretical developments of conceptualizations of culture and identity. Furthermore, a conceptualization of organizational and national cultures as well-defined and homogeneous entities is out of phase...” (Søderberg, 2002, p. 117)

She criticizes the classic anthropological studies and theories of intercultural management developed by for instance Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars, of being too static in a rapid changing and culturally diverse business world. Furthermore, she argues that these obsolete intercultural studies do not examine the: “social variation, diversity, and power relations within a nation or an organization, or between nations and organizations.” (Søderberg, 2002, p. 108)

Her theoretically approach is that management and academics have to see intercultural communication in a new light because of globalization and: “rethink the theoretical and methodological foundation of international management in an increasingly interdependent, yet culturally diverse, business world.” (Søderberg, 2002, p. 109)
In support of Søderbergs theory and critique of the three generalizations of culture, namely the ones of Hofstede, Trompenaars, and Hall, Lisbeth Clausen made some similar thoughts concerning the classic anthropological studies of intercultural communication and stated that: “

“a) stereotypes oversimplify nations and cultures, b) National characteristics do not automatically describe characteristics in business context, c) national generalizations do not provide insights about intercultural business contexts, d) using generalizations as a starting point for research guides questionnaires and maintains stereotypes, e) a generalization approach does not unfold the potential synergies or new understandings that can emerge from intercultural encounters, f) generalizations studies provide a static approach, often devoid of context, that fails to account for how perceptions and intercultural work environments may change over time.” (Clausen, 2006, pp. 55-56)

5. Non-Verbal Japan

In this chapter I will elaborate on what the different non-verbal signals exactly are, and define how the Japanese differ from other cultures when it comes to non-verbal communication. In addition, I will try to analysis these characteristics by means of the theories and studies explained in the previous chapter.

5.1. Paralanguage

Paralanguage is found between verbal and non-verbal communication, and is defined as: “The uhs, ahas, and uhms we use in our conversation...” (Varner, 2005, p. 177).

Within paralanguage we find the term vocal qualifiers. Vocal qualifiers are the volume, the pitch, and intonation of the verbal communication, and deals with the rhythm, or flow, of the conversation, which is often embedded in the culture. If people from different cultures are having a face-to-face conversation and do not use the same intonation, it could be interpreted as one of the communicators is trying to be dominating or aggressive.

Another area within the paralanguage is vocalization. This is the: “nonword” (Varner, 2005, p. 178) noises such as the “ahem,” “um,” clicking with ones tongue, and the likes. Vocalization is found just in-between non-verbal, and verbal communication. In relation to vocalizers are fillers. These are for example; “okay,” “you know,” “yes,” etc. which are often used, but actually not ascribed any

7 (Søderberg, 2002) (Clausen, 2006, pp. 52-56)
meaning. People do not always recognize these fillers as “meaningless”, it can be an obstacle when interacting face-to-face.

When it comes to the Japanese, in regards to paralanguage, they seem to demonstrate some general characteristics. The Japanese seem to speak in clusters, the sentence is being spit out very fast, and they only make a short pause before they spit out another. It must be mentioned, that Japanese women appear to have a more even “flow” when speaking, compared to the Japanese men. Furthermore, the Japanese are likely to use many types of fillers when they communicate and one of the more common is “Hai/yes”. For many foreigners this can be very confusing because it does not necessarily mean “yes” but instead used as a bridge between their cluster sentences, or just as a sign of understanding, and not an affirmative “yes”. The Japanese use of fillers is an indication of attentiveness and: “the feedback stream indicates that the listener is paying attention to the speaker, which helps maintain positive social relations (wa) between the two individuals.” (McDaniel, 2006, p. 270)

5.2. Eye Contact

The cultural rules of eye contact can vary enormously from culture to culture, and the lack of cultural knowledge can be very uncomfortable for people when they meet another “eye-contact culture”. In most western cultures, eye contact is related to power or honesty. Thus, it is more common for superiors to look at subordinates than the opposite. In addition:

“Since several cultures consider the eye to be “the window of the soul” eye contact or its lack is interpreted to have special meaning. In these cultures eye contact is related to honesty. In other cultures eye contact is seen as an invasion of privacy.” (Varner, 2005, p. 179)

