

Rapport Management in Virtual Team Communication

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Abstract

Technological innovation has been making the world's border blurred, in a way, varnished on online communication. The pandemic situation accelerates this trend. This study aims to investigate how the virtual working team builds up effective teamwork from a sociolinguistic perspective. This study views teamwork as a discourse to reveal rapport management in virtual coordination. Rapport management is the linguistic strategies that are used to construct and maintain social relationships (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). This study aims at investigating how the virtual team builds up effective teamwork from a sociolinguistic perspective. This working team has adapted several communicative channels, such as emails among individual members, mailing lists, text messaging, and social network systems. I focus on interactions via Instant Message (IM) program. IM program has various functions such as sending receiving text messages, sharing files, and emoticons to show interactive emotional expressions. The characteristic of IM of immediacy played important roll to construct rapport relation by sharing emotional and relational conversation. The data collected from the online interactions in a virtual team of Japanese organization will be analyzed by references to the notion of communities of practice as a framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Since this parent association includes Japanese parents' utterances, forms, or typical patterns displayed in the email texts will provide evidence of Japanese discourse's uniqueness (Fujio and Tanaka, 2012). On the other hand, this case study has a view of society. It shows that most parent association members are women. The point is that parenting duty heavily rely on women. This study also shed light on Japanese society's context about modernization, traditional ideas or values, and gender inequality behind the economic development in decades (Hendry, 2003). Backdrop explains how the discourse has been constructed through modernization.

Keywords: virtual team, rapport management, identity construction, communities of practice.

1. Background

The parents' association groups of after-school children center gathered from over 26 different areas in the city. All the members have their professional lives, which have to be balanced with their parental duties. This case study has the view of society. It shows that majority of parents association members were women. The point is that parenting duty heavily rely on women.

The readers of this article need to know Japanese society's context about modernization, traditional ideas or values, and gender inequality behind the economic development in decades. Hendry (2003) mentioned that Japanese society has uniqueness, homogeneity, and particular identity. Backdrop explains how discourse has been constructed and deconstructed through modernization. According to Hendry (2003), historically Confucian principle influenced the indigenous family system which men were superior to women, and women were supposed to respond to men's demands in Japanese society. Traditional ideas positioned women as being mothers and wives, and men were contributing the society.

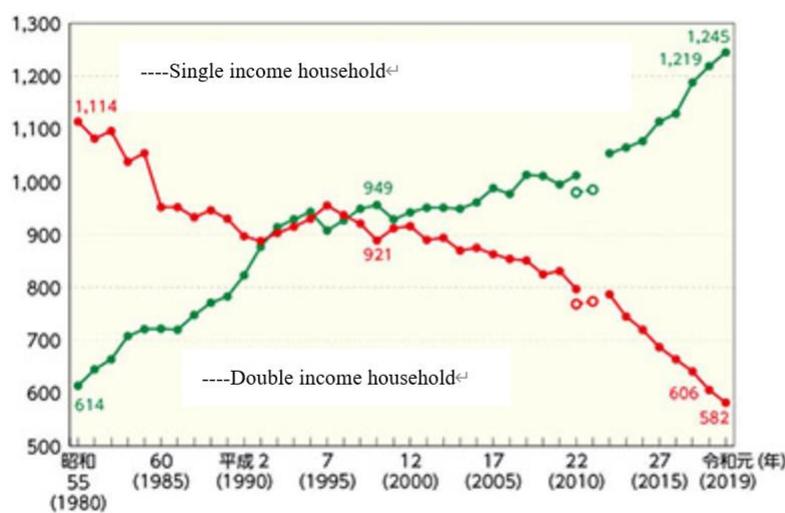
1-1. Child rearing

This traditional idea about women and lacking systems taking care of children for more extended hours prevented women's workplace participation. It used to be hard to continue to work as a full-time employee after having children. It seemed to become old fashioned in recent years. Now gender diversity in management had started to be emphasized among Japanese companies (Ishizuka, 2014). Ideology has changed to a degree. Society cannot change in a short time, and traditional ideas were rooted in people's minds. Thus, the working environment needs more time to restructure itself in Japan (Hendry, 2003).

