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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Friends as mediators in study abroad contexts in Japan: negotiating stereotypical discourses about Japanese culture

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ABSTRACT

Upon encountering unfamiliar words or observing local practices in study abroad contexts, second language learners may discuss aspects of the target language and culture with their peers – ‘non-native’ friends from the same cultural background or ‘natives’ of the target culture. Such mediations are instrumental in elaborating understandings, but are naturally conditioned by the participants’ intercultural stances, including their appreciation of cultural similarities/differences. This study examines the interpretive work carried out by two learners of Japanese and their respective friends in reading a Japanese *manga* (short comics) depicting the allegedly ‘typical’ Japanese behaviour around *honne*, i.e. restraint in expressing one’s feelings or opinions. We observe rather different negotiation styles and different ideologies at play in their argumentations and discuss them in relation to the dynamics generated by the assumption of epistemic authority claimed by (and granted to) the native-speaker friend, vs. the more collaborative negotiation in the case of the non-native friend. The lack of a dominant authoritative source appears to generate more nuanced interpretive possibilities, enabling challenges to established and stereotypical discourses about cultural characteristics. This analysis illustrates dynamics which potentially question widely held (and equally ideological) beliefs about unqualified advantages of periods of study abroad for cultural learning.

KEYWORDS

Study abroad; intercultural mediation; stereotypes; ideology

1. Introduction

While engaging in social activities we produce reflexive representations, i.e. conceptualisations as well as verbal categorisations, by which we position ourselves and others, and give meaning to our experiences. Representations activated in interaction are not passively inherited from pre-existing, historical ones, nor created in a vacuum, but subjective, dynamic, discursively constructed and, as such, ideology-sensitive responses to experience, often co-constructed with others in communicative encounters. By exploring ‘cultural’ representations as they are negotiated in intercultural encounters among peers, this paper has two aims: to explore study abroad (SA) participants’ creative, variable responses to stereotypical representations of the target culture, and to contribute to the literature that challenges ideological assumptions around the benefits of SA, including the unqualified view that language learners can invariably benefit from the interaction with native speakers of the target language (cf. e.g. Kubota 2016).

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In this study, ‘cultural representations’ refer to social behaviours characterised as culture-specific in representational systems such as pedagogical material, media discourses, or casual conversations. ‘Negotiation in intercultural encounters’ refers to the way in which such representations are interpreted, rationalised, or evaluated by participants from a cultural background different from the target representation (e.g. a learner of Japanese language engaging with a textbook depicting some Japanese cultural practice). Statements that characterise behaviours as something ‘the Japanese’ would normally do, or things ‘the English’ would never say, belong to common, if often stereotypical, discourses around culture, which have a necessarily ideological basis. Some of these discourses pertain to beliefs around language use, and can be described as language ideologies (e.g. Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). This study examines the dynamics of representations as they are produced in informal discussions, in SA contexts, between learners of Japanese and their friends, respectively one co-national and one Japanese.¹ These exemplify the contrasting ways in which such peers, invoking distinct discourses (Gee 2008: 3) and adopting distinct stances (Jaffe 2009), variably mediate the learners’ understandings, and consequently enable rather different interpretive paths. This illustrates the mundane ways in which language ideologies impact on interculturality, and how native ‘authoritativeness’ facilitates the formation of stereotypes in the course of casual instances of joint reasoning.