In the Japanese “eye contact culture”, prolonged eye contact is considered an invasion of privacy, disrespectful, or rude, and even in the overcrowded metro’s of Japan, people are not looking each other in the eyes. In fact, the Japanese are more or less taught from childhood to look at a person’s throat, instead of looking a person in the eye, as most western cultures do and learn from childhood. In western cultures, it is very important with eye contact. In Japan, on the other hand, sustained eye contact by a superior is seen as a reprimand of the subordinate, and by avoiding eye

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8 (Varner, 2005) (McDaniel, 2006)
contact the subordinate shows humility and sustaining the “wa”, as McDaniel states in his theory of the Japanese cultural themes. In addition⁹. “*The use of direct eye contact by a superior is a clear exercise of hierarchical prerogative.*” (McDaniel, 2006, p. 268)

### 5.3. Facial expressions

Facial expressions includes smiling, showing anger, and many other facial expressions which accompany feelings and words. Facial expressions can be interpreted in different ways depending on the culture, and also the frequency and intensity can vary a lot. In general, cultures from East Asia are more restrained when it comes to facial expressions and showing feelings, and this includes Japan. These cultures, as Trompenaars theory of cultural orientations points out, have a neutral orientation to showing feelings/emotions, and most western cultures are having an emotional orientation. Additionally, when it comes to smiling, the East Asian and Japanese cultures vary a lot from western cultures. In western cultures, smiling indicates joy, amusement, or friendliness. In contrast, in Japanese culture, smiling can be a sign of embarrassment, anger, displeasure, and even be used when a conflict occur. The Japanese can simply smile, if they do not want to answer a question, or instead of giving a depressing answer to a question. This has to do with the protection of face and can be very confusing or irritating for a foreigner and is very difficult to decipher. In addition, when talking about the smile, laughter is seen very differently depending on which culture you belong to as well. Again, a laugh is not automatically a sign of joy, happiness, or something funny going on, but can be an expression of embarrassment, uneasiness or nervousness in the Japanese culture.

Another Japanese non-verbal signal which is very different from western non-verbal communication is expression of anger. Showing anger, in general, is more legitimate the older, the more power the person has and primarily, it is more acceptable when men show anger. This underlines the high amount of masculinity in the Japanese culture, which Hofstede pointed out as well in his theory of the cultural dimensions. In Japan, showing anger is not appropriate, even a gaze could be improper and the Japanese and East Asian cultures tend to hide their emotions and feelings in order not to burden others and maintain the situational harmony “wa”. Because of this restriction of facial expressions, anger is not uttered openly in work environments, and it can be

⁹(McDaniel, 2006) (Varner, 2005)
very difficult for foreigners to decode the general mood and emotions of the counterpart.\textsuperscript{10} In addition:

\begin{quote}
People from Asian cultures are able to read the message of the subdued nonverbal facial communication of anger, but people from Western cultures tend to have a hard time deciphering the code.\textsuperscript{,} (Varner, 2005, p. 182)
\end{quote}

\section*{5.4. Gestures}

Gestures are something that can accompany the verbal message and strengthen it, but can also be used, when expressing emotions and feelings. Head movements are one gesture, which is very different from culture to culture. For example, shaking ones head means, some kind of rejection, or disagreement in most cultures. Nonetheless, Bulgarians do just the opposite. In connection to head movements, when lowering ones head in western cultures it signifies defeat, insecurity or uncertainty. In Japan, when lowering ones head can be a sign of total attention to the speaker, and also a symbol of hierarchy. Japanese business people can sometimes, in face-to-face negotiations, lower their heads, and close their eyes, in order to give their full attention to the speaker. But this can be seen as an insult in many cultures, because it looks like they could not care less about the proceedings. Nevertheless, it is just the opposite the Japanese are trying to display.