The Japan Times reported that law enactment should support the change. Japan enacted a work style reform law in April 2019. This reform reflects the national issues as follows, long working hours among workers, inequality of job opportunities for women and the elderly, wide gap in wage conditions between regular full-time employees and irregular workers such as part-timers and term-contract workers. The percentage of irregular workers is 40 percent in an account (The Japan Times, 2019). As Ishizuka pointed out, many women could not return to regular work after having children (2014).

Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office (2020) surveyed changes in double-income households. Figure 1 shows that the number of double-income homes increased twofold (The survey result of 2020). Moreover, gender role awareness has been growing among married couples. As a result, in 2019, 55.6 % of men and 63.4% of women are opposing the consciousness of gender role (Gender role awareness survey in Japan, 2019), such as the ideology of women's role as a homemaker (Kayama, 2010). A national survey in the past showed there used to be 80% of adults believed that mothers should stay home to take care of their children (Kashiwagi, 2008). Recently it has been observed that younger fathers are involved in child-rearing. However, it is still shown men work longer hours twice as much as women work outside. That brought the consequence that the household, including child-rearing and care of other family members, is done mostly by women (*Kyodo sankaku*, 2020).

(10,000 household)[←]



[Figure 1] Survey result about changes in the number of double-income households
Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office

As the survey data and historical context explain, child-rearing remains a gender role for women in Japan. In this study, I collected data at the after-school daycare club in Hino city, Tokyo. Parents formed an association for the after-school daycare club to exchange ideas and discuss the city's proposal for an after-school child center.

2. Theoretical background

This study investigates how the virtual working team builds up effective teamwork from a sociolinguistic perspective. The virtual team worked together through online conversations. Since this parent association includes Japanese parents' utterances, forms, or typical patterns displayed in the email texts will provide evidence of Japanese discourse's uniqueness. From a discursal perspective, Japanese society has a strong preference for harmonious connections.

2-1. Theoretical framework relational work

They are working in a team with primary concerns with getting things done. Therefore, conversations among team members are constituted by task-oriented talks. However, workplace discourse is also constituted through members' relational concerns (Koester, 2004). In the process of work, relational sequence frequently occurred in the interactions.

Interactional Sociolinguistics has been developed from interdisciplinary pursuits, such as anthropology, sociology, and linguistic (Schiffrin, 1994). The interactional sociolinguistic helps us understand interaction as negotiating social and linguistic meaning (Darics, 2010). Negotiation to maintain or enhance face (Spencer-Oatey, 2000) in the business situation would reduce problems related to language use. Face Co-constituting Theory suggest that the face is constantly being managed, negotiated, and co-constructed in interaction (Wang & Spencer-Oatey, 2015).

In a virtual team, members engage in linguistic interactions to make decisions, express agreement or disagreement, criticize, offer advice, and delegate tasks. In order to work collaboratively, it was essential to build and maintain a good working relationship. Members seemed constantly balance the work-related interactional actions to show respect and construct rapport in the team.

On the contrary, in face-to-face interaction, the physical context played a crucial role in forming contextual presuppositions and interactive cooperation (Gumperz, 1982). Physical features on a surface, including prosodic phenomena, style code, non-verbal signs, body movements, and gestures, can signify or interpret how the context is understood.

There is little audio and visual information in the text-based Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), which supports contextualizing and signal cooperation. Interactions via Instant Message programs need other elements to support efficient relations in work.

I employ the notion of relational work (Locher, 2006) as a conceptual framework. Non-task-oriented talk has a function that establishes communication norms in the team (Darics, 2010).