2. Background

Learning is a social achievement. At the centre of the processes of understanding, meaning-making, and learning is interaction with others: interaction provides the ecological context in which meanings are first negotiated on a social, interpersonal plane, and then internalised on an individual, intrapersonal plane (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013, and based on Vygotsky 1978), and the context in which such meanings are continuously confirmed, challenged, reinterpreted; language is the primary mediational tool that enables such development and mutual coordination. Language is inextricably tied to social and cultural meanings, because of its pervasive indexicality (Ochs 1996), and because, through language, we ‘categorise’. Therefore, in using language, speakers necessarily adopt frames of interpretation, which in turn define the very social contexts in which language is used (Liddicoat 2009: 116) such as social relationships, social activities, stances and positions (Van Langenhove and Harré 1999). A growing body of work endeavours to go beyond views of language learning as the mere learning of ‘conventionalised mappings [...] between linguistic forms, functions and contextual elements’, in which appropriateness is measured by the degree of alignment to native speaker norms, trying to draw attention instead to the meanings (and agency) of non-native users, who approach contextual assessments and linguistic strategising with full-fledged socio-cultural schemas, and an awareness of socio-pragmatic meaning potential (McConachy 2019: 168–169; also 2018). As learners gain familiarity with new linguistic and cultural systems, they then also form views on communicative practices associated with those linguacultures, which are inevitably charged with evaluative stances. As McConachy notes (2019: 170) ‘Interpersonal interaction is permeated by explicit and implicit evaluation of language use in terms of meta-pragmatic categories such as polite/impolite, direct/indirect, friendly/unfriendly, sincere/insincere etc., which appeal not simply to notions of linguistic appropriateness in a narrow sense but to preferred ways of being in the world vis-à-vis others.’ Evaluations position speakers vis-à-vis the objects being evaluated but also vis-à-vis other participants and are therefore not only windows onto moral worlds, but tools for shaping such worlds (Jaffe 2009; Van Langenhove and Harré 1999). Evaluations involve substantial reflexive work: from metapragmatic noticing, through deployment of argumentative reasoning, to social and moral positioning and ideological construction. Any aspect of experience, including communicative practices and established discourses around them, can become the object of (more or less critical) reflection (Byrd Clark and Dervin 2014: 13; see also McConachy and Liddicoat 2016). Students’ reflections about an allegedly ‘typical’ Japanese communication style and

the language ideologies mobilised in these reflections are the particular case examined in this study.

2.1. Mediation in intercultural learning

The notion of mediation in intercultural learning has evolved over time, and so has the representation of the multilingual user as a mediator: from a somewhat mechanical ‘intermediary’ able to solve communication problems for people belonging to different groups, a mediator is now recognised as an individual deeply ‘involved in processes of understanding, explaining, commenting, interpreting, and negotiating phenomena’ for others as well as for self, all of which is crucially linked to the ability to ‘decentre’ from existing cultural positions and appreciate the relativity of cultural phenomena (Liddicoat 2014: 260–261). If we see interaction as the primary site for the mediation of cultural meanings (as in the socio-cultural theory tradition), we acknowledge that understanding commonly results from complex assessments and interpretations taking place in the midst of the push and pull of others’ interpretations and evaluations, moreover under the pressure of relational work, i.e. the interactional positioning invariably associated with interpretation. In other words, understandings are emergent phenomena, shaped by mediation (and therefore power) dynamics.

Many strong beliefs exist around the putative benefits of SA (e.g. Doerr 2013; Kubota 2016; Surtees 2016): that they provide rich interactions with native speakers, leading to enhanced confidence, or that interacting with local native speakers helps students gain language skills (Kubota 2016: 349) and global competence (Doerr 2013: 372). Despite much evidence that such expectations are not necessarily realised, such beliefs linger on, their resilience arguably lying in the strength of ideological beliefs that are pervasive in society, and reproduced ‘through interactions with friends, faculty, family, media, and institutional policy’ (Surtees 2016: 98).

When it comes to the learning of culture, the question of expertise is complicated by the fact that metapragmatic judgments (i.e. what constitutes in/appropriate or un/desirable behaviour) are far from consensual across group members. They depend on individuals’ value systems, moral compass, and ideologies, as much as they depend on their life experiences (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013: 45, 49), and therefore mismatches in the valorisation of such norms are possible even among people with similar backgrounds. This in principle makes mere ‘nativeness’ a far weaker condition to establish authority over relevant norms – or ‘who knows better’ – than it is for linguistic matters. Non-native group members (i.e. members sharing ‘less’ experience and socialised to different cultural systems) may produce legitimate interpretations of events and behaviours that nevertheless diverge from the judgments of most native speakers, or that follow a different logic. Such interpretations may or may not be ratified by local participants, but if they are, they demonstrate that some form of ‘learning’ may happen in many directions (cf. Cook 2006: 149), and that the position of ‘knowledgeable other’ may also be negotiated (co-constructed) in the course of the interaction.