Furthermore, within the area of gestures, we find the use of arm movements or arm gestures. In most western cultures arm movements are used to enhance the size of the speaker, and can be used to intimidate listeners and make the speaker seem more powerful. In contrast, the Japanese use far fewer arm gestures than westerners, and this is connected to the possible invasion of personal space. Furthermore, by using large arm gestures and expressive body language, there will be a possibility that the individual is singled out from the group, and this can threaten the harmony of the group. Because the Japanese are not expressive, and do not use big arm movements:

\begin{quote}
Someone from a more openly expressive culture may interpret the subdued arm and body movements of a Japanese person as submissive or timid.... People who are used
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} (Varner, 2005) (McDaniel, 2006)
Because of this, the Japanese can be overwhelmed by the more expressive cultures use of arm gestures and they seem to scream at the Japanese.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{5.5. Timing in spoken exchange}

“A conversation is verbal exchange between people. Although the words are obviously important, the timing of the exchange also carries a significant nonverbal message”  
(Varner, 2005, p. 185)

Timing in spoken exchange is a question about gender, status and hierarchy. In most cultures men tend to start the verbal exchange. In addition, the older you are, the more likely it is that you initiate the conversation. Finally, the higher you are in the hierarchy, the more probable it is that you open the conversation too. These patterns of gender, status, and hierarchy are the same in many cultures, and also prevailing in the Japanese. But, the Japanese differ in some other aspects of the timing in spoken exchange. In many cultures it is tolerable to interrupt others while they speak, but not in the Japanese culture which could lead to loss of face and ruin the social balance and harmony. Interruption of others is not acceptable and this can create a lack of verbal ping-pong and duelling common in western societies. Furthermore, the timing is influenced by the environment of the culture. In Japan, the conversation is usually dominated by the oldest person, meaning the seniority, who is also often the highest in the hierarchy. In addition, timing of the conversation is clearly dominated by men, which corresponds with Hofstede’s theory of Japan as a very masculine culture. Thus, the control of the conversation in Japan is mainly a question about, seniority and gender.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{5.6. Touching}

People have different views on touching each other, according to their cultural background. For example, the greeting ritual varies a lot depending on where you are. The handshake though, has become the most common way of greeting each other welcome, and goodbye, or when a business deal is completed. But, even the hand gesture can vary according to the culture. For instance, in France you will often be met with a soft handshake maybe accompanied by a kiss, or two on the

\textsuperscript{11} (Varner, 2005) (McDaniel, 2006)  
\textsuperscript{12} (Varner, 2005) (McDaniel, 2006)
Influenced by globalization, which underlines the theory of Søderberg of converging cultures, the Japanese are getting more used to the handshake when meeting people from other cultures, but when the Japanese do, they tend to make a slight bow and keep the arm firmly extended to maintain distance and personal space. Still the most common greeting in Japan is the bow. The bow is a fundamental part of Japanese everyday life and is used in numerous occasions:

“The Japanese bow is used when meeting someone, when asking for something, while apologizing, when offering congratulations, when acknowledging someone else, and when departing, to mention just a few instances.” (McDaniel, 2006, p. 268)

The bow is a historical sign of submission, and respect, and indicates where in the hierarchy you are:  

“The junior person bows first, lowest, and longest. An improperly executed bow can be interpreted as a significant insult.” (McDaniel, 2006, p. 268)

In general, touching in public is not tolerable in Japan. After childhood, the amount of contact drops significantly, and the individuals are expected to obey the rules of non-touching. There are some exceptions though: “Indeed, adult Japanese actively avoid public displays of interpersonal physical expressiveness unless in a close-knit in-group setting.” (McDaniel, 2006, p. 269).

People who know each other very well whether it being co-workers or family members etc., can touch one another in public. For instance, when male co-workers are in a friendly drinking session after work, which is common in Japan. When people in an out-group do touch unwillingly in Japan, it is often because of crowding.  

5.7. Language of space
The use of space varies a lot depending on where you are in the world. The proper distance to other people is something learned, and not inborn, like many other cultural traits. We intuitively know what the right distance is, and it is not something we think about in our daily interactions.

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But: “The problem is that the acceptable use of space varies widely among cultures.” (Varner, 2005, p. 189), and what feels right in one culture can feel uncomfortable, and offensive in another.

