



# Observations on Cross-Cultural Electronic Networking

BY JEFFREY SHAPARD

*Jeffrey Shapard is a Montanan living in Tokyo. After attempting a career with his 12-string guitar, he became a teacher, and then stumbled onto electronic networking in 1984 as a way to provide opportunities for continuing education and meaningful communication in English to the alumni of IEC/NichiBei Kaiwa Gakuin, one of Japan's oldest English communication training institutes. In the process he and his friend Joichi Ito developed TWICS ("Two-Way Information Communication System"), a passion for building bridges between people, and a belief in the power of enhanced communications in the process of human growth, personal and organizational.*

—Howard Rheingold

COMPUTER CONFERENCING is often mentioned as a potential tool for encouraging cross-cultural communication. As the co-founder of TWICS, I've observed that you need more than the technical infrastructure of computers, modems, software, and system administrators to make a multicultural online communication system work.

TWICS is an electronic networking service and central host computer facility based in Tokyo, and supports an online virtual community of multi-cultural nature, more reminiscent of an international trading port than a mainstream regional or domestic on-line communication system. And TWICS is an experiment in cross-cultural electronic communications whose members confront, and sometimes transcend, boundaries of differing styles of communication and conditioned cultural assumptions.

TWICS has an online user population of around 700, with more than 200 accessing from outside Japan. Another 200 belong to private groups, most of whom have full access to the public/ community areas. Of the remaining 300 or so, some use the system primarily for business purposes, and others have social or personal reasons as their priority. Most domestic users live in the Kanto Plain region of Japan (the greater Tokyo-Chiba-Kawasaki-Yokohama metropolitan area, where a third of the Japanese population is concentrated). Half the domestic members of TWICS

are Japanese, and the rest come from a variety of cultures, though the large number of North Americans among Japan's small *gaijin* population is reflected.

The large number of Japanese, residents of Japan, and people interested in Japan, on one hand, and the prevalence of English as the common language, on the other, are significant factors in the online style. The overall communication atmosphere is different from the large national information utilities of the USA and Japan, which are dominated by the mainstream cultures of those nations, and from regional or specialist systems with international access, which have user populations of a more focused nature. Further, TWICS members have access to inter-system discussions to balance the usual insularity of a single-host online community.

Cross-cultural networking is at the core of almost all interaction on TWICS. These observations about cross-cultural networking are not definitive, nor are they restricted to electronic media, but as the world becomes more interconnected an awareness of them becomes more important for successful communication.

Language matters, in ways beyond the most obvious (that people who do not speak the same language have no way to communicate if they cannot do so face to

face) When you are using a medium like electronic mail or computer conferencing, you cannot rely on smiles and gestures and pictures scrawled on notepaper to get your message across. All you have are words. But if you have people from different cultures using the same words, you may have the linguistic illusion that they are using the same language, when this may not be the case. And if people use a language native to some but not all of them, it may also be an illusion to think that the native speakers have an advantage over the others.