2.2. Cultural representations in the learner’s milieu

How ‘culture’ is understood has also evolved over time (see, e.g. Liddicoat and Scarino 2013: 17 ff.), and a view that sees culture as fixed, bounded or coherent is no longer tenable. Global mobility and fast-changing social contexts today generate far more elusive notions of identity and culture, with important consequences for how we make sense of our experiences: hypermodern individuals have multiple affiliations and move across numerous ‘cultures’, and need to learn to appreciate and accommodate ever increasing ‘diverse diversities’ (Dervin 2009; see also Blommaert and Rampton 2011).

This does not mean that in these liquid times ‘solid’ identities are no longer observed: for example, stereotypes of national identities can be strategically resorted to in order to cope with

heterogeneity and uncertainty, and they possibly provide useful argumentative tropes in intercultural encounters (Dervin 2009: 121, quoting Abdallah-Pretceille (2006) and Chakrabarty (1998)'s work). Indeed, although stereotypes are widely considered as biased, and mostly negative, forms of 'categorisation' (Van Langenhove and Harré 1994: 463), their cognitive and socio-cultural positive functions have also been discussed: information management (reducing the complexity of the real world), or the maintenance of positive social identity (Rubin and Badea 2012; Van Langenhove and Harré 1994).

Cultural stereotypes are 'generalised expectations about how others are motivated, behave, feel, etc.' (Holliday 2010), which do not need to be derived from direct experience but are often 'inherited' from the milieux we are socialised into. They can of course be the result of learners' overgeneralisations from episodes of their own experience, but more often than not they are also encountered in many different contexts of a learner's social life: in casual folk-reasoning (e.g. Fukuda 2006; Suzuki 2009 on 'foreignness' or other cultural realities), but also in scholarly reasoning, e.g. when a group's behaviours are summarily (mis)attributed to cultural predispositions (e.g. Kumaravadivelu 2003 on the assumptions around typical 'Asian' student behaviour). Language teaching materials are of course not immune from them either.

Tropes often crystallised in so-called 'cultural keywords' are widespread and widely recognised in Japanese critical studies as elements of *nihonjinron*, *lit.* theories about Japanese identity (see, for example, Cook 2006; Kowner 2002; Liddicoat 2007; among many others). These contrast Japan with its primary other, often a generalised West, to illustrate distinctive features of the (homogeneously portrayed) Japanese culture and people: 'individualism vs. groupism', 'egalitarianism vs. hierarchy-based ties', and so on (Goodman 2005: 65). An 'objectivist-differentialist' logic (Dervin and Liddicoat 2013), which regards cultures as 'irreconcilably different', often taking the form of 'binary division of national cultures into categories such as 'individualist'/collectivist' is often adopted in foreign language textbooks and classrooms (McConachy 2018: 78; Kubota 2003; Matsumoto and Okamoto 2003; Kumagai 2014; McConachy and Hata 2013; Bhattacharya 2020). SA contexts can be seen as sites whose frequent encounters with diversity may stir metapragmatic commentaries, but they are not invariably more conducive to learning; Dervin (2009) reports of learners sharing accommodation with other exchange students and rarely meeting locals, which occasionally results in a proliferation of representations and stereotypes about both the locals and themselves. He suggests that interacting with locals is key to avoid forming or reinforcing stereotypes, but we show below how this may not be invariably the case.