One part of space is the private space. If our private space is intruded by outsiders, we can feel violated. The private space, or bubble, is very small in the Middle East, and Latin cultures, while Japan is at the other end of the scale. This is because,

“In Japan privacy is defined altogether differently than it is in the United States and Germany. Japan is a crowded country, and space is costly; therefore, houses and apartments are smaller….Yet within this crowdedness the Japanese are able to create a private sphere.” (Varner, 2005, p. 191).

While the Americans and Germans see the bubble of privacy as physical space the Japanese, on the other hand, see the bubble as more psychological as a mental space. The Japanese have a much larger distance of personal space, when in a less crowded setting, than for instance, Americans. Still, when the Japanese experience prolonged body contact, due to crowdedness in the metro etc., they seem to just accept, and make up a facade of passivity in order not to preserve the situational harmony. Intruders do not actually exist in the mental private space. Moreover, the Japanese seem to be much more comfortable with their private space being intruded, when they find themselves in an in-group setting. Within an in-group, the Japanese private space is reduced dramatically.

In general, our cultural mind-set of private space can be directly transferred to our mind-set of space in the office setting, although this is not the case with the Japanese. Habitually, cultures with a big personal space bubble, like the Japanese, have a tendency to value large personal offices, and cultures with small private space bubbles do not value the size of the office. The Japanese however, prefer large group offices where information can flow easily to all members of the organization15:

“Although Japanese businesses have undergone a number of changes, the traditional office arrangement has remained the same. The Japanese believe that this arrangement emphasizes the importance of the group and the need to work together” (Varner, 2005, p. 194).

Furthermore:

“The Japanese office layout sends a strong symbolic message: “we are in this together.” The welfare of the whole is more important than are the concerns of individuals” (Varner, 2005, p. 195)

5.8. Appearance

While the Europeans are getting more and more casual, in regards to dressing in business settings, the Japanese still have a rather conservative dress style. The Japanese businessman, among other things, still have to obey the rules of not sticking out from the crowd, and thus, wear the same conservative grey, black or dark blue suit, in order not to stick out. This implies a strong sense of group affiliation and the need to maintain social balance. The suit can also show an important indication of status and hierarchy, and as Japanese women are let into managing roles etc., instead of the traditional office/greeting ladies, the importance of proper dressing is crucial. However:

“With the growing emphasis on comfort and leisure time activities, attitudes toward appearance and dress are changing in many cultures. In many cases young people around the world have more in common with the young people from other cultures than with the older generation of their own culture when it comes to dress.” (Varner, 2005, p. 200)

Again it is important to underline that we see converging of cultures, as Søderberg stresses, and moreover in this situation, it is not national cultures, but subcultures within the wider national culture that are converging with other subcultures in other national cultures. But nonetheless, to be dressed improperly can have a major counterproductive signal in some cultures and: “if a person from a more casual culture with an emphasis on comfort does business with someone older from a conservative and formal culture, dress can become a serious issue.” (Varner, 2005, p. 200)

5.9. Silence

The importance and interpreting of silence as a way of communicating vary a great deal depending on the culture. The language of silence is much more difficult to interpret than explicit words. In low context cultures, such as the American or German, silence is uncomfortable and is often
interpreted as a communication breakdown, and can give the impression of mistrust, and that the other part has something to hide. In Japanese culture, silence is seen much differently. High-context cultures, like the Japanese: “can impart a variety of messages, with the context supplying the actual meaning.” (McDaniel, 2006, p. 271) Furthermore: “silence is used to tactfully signal disagreement, nonacceptance, or an uncomfortable dilemma.” (McDaniel, 2006, p. 271) The Japanese interpret silence as preferable to explicit conversation and their conviction is that:

“It is through silence that one can discover the truth inside oneself... Buddha taught that words make truth untrue, and there is a view in Japanese society that words contaminate understanding.” (Varner, 2005, p. 201)

Thus, the Japanese believe that verbal communication actually diverts people from understanding the truth, and silence is considered a virtue, a sign of respect, and trustworthiness. In addition, the Japanese can use silence to assess the other person’s attention and emotional state more carefully.16