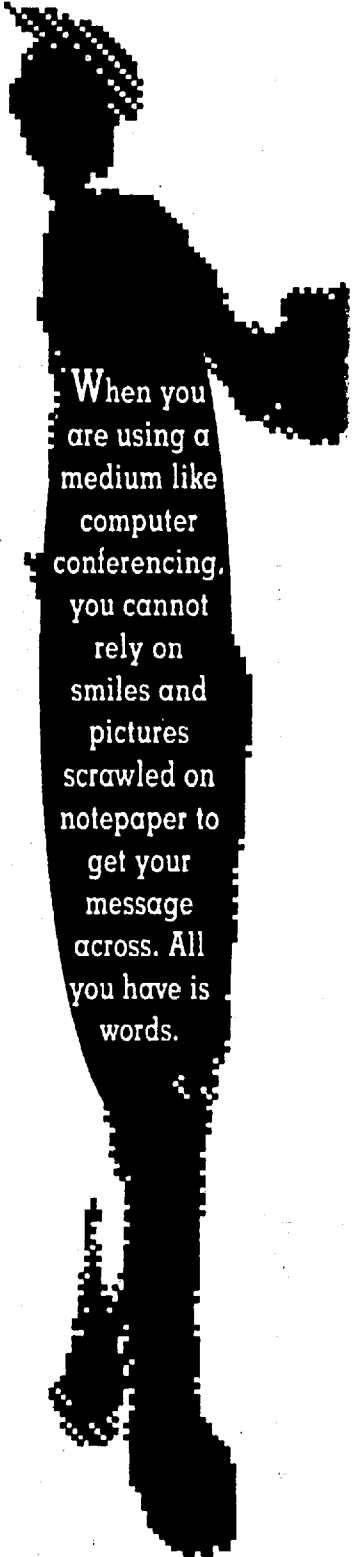
Words are just consensual tags for complex bundles of concepts, images, and associations evolving from the processes of cultural conditioning and personal experience. Most people take it for granted that each word has a common shared meaning, something that can actually be looked up in a dictionary, when actually that dictionary definition is just a tiny seed surrounded by layers of added meanings and associations. Meaning is a vague, squishy notion that keeps semanticists, lawyers and philosophers employed and can drive serious thinkers insane, yet we assume that words have fixed inherent meanings. It is amazing enough that two people can communicate with words when they have shared cultural conditioning and personal experience, and it takes on miraculous proportions when they are from different backgrounds. When an American says something in a computer conference and a Japanese looks up some of the words in her bilingual dictionary, where the English words are explained in Japanese using whole different bundles of concepts and images and associations, what the American understands herself to have said and what the Japanese understands to have been said will probably be different. In a cross-cultural context, it is important to choose your words well, to use some redundancy, and to be prepared to say things in more than one way.

Native speakers may actually be at a disadvantage, especially when they are mono-

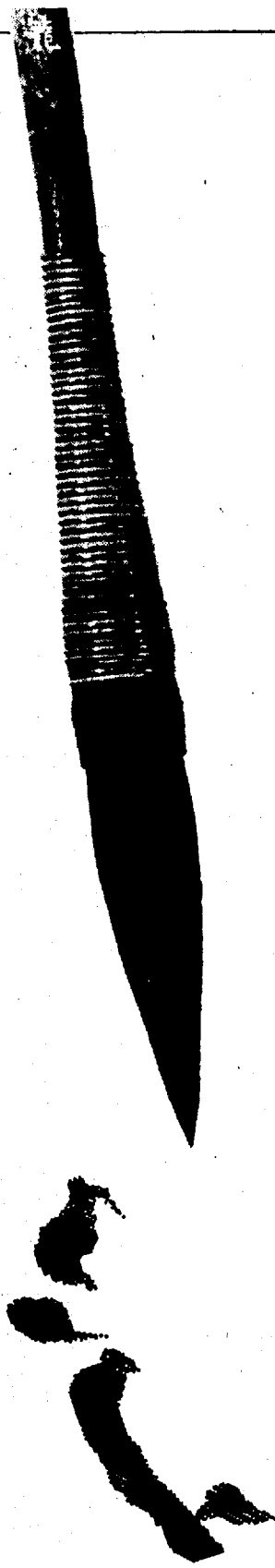
lingual and therefore not able to draw on the conceptual resources of other languages. Native speakers may tend to think out loud, rambling along in writing while they work out their ideas, and leaving it up to their audience to work out the logic. A Japanese, communicating electronically in English, may think long and hard about what someone else has said, trying to get the best understanding she can, then spend much time writing her reply, carefully choosing what she feels are the clearest, most appropriate words to get her ideas across. But if an American member of her group discussion skims her reply too quickly and fires off comments based more on impressions than thoughtful consideration, the Japanese member will feel frustrated about putting so much time and energy into her communication when her partner does not. Likewise, if the American members flood the discussion with long wordy notes because they do not want to spend the time to be clear and concise, and forget about the extra time and energy it takes to work through such screed in another language, then the Japanese members will be silent, or withdraw altogether, rather than waste their time trying to communicate with people more interested in speaking than listening.

Communication style is especially important in cross-cultural contexts; it has a strong influence on the content of electronic communications. The warm human paralinguistic aspects of face to face communications — the smile, the hand on the shoulder, the tone of voice — are not present. All we have are words, though some people try to spice them with punctuation and expressions like :- ) and *(smile)*. What may be considered appropriate by people from one culture might differ greatly in the way it is interpreted by people from another.