3. Research objective and questions

This study explores learners' responses to stereotypical discourses around cultural practices, and how they negotiate, in interactions with their peers, social and moral positions vis-à-vis those practices. We asked our focus students to comment on some 'provocative' sources (as described below in 3.4), i.e. sources which resort to stereotypical representations of Japanese behaviours and illustrate them in dichotomic contrast to American behaviours. We were interested in the metapragmatic knowledge that learners bring to interpretation, in the discourses, reasoning and value systems they invoke to make sense of the task (cf. Scarino 2009: 68), and in the way in which such knowledge is shaped and (re)constructed in the course of interactions with a friend, while reflecting on experiences of life in Japan. We see this joint activity as mobilising not only conceptual understandings (cultural discourses are challenged, dismissed, or enriched by the other), but also relational identities (vis-à-vis the other participant as well as the relevant speech communities, or cultural groups), as they are ascribed, invoked or constructed in the interaction.

In our analysis, we focused particularly on the following questions: what aspects of the stories depicted in the *manga* do the learners pick out as salient? Do they take these stories at face value or do they recognise them as stereotypes? How do they present their interpretations to their peers, and how do they orient to their peers' positions? Every participant to the task must

interpret the meaning of the texts, but also understand their interlocutors' interpretation of them, and all must negotiate a joint interpretation – not necessarily a shared position, but a mutually coordinated one. Some form of cognitive and social mediation therefore occurs in several directions, but we focus on how our learners' friends act as mediators of our focus learners' understandings.

As noted in 2.1, mediators are not just 'translators', but other individuals deeply involved in understanding, commenting, interpreting, and negotiating a position, and their stance in the interaction affects interpretation and the resulting joint position vis-à-vis those discourses. By asking the students to discuss the *manga* with friends they normally interacted with while in Japan, we aimed to capture a discursive practice (informal conversations with peers over the meaning of cultural practices) which had possibly been experienced before. The behaviour depicted in the *manga*, although humorously exaggerated, was one that the students may, in principle, have had opportunities to observe or hear about from either local or international peers during their stay in Japan, although this was not presupposed. By selecting two pairs whose friends were, respectively, from the same and a different cultural background, we explore the potential differences in the dynamics of their interaction which these asymmetrical relational positions could generate.

3.1. Participants

The two students we focus on, whose profile is shown in Table 1, were at the time both enrolled in a UK institution² as double majors (Japanese and Linguistics); they were selected from a larger group which participated in a three-year longitudinal project (2015–2018). The data presented here come from the third data collection point with these students, and were collected 4–5 months into their year abroad (YA) (January 2016). Hazel spent the YA at a university in Tokyo and Roro at a university in Kyoto.³

Students were aware that the planned task was part of the research project they were participating in. On this occasion, they were asked to meet one of the researchers at a space in the university and to bring a friend who they would often spend time and speak Japanese with. Hazel came along with Sarah, and Roro with Kaori (all pseudonyms); both friends studied at the same universities as the focus students. Their profiles are shown in Table 2.

3.2. Procedures

The students were asked to discuss a text about Japanese culture with their friend. Before the meeting, they were given a *manga* episode (see 3.3 below) together with a set of questions to

Table 1. Learner profiles.

Pseudonym	Hazel	Roro
Background	Turkish Kurd–British	British English from Manchester, UK
Age	20	20
Education	Five years in US primary school, then Sheffield, UK	All education in Manchester/London, UK
Languages	English (L1), Japanese German, French, Turkish	English (L1), Japanese Spanish, British Sign Language
Previous visits to Japan	None	3 times (total of one month)

Table 2. Friends' profiles.