5.10. Time

The last characteristic I will examine in this chapter, about Japanese non-verbal behaviour, is the importance and interpretation of time as a structure. According to Hall’s theory, time can be used in two different ways, either the you fit into the concept of monochronic time, which means: “paying attention to and doing only one thing at a time” (Hall E. T., 1987, p. 16), or, you belong to cultures, which make use of polychronic time, which is: “being involved with many things at once.” (Hall E. T., 1987, p. 16)

Like many other different cultural traits and characteristics, these two time concepts do not mix very well. Cultures which are using the monochronic time concept, are dividing time into sections, and make schedules, in order to focus on one thing only, and these schedules are sacred, and a very important thing in everyday life. In monochronic cultures, time are almost seen as something tangible, and people can save, lose, or spend time. Polychronic time, on the other hand, is just the opposite. Cultures that make use of the polychronic time concept, including Japan, place the emphasis of time on human transactions, and involvement with people more than schedules. Thus, schedules, or time, can wait if a personal matter arises, and this indicates that the cultural

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orientation in Japan, according to Trompenaars theory, is particularism in contrary to universalism. However, the Japanese use the polychronic concept when in an interpersonal relation, but they also possess the ability to act from a monochronic time perspective when dealing with foreigners and: 17 "The rigid adherence to schedules when dealing with foreigners is in contrast with the temporal flexibility exhibited during interactions with other Japanese." (McDaniel, 2006, p. 270)

5.11. Conclusion of the Japanese Non-Verbal Characteristics

When analysing the non-verbal behaviours of Japan we observe some general cultural tendencies. Throughout their non-verbal behaviour I have noticed some important national culture traits like the Confucius thought, and that the Japanese religious background of Shinto and Buddhism have an incredibly dominant influence on their non-verbal behaviour. The social balance and harmony "wa", group affiliation and loyalty are dominant cultural factors throughout almost all of the non-verbal characteristics. Additionally, a strong hierarchical system, formality and the dimension of masculinity is hidden in the Japanese non-verbal communication. Furthermore, protection of face and status are dominant cultural aspects which shape the non-verbal behaviour.

Gesture like the bow and appearance are, among other things, symbols of hierarchy and formality, and subdued arm movements are symbols of fear of being singled out from the group. It must be mentioned that the adoption of the western handshake supports the theory of Søderberg and Clausen of converging cultures in a globalizing world and that culture is not static and must be analysed in a more specific way.

Moreover, the behaviour of timing in spoken exchange are unambiguous indications of the masculine dominated power structure in Japan, which Hofstede’s dimension of masculinity also indicates and furthermore, that seniority and hierarchy still prevails in the Japanese culture. The behaviours of touching and language of space also indicate that the in-group is a “safe zone” in the Japanese culture and that relationships are especially important to the Japanese. Furthermore, Halls theory of the Japanese, as a high-context culture, is being supported when we look at the language of silence in the Japanese culture. Additionally, as Hall indicates, the Japanese polychronic time perspective shows us that the Japanese value relationships and that harmony of the group and social balance has precedence over schedules. Nonetheless, the Japanese also have

the ability to make use of monochronic time when dealing with foreigners and this raises a critique of Hall’s theory and in that connection supports the arguments of converging cultures stated by Søderberg.

6. **Japanese Organizational Culture**

In this chapter about Japanese organizational culture, I will give a presentation of the general characteristics of Japanese organization culture and philosophy. I will examine how they deal with information flow, promotions, decision-making, employee relations, and analyse how the national culture is embedded in these characteristics, and furthermore, analyse whether the studies and theories confirm these characteristics.

The Japanese live in a sea of information both within the national culture, and within the organization. As Stuart Hall states, the Japanese are high-context communicators, and are constantly keeping themselves up to date with the information needed, and this is the case within the organization too. There is a free flow of information within the organization, and this is displayed in the Japanese office setting. Because it is so important for the Japanese to have constant access to information, the office setting is somewhat different than western low-context settings. As we examined in the section with language of space, the office layout is a collectivistic setting where information can flow freely to all members of the organization and reflects the collectivistic group culture of Japan, as both Trompenaars, and Hofstede point out.