Even in electronic communication among



When you are using a medium like computer conferencing, you cannot rely on smiles and pictures scrawled on notepaper to get your message across. All you have is words.



people from a single cultural background, irony and sarcasm often backfire and cause misunderstanding, and emotional outbursts flame across many a screen, making their authors look foolish and their audience feel bad. This is even more so in cross-cultural situations. A snide comment, meant as a simple joke, may be interpreted as an insult. Criticism of someone's ideas may be taken as a personal attack. An elegant exposition of a point of view may be taken as boorish pedantry if it does not allow openings for others to offer alternative opinions, or qualify that it is but one point of view.

One of the biggest conflicts in communication style between Japanese and people from EuroAmerican cultures is that of confrontational debate as a vehicle of discussion. When, for example, our Japanese participant sets forth a set of ideas and is suddenly attacked by some American members of the online discussion group, she is put into a defensive position. The American members may not actually disagree with her, but may merely be taking opposing positions for the sake of discussion, engaging in an intellectual sport typical of Western communication style. However, she may feel that her personhood is being attacked, as she is not used to separating her ideas from her personality. If some of her ideas and their supporting arguments are first recognized and given credit, and alternative positions are then gently introduced as such, the situation is quite different from that where lines of dualistic pros and cons are drawn. And if she has taken an informed position as a result of serious thought and research, while her electronic respondents are just playing games with opinions, she may consider the whole exercise a waste of time and withdraw, to everyone's loss. Why should she waste her time when the rules of the game are such that one side wins and the other

loses, rather than both sides learning and moving together to some middle ground, especially when it appears that those she is talking with have already made up their minds that they are, in fact, correct and she is wrong?

Cultural assumptions always exist as shadows in the background. It is essential to effective cross-cultural communication to examine where they are influencing your behavior and attitudes and getting in the way. They are dangerous when ignored, but merely distractions when dealt with honestly.

One assumption that often causes problems is that active participation means active speaking/writing. So-called "lurking," or sitting back and following a discussion without contributing anything, is considered bad, and lurkers are chastised for taking without giving anything back in return. Active listeners are not given credit for their silence when they feel they have nothing to add. In Japan, lurkers are called ROMs (Read-Only Members), and active speakers always hope that the ROMs will step in when they have something to say. If they are encouraged rather than criticized, they will do so eventually, when they are ready. Listeners are important, too, and quite a few online discussions could be improved significantly if the members would put as much energy into their listening as they do their speaking.

Another attitude, mentioned previously, that frequently inhibits cross-cultural networking is that debate is good communication. It can be, but it can also drive away the very people from whom you might learn the most. Many Japanese just do not like confrontation. They find it stressful and nonproductive, and they avoid it. Debate is seen as argument, and argument is seen as something angry people do when they are not mature enough to sit down and listen carefully to the other person's ideas and work together toward some common understanding. This does not mean that there are no

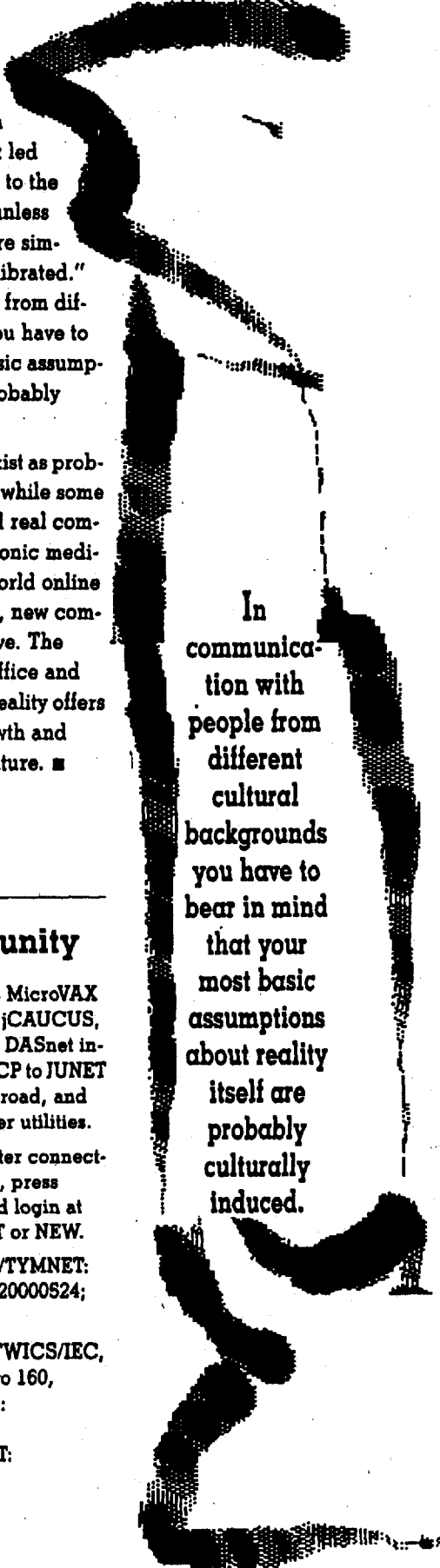
debates or arguments among Japanese — there are, and they can be particularly vicious, which only serves to reinforce alternative cultural assumptions about the value of consensus-building over confrontation.