	Hazel's friend, Sarah	Roro's friend, Kaori
Background	British	Japanese
Age	20	20
Languages	English (L1), German, Spanish	Japanese (L1), English, Italian
Previous visits to Japan	none	n/a
Overseas experience	Short trips within Europe	one month in Italy

guide their reading (e.g. whether they had had similar experiences to the episodes described, etc.). The encounter was video-recorded. Although the researcher was present, our students were instructed to address their peers only. Mindful of Liddicoat and Scarino's (2013: 94) observations about the selection of resources for language learning, we note that while the scenes depicted in the *manga* are quite openly simplistic overgeneralisations rather than rigorous accounts of Japanese behaviours, the task in itself displays authentic features in terms of the learners' response, soliciting the same interpretive procedures that learners' may commonly employ in making sense of (stereotyped) cultural representations with the help of others.

3.3. Instrument: manga booklet of intercultural learning

Ibunka-tenaraichō [The Booklet of Intercultural Learning] is a publication of the Bunkachō [the Agency for Cultural Affairs], a governmental agency tasked with promoting Japanese culture. The booklet (Bunkachō 2007) is designed by experts in related fields, and it belongs to a popular genre of guides aimed at resolving intercultural communication problems, written in accessible language, and targeted at foreign residents. It depicts 'typical' Japanese behaviours said to be the trigger of intercultural misunderstandings, illustrated humorously through the off-kilter interactions between Japanese locals and Michael, a student from the US. According to the editors, the episodes in the booklet are based on incidents reported anecdotally in questionnaires and interviews by both native and non-native (Chinese, English, Korean and Portuguese) users of Japanese.

The stories are organised under speech acts, behaviours or other themes, such as *kenson*, (modesty), *aimaihyōgen* (vague expressions), or *shazai* (apologies), framed as sites of intercultural misunderstandings. The stories therefore thematize particular practices and present them as iconic cultural categories; the juxtaposition of native and foreign characters arguably forces a national notion of culture, facilitates dichotomic comparisons and invites essentialising and stereotyping – though we will see the two pairs commenting rather differently on them. We adopted such 'problematic' sources in the spirit of critical research and pedagogy, as helpful instruments for the assessment of intercultural capability (Scarino 2009: 75), or for the development of reflexive and critical skills (McConachy 2018).

We selected two episodes but present only the second here for reasons of space. The keyword representing the theme of this episode is *honno* (one's true feelings, or 'private stance', contrasted with *tatema*, 'public stance') and the episode, in which various characters report frictions arising from different communicative practices, is intended to symbolise the practice of 'opinion restraint'. *Honno* is a prototypical case of an established and relatively widespread discourse about the Japanese dispreference for the open display of opinions, feelings, intentions in public (related to the preference for indirect and non-committal communicative styles; see Pizziconi 2009). It is not difficult to find sources describing *honno/tatema* and other such keywords, stating that these can become a 'serious obstacle to communication' in intercultural contexts (Davies and Ikeno 2002: 115–118). This episode focuses on two characters: Michael, an American in Japan, who complains about Japanese people not expressing their opinions in person, and Mariko, a Japanese, who confirms Michael's perceptions with the story of her sister's experience in an international workplace, in which a British person laments their Japanese colleagues' habit of being quiet during meetings, instead talking more openly behind their supervisor's back.

3.4. Analysis

For the analysis of the conversations between the two pairs of friends, we adopt a discourse analytical approach (e.g. Scollon and Scollon 2001), and, accordingly, examine not only features of utterance design (e.g. linguistic realisations, modalisations, sequencing), but also zoom in on the interpersonal dynamics at play. Through narrative analysis (Ochs 2004) we focus on how participants invoke discourses around alleged culturally specific practices or cross-cultural similarities, or notions

of ‘Japaneseness’ or ‘foreignness’, in order to construct their interactional stances. Moreover, we show different ways in which opinions are negotiated and authoritative stances are assumed, granted or challenged; this illustrates rather different interactional dynamics in the two pairs.

After transcribing the discussions (62 minutes for Roro-Kaori; 27 minutes for Hazel-Sarah⁴), we zoomed in on moments in which students produced comments about the typicality of the behaviours observed, assessed the manner in which the *manga* portrayed them and negotiated a position in relation to the interlocutor, i.e. the friend’s own assessments and interpretations. For both pairs, the *manga* is a mediational tool to grasp features of the Japanese culture that were presented to them as established discourses. The ‘friends’ are mediators for their peers, as they participate in meaning-making and provide a second-order interpretation of the practices depicted in the *manga*.