To get a promotion in Japan can be a lengthy process. According to Trompenaars, the Japanese culture is an ascription culture that values age, and seniority. Thus, accomplishments are not necessarily a criteria for promotion. In addition, promotions are given to those who work hard, stay loyal, and are serious in all aspects of the work environment. Furthermore: “The key to everything in Japan is ningen kankei, human relations.” (Hall E. T., 1987, p. 77), or roughly put, friendships, which Trompenaars also indicates when stating that the Japanese culture is particularistic, and it is immensely important to maintain these “ningen kankei” which:

“In addition to former classmates it includes people who come from the same town or who are working for the same company... employees of the same organization tend to form ningen kankei with people of their same level but in different parts of the
company... ningen kankei is greatly strengthened by afterhours socializing in bars or on the golf course over the weekends.” (Hall E. T., 1987, p. 58).

, and it is of great importance to have the ability to work well in groups. Additionally, it is not possible to jump ranks in Japan and it shows the powerful force of hierarchy, and the determination not to ruin the harmony of the group. In connection, to be a good leader in Japan, one has to do his best to improve and contribute to harmony, or the Japanese term “wa”. “Wa” signifies cooperation, trust, warmth, and a caring attitude toward others. Again, we see the importance of teamwork and the collectivistic thought is emphasized greatly, and moreover: “To the Japanese, 
leadership means an individual’s ability to listen carefully to others and to work to achieve group consensus and harmony.” (Hall E. T., Hidden Differences, Doing Business with the Japanese, 1987, p. 78). Furthermore, the Japanese have several philosophies, besides “wa, and ningen kankei”, imbedded in their culture, which has to be explained in order to fully understand the human and work relationship of the Japanese. One of these Japanese terms, or philosophies, is “Amae”. This philosophy: “is the glue that holds Japanese society together” (Hall E. T., Hidden Differences, Doing Business with the Japanese, 1987, p. 54), and can be roughly translated to dependency. “Amae” is strengthening the workforce among the group, and the employee will enter a close dependency relationship with the superior, who has the power, status and influence. Dependency is a rather negative perceived word in English, but this is not the case with “Amae”:

“The larger Japanese companies reflect amea in their relationship to the employees by providing health and life insurance, housing for some employees and housing allowances for others... education and training in-house and at technical schools and universities. In return, employees identify closely with the company, which gradually becomes at least as important as their family.” (Hall E. T., Hidden Differences, Doing Business with the Japanese, 1987, p. 55)

It is almost like the saying, “I’ll scratch your back if you’ll scratch mine”, but to another extent of mutual dependency, trust and interdependent relations to the whole group, and not a, something for something deal. This again stresses the importance of the collectivistic thought and if the “amea”, among other things, is kept in balance, the employer will have an employee for life, and an employee who will be involved with the common goal of the company, even more than the goal of the individual self. Thus, the participation and involvement of workers in the Japanese
organizations are typically in the normative consensus. in which the individual contributes his or her commitment because of the goals of the organization are basically the same as the individual’s goals.” (Schein, 2004, p. 191)

The decision making process in Japan, as you may have foreseen, is collective and a matter of consensus making. The Japanese refer to it as “ringi”, and is described like this:

“ringi, a collective decision-making process through which companies seek to test the robustness of policy initiatives and other developments. Under this process, a policy document is circulated among a group of managers or other personal for approval. If a person disagrees with what is being proposed, he or she is free to amend the document, and it is circulated again.” (Morgan, 1997, p. 97)

This process can be extremely time-consuming, but on the other hand, one can be almost sure that the future outcome will have been closely scrutinized, and all critical concerns detected and dealt with. The process of “ringi”, as Hofstede’s long-term orientation, and uncertainty avoidance dimensions indicate, shows us that the Japanese are thinking more about the future than the present, and that the Japanese make this form of quality circle to avoid uncertainty in the future. Furthermore, as Hofstede, and Trompenaars established in their studies, the importance of collectivism, group decisions and consensus are virtues in Japanese culture. In general, in the communitarian Japanese organizational culture and philosophy:

