

The LLL SIG Newsletter

Japanese often care about nonverbal communication patterns

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Communication specialists think that only 10%-40% of interpersonal communication is linguistic. The bulk of communication is accomplished by other means, such as nonverbal signals, gestures, facial expression, voice tone, and consideration of the contextual situation and background information.

One of my American friends believes that this is even more true of communication among Japanese speakers than that among English speakers.

In fact, he reported a variety of cases where Japanese speakers clearly disregarded the verbal content of what he said in favor of other aspects of the communicative gestalt.

For example, he once entered a stationery shop in a small town, and had the following exchange with the elderly lady at the register:

He: Empitsu wo kudasai ."
[I'd like to buy a pencil.]

Elderly lady: Eigo ga dekimasen. Mago wo yobu kara, chotto matte kudasai.
[I can't speak English. Please wait a minute. I'll call my granddaughter.]

Apparently the woman paid no attention to the fact that he had, in fact, spoken to her in Japanese. Instead she saw his Caucasian face, and assumed that he could only speak English.