4. Data

4.1. Roro and her Japanese friend Kaori

Roro and Kaori have known each other for a while and meet on a regular basis both on campus (over lunch with other non-Japanese friends) and outside, in social contexts such as *karaoke*. They mention in the interview that the discussion they have over the *manga* resembles the informal chats over cultural practices and meanings they routinely have when they meet, although these normally tend to be held in English. They seem comfortable with each other and with the nature of the task.

Throughout the conversation, Roro appears to position Kaori as the knowledgeable party, by asking Kaori how common or frequent some practices are. Kaori appears to accept this positioning unproblematically, by answering with mostly categorical statements about what is and is not common ‘in Japan’, or for ‘the Japanese’. In line 1, we see one example of the topicalisation (‘the Japanese’), which Ohri (2005) discusses as a feature of the ‘us and them’ ideology and the discourse of exclusion (many more are found in Kaori’s contributions; see also lines 55, 72). Transcription conventions for the excerpts below are given in the [Appendix](#).

Excerpt 1 [60’38’']

1.	Kaori	<i>soo nihonjin wa minna ... sore ... ano: junban o mamoru kara ne</i>	That’s right ... because all Japanese observe that ... they respect queues.
2.	Roro	<i>Soo\soo\</i>	Right, right.
3.	Kaori	<i>[densha] demo zettai minna kiree:ni [densha] matte\</i>	For trains too, all people wait for the train in orderly manner, absolutely.
4.	Roro	<i>[Soo\] junban o mamoru\</i>	Right! They respect the queue.

Moreover, Kaori seems to unquestionably accept the *manga* as a genuine representation of a Japanese cultural practice. She frequently (line 3 and elsewhere in the recordings) validates the content with categorical assertions (i.e. bare sentence endings), often accompanied by adverbs such as *zettai* ‘absolutely’ or *itsumo* ‘always’. Roro mostly defers to Kaori’s authority, often responding with an acknowledging *soo* ‘that’s right’, *honto* ‘really’ (falling intonation), or *wakatta* ‘I understand’.

However, while Kaori’s authoritative contention on the frequency of these practices is not surprising, what is surprising⁵ are her equally categorical claims about how foreigners allegedly perceive Japanese practices, which suggests the existence of established discourses about foreigners too:

Excerpt 2 [6’12’]

5.	Kaori	<i>tottemo semai kedo gommenne toka ... ato nanka yoku nihonjin:ga gaikokujin ni totte komaru komarukoto wa[...] a mata ie kite ne tte itte[ru kedo]</i>	um ah, like, they would say ‘it’s super-small, sorry’, and ... well ... what Japanese do that troubles foreigners is (that they say) ‘please come again’
6.	Roro	<i>[so]</i>	ah, um

[aa nnn]

- | | | | |
|-----|-------|---|--|
| 7. | Kaori | <i>sore wa oseji tte yutte nanka[...] be ... nanka aisoo ...</i>
<i>n [n de]yu: yuttari suru kedo[oo] de jissai gaikokujin</i>
<i>ga asobi ni kita yo tte</i> | but it is called <i>oseji</i> (= mere compliments)...they'd...
well...they'd say things like that just to be friendly,
and (when) the foreigners actually come along |
| 8. | Roro | [un]
[un]@@@ | Yeah
yeah@@@ |
| 9. | Kaori | <i>e, honto ni kita no [mitaina @@ha@nanka] ko</i>
<i>gaikokujin ga yoku komaru koto</i> | (then they think) like, 'what?! you've actually come?' This
is what often troubles foreigners. |
| 10. | Roro | [@@@@ wakatta] aa wakatta
wakatta hee | I see, oh I get it, I see. |

Although, as noted, Roro generally accepts Kaori's authority about Japanese matters, she also tries to mildly object to Kaori's categorical statements by mentioning facts which could be taken as exceptions to the rule. In Excerpt 3, responding to Kaori's insistence that Japanese people never express their true opinions and that not voicing negative comments openly is a sign of considerateness, Roro cautiously describes a counterexample of Japanese friends who *do* express their opinions. She provisionally qualifies this by saying that these Japanese speakers do so when interacting with foreigners.