“the individual is expected to sacrifice himself or herself for the greater good of the group. At the extreme this assumption has led to the glorification by their people of Japanese kamikaze pilots in World War II...” (Schein, 2004, p. 181)

In addition, the tradition of “hara-kiri” (suicide), which means belly cutting, or more common in Japanese “seppuku”, which means self-disembowelment, is an ancient custom to restore face in an honorable way, and a ritual punishment employed by the Emperor beginning, at least, from the 15th century. The “hara-kiri” ritual is a good indication of the Japanese’ need of loyalty and despite that “hara-kiri” is a rare sight in modern day Japan, it still happens:

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“Japanese officials would sometimes commit hara-kiri to protest a superior’s decision. Like self-immolation, hara-kiri is meant to attract attention and show a willingness to sacrifice oneself for a greater cause... Japanese officials sometimes killed themselves to atone for botching an assignment or out of grief over a leader’s death.” (Gottlieb, 1999)

Fortunately, “hara-kiri” can be avoided if, among other things, the face, or “kao” is protected. “Kao” imply self-esteem, reputation, and personal honor and plays a vital role in all aspects of Japanese life. One way to protect the “kao” is not to say no, and they abhor to be rejected, criticized, or to make mistakes, which will result in loss of “kao”. The Japanese are experts in not saying no, and this can be really frustrating for foreigners:

“the Japanese avoid saying no, even though that’s what they mean...You don’t hear a Japanese saying, ”I told you that wouldn’t work.” (Hall E. T., Hidden Differences, Doing Business with the Japanese, 1987, p. 57)

The only solution is to decode the negative body language, or other non-verbal implicit signs of rejection. Nevertheless, there is one way, the formal rules, and loss of face can be reduced, and that is in the after-hour in-group meetings. According to Edgar Schein:

“Formal relations in Japan, especially across authority lines, have to preserve face, but this prevents certain kinds of necessary feedback to the boss. By getting drunk together (faking inebriation is not allowed) they create a climate in which subordinates can say things to the boss that would ordinarily be much too face-threatening” (Schein, 2004, p. 126)

6.1. Conclusion on the Japanese Organizational Culture and Philosophy

In my analysis of the Japanese organizational culture and philosophy, we can acknowledge the importance of the national way of thought and religions. The collectivistic thought, group balance and harmony of “wa”, masculinity, seniority and relationships prevail in the Japanese organizational setting. Additionally, long-term orientation, uncertainty avoidance and consensus making are also characteristics which can, to some extent, verify the theories put forward by Hofstede, and Trompenaars about the Japanese cultural dimensions. Furthermore, face protection and the need of social balance are embedded in many characteristics of the Japanese communication traits but this can have a counterproductive aspect because of the possible

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frustration from the Japanese employees when personal opinions or feedback to the boss is needed.

7. **Conclusion, do’s and don’ts**

The non-verbal communication characteristics and organizational culture of Japan has some general traits and is, in my opinion after writing this thesis, deeply rooted in their strong natural culture and religions. Thereby, I have not found significant evidence pointing towards that the non-verbal communication in Japan is influenced by other noticeable dynamics. As a result, I must give my support to the cultural dimension theories made by Hofstede, Trompenaars, Hall, and McDaniel. Small indications of converging with other cultures have been noticed, but my judgment is that the Japanese national culture, organizations, and non-verbal communication are in fact very static. The Japanese way of thought and non-verbal behavior, as well as the organizational culture, is greatly influenced by Confucian philosophy, which brought a hierarchical power structure to Japan, along with values of harmony “wa”, social balance and group loyalty. In addition, the Japanese society and organization is still strongly influenced by males. I have no definitive answer to why that is, but it could be a relic from the ancient male dominated samurai period, and also an indication of, despite a converging and globalizing business world, that the Japanese are sticking with their traditions because of their, still very homogeneous nation.

In my opinion, within the organizational culture of Japan the correct non-verbal communication is essential not to fall into disfavor with the organizational culture and the wider society. If not applying the right non-verbal behavior, the individual Japanese could lose face, and that would be critical in a business context where formality, appearance, hierarchy and status are fundamental values.