In a digital communication environment, there are hardly occurrences of the non-task-oriented talk itself in workplace communication. Relational work is a notion based on face-to-face interaction. However, Darics' research on business in the text-based on CMC suggested that non-task oriented relational work generated relational work function. Her study reveals the features of backchannels, hesitation, and humor functions in instant messages (Darics, 2015).

There is an alternate form of expressing emotion used in instant messages. Keyboard-generated emotion signs resemble a human face. Following are examples, :) or :-) 'smiling face', ;) or ;-) 'winking face', >:('frowning face') (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004). In this study, emoticons played an important role in sharing emotional expression and address members' intentions.

2-2. Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice are social learning systems formed by people who engage in collective learning in a shared domain of interest (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Members of the

community work together in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. Commitment is one of the critical factors required as a practitioner. This engagement builds relationships that enable them to learn from each other.

The digital environment using Instant Messaging on SNS could provide participation opportunities. As Cherney (1999) pointed out, online communities develop their own social and linguistic norms through textual linguistic interaction and establish shared knowledge.

3. Method and approach

In this research I employed ethnographic approach to have context sensitive analysis. I was part of the team as a participant observer. I was able to observe this team from the beginning, March 2017 to May 2018. My positionality gave an insider view. Meeting data and field note from observation were analyzed. For ethical consideration, all participants names were anonymized.

3-1. Research site and data collection

There were 26 after-school children centers in Hino City, Tokyo, in 2017. About 8000 school children aged 6 to 9 can go to after-school children center. School children spend some time after school until mothers come home. After-school children center opens afternoon until 7:00 pm. Usually, children go home by 5:30 pm. From 5:30 pm to 7:00 pm, parents need to pay the extra charge for the extension.

The parents' organization members exploit online meetings and social networks to formulate a proposal to the city or metropolitan Tokyo. The period under scrutiny goes from March 2017 to July 2018.

Although the working team members did not have much time to meet for discussion, they entirely use online communication tools in the pass-time during work or at home.

3-2. Participants

In this study, there were 7 participants selected as board members of the parents' association of after school in March 2017. In the parents and teachers meeting, every once a year, seven board members of the parents' association are chosen out of 70 members in one after-school children's center, which meant 70 school children went to after-school children center to wait for parents to come home.

This local parent association belonged to the upper affiliation of the parent association union. There were 26 after school children centers in Hino city, about 8000 children spent after school. In the upper affiliation, this local board members became the role of chair to organize the parents' association union. The parents' association union of Hino city had 150 members.

- Saki: She was in her forty. Elementary school teacher. She is one person who stood as a candidate. Her son was a third-grader, which was senior year in the children's center. She voluntarily became a chair to show sincere gratitude for what her son received while her son came to the after-school children's center.
- Haru: She was in her late thirty. Nurse. She had three daughters. The youngest daughter was a first-grader. She did not have a computer at home. She did not want to do secretary duty. She became responsible for accounting.
- Kei: She was in her thirty. Consultant. She had an only son who was a first-grader. Her son needed special attention in daily life due to having a developmental disorder. She became a vice-chair who attended the meeting in the city with Miki.
- Yume: She was in her thirty. Retail shop sales representative. Her daughter was a second-grader. She became a secretary in the local parents' association.
- Nao: She was in her forty. Office clerk. She had three sons. Her youngest son was a

first-grader. She became a vice-chair with Kei. She had been a full-time homemaker for a long time and had experienced a PTA job.

- Kazu: She was in her thirty. Nursing home caregiver. She had two daughters in second grade and third grade. She worked as a caregiver at a nursing home. She sometimes had the night shift. It was hard for her to attend the meeting often.
- Mina: She was in her forty. Retail shop sales representative. She had two children. Her daughter was a second-grader. She moved from other areas one year before she felt still new to this area at that time.

I used field notes from observation and in-depth interview data to describe this research site's detailed information. For the data analysis of this study, I focused on interactions via the IM program. For ethical consideration, all participants' names were anonymized.