Excerpt 3 [34'30"]

- | | | | |
|-----|-------|---|--|
| 11. | Roro | <i>Demo ... @@nihonjin no daigakusei to ... hanashite iru toki</i> | But when I talk @@with Japanese university
students |
| 12. | Kaori | <i>Un</i> | Yeah |
| 13. | Roro | <i>chokusetsu ni ... iu itsumo chokusetu ni</i> | they speak directly, always directly |
| 14. | Kaori | <i>Un</i> | Yeah |
| 15. | Roro | <i>iken o dasu\</i> | (they) express their opinions |
| 16. | Kaori | <i>soo soo</i> | that's right, that's right |
| 17. | Roro | <i>Watashi watashi ni moo ano gaikokujin no tomodachi [to]\</i> | me, to me, well with foreign friends |
| 18. | Kaori | [un] un | yeah, yeah |
| 19. | Roro | <i>demo nee omoshiroi ... sono@@@tabun ano ... nihonjin to</i>
<i>hanashiteiru toki to chotto chigau [ne:]</i> | but yeah that's interesting. Maybe it's different
when they speak with Japanese people. |
| 20. | Kaori | [un un] | yeah, yeah |
| 21. | Roro | <i>gaikokujin to hanashi toki ano ... jiyuu ni iken ga daseru /kana/</i> | I wonder if they can express their opinions more
freely when talking with foreigners. |

Despite the friend's insistence, Roro cautiously tries to suggest that the restraint in expressing personal opinions may actually be a stereotype.

Excerpt 4 [38'12"]

- | | | | |
|-----|-------|---|--|
| 22. | Roro | <i>Itsumo iwanai. Sono yoono sutereotaipu ga kiita koto aru</i>
<i>demo\ honto ... honto ka dooka wakarana[katta@]</i> | (They) never speak their mind. I have heard such
stereotype but I was unsure if it was true ... true. |
| 23. | Kaori | [aaa] | ah ah |
| 24. | | [aaa] | aah ah |
| 25. | Roro | <i>[moo ano] ... hontoo janai to omotta.</i> | I thought it wasn't true |
| 26. | Kaori | <i>un un</i> | uh-huh, uh-huh |
| 27. | Roro | <i>honto ja ... itsumo ano ... daigaku de itsumo hitobito wa</i>
<i>ano ... iken iken o itteiru</i> | (not) true ... people always express their opinions at
the university. |
| 28. | Kaori | <i>un</i> | Yeah |
| 29. | Roro | <i>watashi nimo ano ... gaikoku to gaokokujin to shite</i>
<i>nihonjin wa itsumo iken o itteiru node\</i> | Because to me also, as a foreign foreigner (they)
always express their opinions. |

Kaori, rather forcefully, defends the notion as accurate (in subsequent lines: *ookuno nihonjin wa soo da to omou yo*. 'I do think that a lot of Japanese are like that'). Roro eventually gives up, but seems amused by Kaori's elaborated descriptions and will conclude that she finds this practice 'troubling' (*honto ni omoshiroi. Demone: komaru*. 'Really interesting, but hard to deal with ...').

In the interaction between two parties with an assumed asymmetry in epistemic authority (to which both seems to orient to), it is easy for positions to become polarised. While Roro is ostensibly

more cautious and Kaori more assertive, Roro can only tentatively suggest more nuanced interpretations, and she appears to be constrained by Kaori's categorical statements and the relative dichotomies thus engendered. She then aligns with Kaori's framing by producing her own example of these contrasting differences, i.e. the manner in which one notifies a teacher when skipping classes: roundabout in Japan, and direct in England (Excerpt 5) – which continues to make national culture relevant.