For a foreigner doing business in Japan, there are some guidelines to follow. The first thing is, have patience with the Japanese. The Japanese have an extensive quality circle system “ringi”, where all people involved with the dealings or process have to achieve group consensus. Secondly, do not be offended or try to wake up a Japanese counterpart who looks like he/she is sleeping. It is, hopefully, an attempt to devote all attention to what you are saying. Thirdly, if you are from an expressive culture, which uses a vast amount of arm gestures, body language and facial expressions, try to tone it down a bit. The Japanese are often overwhelmed by too many
expressive gestures. Fourthly, do not be insulted if the Japanese counterpart does not answer your problematic question but instead smile and laugh or sit in silence. The Japanese do not want to give a depressing answer or an explicit no, and therefore, uses some particular expressions which could signify the direct opposite in your non-verbal culture. The fifth, and last, guideline or advice is, when asked to go to a bar, for a glass of “sake”, after a hard day’s work or negotiations, does it. This could mean that you are in the essential Japanese in-group circle and the high-level of formality is decreasing and relationships can develop even more.
8. Abstract

The initial motivation to analysing the Japanese non-verbal culture is my own curiosity after meeting some fellow Japanese students, but more important to provide others with background knowledge about the Japanese non-verbal behaviour and the ability to decipher the deeper meaning with their behaviour, and in addition, give some advice to foreigners about how to act in a Japanese business setting. In addition; In general, Japanese non-verbal culture is perceived to having a profound cultural heritage related to Japanese national culture. Therefore, I want to describe some common characteristics about the national culture of Japan and examine the religious background and what impact this has made on modern day Japanese people.

Problem statement:

- What are the non-verbal communication characteristics in Japan?
  - What can explain these characteristics?
- How is non-verbal communication influencing the organizational culture in Japan?
  - Are there any fundamental guidelines/strategies for foreigners to ensure successful non-verbal communication in business settings?

Approach

I will apply studies and theories created by some of the leading theorists, and scholars within the fields of intercultural, non-verbal communication, and organizational culture in order to answer my problem statement. The theories and studies I want to present are the following, cultural themes by Edwin R. McDaniel, the cultural dimensions examined by Geert Hofstede, relationship orientations by Fons Trompenaars, the theory of contexting by Edward T. Hall and finally, Anne-Marie Søderbergs more modern way of studying cross-cultural communication.

I want to examine the particular characteristics of Japanese non-verbal behavior and try to analyze these characteristics by means of the theories, studies and the national culture and heritage. Furthermore, present some essential background knowledge about the Japanese organizational culture and philosophy, and discuss and analyze the impact of the Japanese national philosophy, and relate the theories and studies to the organizational culture of Japan.
Lastly, attempt to give some pointers concerning what to do, and maybe more important, what not to do non-verbally in an intercultural business meeting with the Japanese according to the findings in my analysis. And in connection with this, conclude on the impact of non-verbal communication within the organizational culture of Japan

Results/conclusion

I have not found significant evidence pointing towards that the non-verbal communication in Japan is influenced by other noticeable dynamics than national culture and heritage. As a result, I must give my support to the cultural dimension theories made by Hofstede, Trompenaars, Hall, and McDaniel. Small indications of converging with other cultures have been noticed, but my judgment is that the Japanese national culture, organizations, and non-verbal communication are in fact very static. The Japanese way of thought and non-verbal behavior, as well as the organizational culture, is greatly influenced by Confucian philosophy, which brought a hierarchical power structure to Japan, along with values of harmony “wa”, social balance and group loyalty. In addition, the Japanese society and organization is still strongly influenced by males. I have no definitive answer to why that is, but it could be a relic from the ancient male dominated samurai period, and also an indication of, despite a converging and globalizing business world, that the Japanese are sticking with their traditions because of their, still very homogeneous nation.

In my opinion, within the organizational culture of Japan the correct non-verbal communication is essential not to fall into disfavor with the organizational culture and the wider society. If not applying the right non-verbal behavior, the individual Japanese could lose face, and that would be critical in a business context where formality, appearance, hierarchy and status are fundamental values.

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