4. Data Analysis

Thanks to new technologies' affordances, each parent is encouraged to cooperate with the others, building a sense of camaraderie. The data collected from the online interactions on IM will be analyzed by references to communities of practice and relational work as a framework. This organization's members are sharing objectives and a common purpose, like any other working group. Lave and Wenger (1991) originally outlined the notion of "community of practice," which was later further developed by Wenger (1998). This approach points out how participants construct membership and identity as a team in this association by exchanging messages and sharing information through online meetings. Online talks make another space virtually for working mothers to convey a sense of supporting each other with empathy.

4-1. The duty as a chair group for the parents' association union

There were official objectives to propose the city for an after-school children's center to have better facilities and services. Also, the parents' association supported the improvement in teachers' compensation and treatment. To do all those things, the chair group organized the meetings and the parents' annual conference.

The meetings and the parents' annual conference were held face-to-face. However, all members had a professional life. The discussion and information sharing were done through email via a mailing list. For intra-group discussion and information sharing, team members used Instant Message Program to have interactions.

4-2. Interaction via Instant Message Program was handy for team members

Unlike other communication mediums, the IM program gave this team the private space to communicate when they exchanged messages. It can be said the use of emoticon had an important role. In the past study, emoticons were mostly made by keyboard typing. Emails that were sent to 150 members officially did not have any use of emoticons. That fact supported intra-team conversation had to function to share relational work that non-task oriented emotional expression.

Working mothers with children managed time to work and do child-rearing daily. There was the only pastime to work as the chair group for the parents' association. Interactions via the IM program was handy for team members. While they used this program to share messages, they built relationships among members.

4-2-1. Identity construction

The participants' descriptions showed that there was only one person who was actively involved in this team at the beginning. Besides Saki, other members were selected by the drawing in the meeting due to a lack of candidates. Saki became the board member

voluntarily because she would like to return to the center to her gratitude. Other members did not have enough time to involve PTA jobs at that time. However, the result of the lucky drawing brought other members to become board members. Unwillingness to attend activities was shown when the job in the association started.

[Excerpt 1]

2017/04/23(Sunday)

- 1.18:00 Saki "Thank you, everyone. I realized how hard the chair has to work 🌀🌀
Anyway. We work in our way, as far as we can afford the time!
We don't have to go beyond our capability. We speak out. If we can't, we say
☹️."
- 2.18:05 🌀☐ Yume 🌀☐ "Thank you for today...
You are right. We should not work very hard. We work within our ability.
(sweat) 🌀🌀🌀🌀"
- 3.18:41 Mina "Thank you for today.
I feel relieved that you said we could say no when we can't. Say! Our chair~
🌀🌀."
- 4.19:09 Kei "Thank you for today 🌀
I don't know anything about this organization. There are so many things
unknown to me. But, with you all, I feel I can go through this situation and
work. 🌀
Our chair, Saki. Thank you for your worm message for us 🌀
I look forward to working with you 🌀."
- 5.20:41 Kazu "Thank you for today.
I feel relieved that you are so kind and warm. I cannot afford much time to
involve this job because of my busy schedule. I worry about my
inefficiency. But, please let me on this team, and I look forward to working
with you.
🌀☐"
- 6.20:45 Kazu I received your test mail.
- 7.21:07 Haru " Thank you so so much for today(sweat). I was so surprised that the
atmosphere was so serious...(sweat) I didn't imagine that our team became
the chair group in the parents union. (Surprise) Smile(Sweat) I look forward
to working with you☺☐
Saki~I follow you~(๑>.<)~

Interactions Excerpt 1 was made after the official meeting of the Parents association union of Hino city. This is an example of emoticons usage in the interaction. Most members used emoticons of crying or sweat. It showed that how overwhelmed, they owe as a chair in the association union. However, Saki took strong leadership in this team. She encouraged members that they work within their capability. Most of the members felt anxious about the workload of organizing all those activities, meetings, and conferences. Their group identity was a follower at the beginning.