Related to attitudes toward debate is the more deeply rooted assumption that duality is a given fact of nature, rather than a matter of interpretation. This or that, pro or con, right or left, true or false, good or bad, all these logical constructs may interfere significantly when communicating with people who can also accept the logical validity of this and that, pro and con, right and left, true and false, good and bad, and/or-somewhere-in-between depending on the circumstances.

The anthropological linguist Edward Sapir talked about culture and language as two sides of the same coin. His student in linguistics, Benjamin Lee Whorf, was also interested in the relationship between language and perceptions of reality. After years spent studying the Hopi language and the way it is used to talk about the world in a manner completely different from the Indo-European languages he was

familiar with, he began to talk about the way language and mind influence each other, of a linguistic relativity "which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated." In communication with people from different cultural backgrounds you have to bear in mind that your most basic assumptions about reality itself are probably culturally induced.

All the issues discussed here exist as problems on TWICS, but once in a while some manage to transcend them and real communication begins. Our electronic medium is still young, and as the world online becomes more interconnected, new communities will emerge and evolve. The ability to sit in your home or office and gain different perspectives of reality offers great potential for human growth and much hope for our common future. ■



In communication with people from different cultural backgrounds you have to bear in mind that your most basic assumptions about reality itself are probably culturally induced.

## Connecting With The Japanese Online Community

TWICS functions as an internal communication system for the International Education Center, providing commercial services externally to individuals and organizations in Japan and abroad. The first system began in 1984, and the present system has been online since 1986, when TWICS Company, Ltd., incorporated. TWICS has been internationally accessible through public data networks since 1986, and linked to international email networks through DASnet since 1987. New global connections continue through close inter-system relations with The Meta Network (US), The London Caucus (UK), and others.

Specializing in group communications and connectivity, TWICS is unique in Japan for its global orientation and use of English as the common system language, and unique in the online world for its multicultural community. To promote this, TWICS continues to provide free user accounts to people outside Japan.

*Techie Talk:* TWICS uses a DEC MicroVAX II under VAX/VMS 4.6 running jCAUCUS, PARTICIPATE, VMS MAIL with DASnet intersystem links, and DECUS UUCP to JUNET and direct sites in Japan and abroad, and various real-time and file transfer utilities.

*Access (parameters = 8N1):* After connecting in one of the following ways, press {RETURN} a couple of times, and login at the username prompt as GUEST or NEW.

NTT DDX-P: 4401 3612065. NIS/TYMNET: TYMPAS (NISJPN) 524 or 4406 20000524; direct modem: +81-3-351-8244.

For more information, contact TWICS/IEC, 1-21 Yotsuya, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160, Japan. Tel: +81-3-351-5977; fax: +81-3-353-8908; email: TWICS@dctwcs.das.net (JUNET: TWICS@twics.co.jp). □

**SPECIAL INAUGURAL REPRINT ISSUE: INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT TOOLS  
AND IDEAS Whole Earth Review Dedicated to the Incoming Administration 20 January  
1996 - Link Page**

[Previous](#)      [Founding Father Knows Best \(Spring 1991\)](#)

[Next](#)      [Cross-Cultural Communications & Computer- Supported Cooperative Work \(Winter 1990\)](#)

**[Return to Electronic Index Page](#)**