Shared emotion gave the chance to know they were not alone who felt overwhelmed. They made sure that they worked when they were available. Someone capable can respond when things needed to be done.

However, the question arose about identity reconstruction as a team of the chair. Later, each member started to respond to inquiries from other association members. Emotion sharing was not enough to work as a team. Harmonious rapport emerged at the beginning that lasted through the year.

4-2-2. Identity reconstruction

When the team started to work as a group of the chair in the parents' association union, they found a series of agendas coming up. The agendas held the meetings for all member affiliation, the conference for parents, the city officials' forum, and the proposals to the city. The following chart showed the numbers of sleds each member posted in the IM program.

[Excerpt 2]

	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep
Saki	4	4	7	30	17	-	15
Haru	3	3	2	9	3	-	9
Kei	3	6	3	28	28	-	30
Yume	2	4	4	8	8	-	16
Nao	4	7	4	6	30	-	33
Kazu	3	5	4	5	-	-	17
Mina	3	5	3	4	10	-	10

Agendas of each month

- May: Annual kick-off meeting for parents' union
- June: Preparation for the survey to collect parents' opinion
- July: Distributing survey and collected responses from all members
- Sep: Review and discussion about survey result

[Excerpt 3]

	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Saki	7	28	2	3	30	46	12
Haru	10	6	13	2	8	3	11
Kei	5	44	3	3	41	41	16
Yume	4	5	3	2	20	2	16
Nao	3	35	5	2	21	14	35
Kazu	6	10	8	3	10	8	17
Mina	9	9	15	3	16	3	10

Agendas of each month

- Nov: Proposal to the city, Preparation for the conference
- Dec: Holding the party for local after-school children center
- Jan: Checking schedule for next year
- Feb: Farewell party for local after-school children center
- Mar: Selecting new members
- Apr: Editing newsletter and ordering the print

As two excerpts show, there were some work-related agendas each month. In order to understand what they needed to do, each member raised their attention to the agendas. Members read all documents and shared what the topic was. Gradually the team formed Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the association. By the time of June and July, they exchanged messages on IM with fewer emoticons. There were work-related conversations without many sharing emotions. Team members became not to use many emoticons. Decreasing the numbers of emoticons meant that members shorten the distance

and concentrated their task as the chair. That could be interpreted that members reconstructed their identity as a member of this chair group. What made the members to reconstruct their identity was the learning through getting the job done. Members needed to prepare to get information about the topics for meetings in advance. The more they engaged the things, the more a sense of membership and identity as the chair was constructed. From the interactional Sociolinguistic approach perspective, building rapport would enhance the CoP. Thus, rapport management was a crucial element to work efficiently.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, I investigated how the virtual working team builds up effective teamwork from a sociolinguistic perspective. This study viewed teamwork as a discourse to reveal rapport management in virtual coordination. Although the working team adopted several communicative channels, this study focuses on interactions via instant message program. Instant message program on SNS was most frequently used among team members and contributed to building rapport in the organization.

The participants of this study were positioned in different job types as business professionals. Nonetheless, as mothers, they are on the same scaffold. Data showed how participants' identity was constructed by working together on the virtual space via social networks through analyzing exchanged messages.

New technology and old manners in society are mingled in ordinary life. It resembles what Morley pointed out that Japan may be unique among Asian countries in being modern and Westernized on the surface and very traditional beneath that veneer. Working parents deal with their professional and private life, coming and going via effective use of digital tools such as social networks. Moreover, social environment construct peoples' subjectivities depending on the sceneries. It can be said that subjectivities to social life are free in an online environment.

Limitation

This study focused on the interactions via the IM program among parents' association members. The concentration of a particular group of people and the medium used gave empirical data for this study. However, the narrowed focus could not provide a macro point of view. Therefore, it is impossible to generalize findings in this study to IM program users on the broader population.

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