Interestingly, at this point (line 45) Kaori adds that her grandmother, and 'especially elderly people' are likely to prefer an indirect style. This suggests that other groups (younger people?) may have different preferences (or no preference at all), which would be evidence of variation within Japanese groups. However, the observation is soon after ignored, when she restates the same broad stereotypical generalisation.

Excerpt 5 [28'40"]

30.	Roro	<i>soo watashi ga sensei ni itai koto ga aru demo ano ...</i>	Right, when I have something to say to my teacher, well
		<i>watashi ga toka kyuukoo shitai[toka]</i>	for example I want to excuse myself from a class
31.	Kaori	[Un]	Yeah
32.	Roro	<i>ano ne: shitumon ga atta n desu ga: ano kyuukoo wa:</i>	(I'd say), (softly) I have a question ... , um ... about a
			leave of absence from the class ...
33.	Kaori	@@un	Yeah
34.	Roro	<i>demo chokusetsuni [iwanai]</i>	but I/you would not say it directly
35.	Kaori	[@@@soosoosoo un]	yeah, yeah right
36.	Roro	<i>demo igirisu de chokusetsu ano ... kyuukoo shitai</i>	In the UK I/you would say it directly. Ehrm ... I would like
			to excuse myself from the class.
37.	Kaori	[@@@]	@@@
38.	Roro	<i>[kore@kore @ ichiban teinei@]</i>	and that is the most polite.
39.	Kaori	[Soosoo]	Yes, yes.
40.	Roro	<i>[sensei ni] kyuukoo shitai sensei wa aa daijoobu</i>	I/You would say to the teacher 'I would like to excuse
		<i>[daijoobu] wakatta demo kore wa honto ni chigau]</i>	myself' and the teacher would say 'that's fine'. But this
			is really different.
41.	Kaori	[@@@]	Yes, yes. That's because we/they wouldn't say it directly,
		<i>Soosoo sutoreeto ni iwanai kara ne itsumo</i>	never.
42.	Roro	<i>Soo/ @soo </i>	right, right
43.	Kaori	<i>Watashi no obaachan mo yappa mukashi no hito wa</i>	My grandma also, I think elderly people especially behave
		<i>toku ni soo da to omou kedo</i>	this way,
44.	Roro	Un	Yeah
45.	Kaori	<i>watashi no obaachan mo ... itsumo denwa de tomoda</i>	and my grandma ... such as when talking with her
		<i>soo tomodachi to shaberu toki toka[...dareka to</i>	friends or someone ... she would never say 'I want you
		<i>shaberu toki itsumo[...naninani shite ... shite hoshii</i>	to do something' but (rather)'if you could do (it) for me
		<i>tte iun ja nakute[...jshi shi ... shite kuretema ...</i>	... but (that would) not be possible would it?@@@
		<i>demo dame desu yone [toka @@@]</i>	
46.	Roro	[un]	Right
		[un]	@@@Ah why, um why, why?
		[@@] aa nande aa nande	
		<i>nande [nande]</i>	
47.	Kaori	<i>e [demo] aa muridattara ii desu yo ... mitai na</i>	Like 'well ... um ... it's ok if it is not possible ... '
48.	Roro	<i>so sonna sonnna kanji</i>	Yes, something like that
49.	Kaori	<i>shite hoshii kedo: muri desu yo[ne: umm toka]</i>	like 'I would like you to do that but it is not possible, is it?'
			umm
50.	Roro	<i>[soo aa muri</i>	right, 'ah, not possible, is it? that's alright'
		<i>desu yone] aa</i>	
		<i>daijoobu [desu yo]</i>	
51.	Kaori	<i>[desu yo] demo honto</i>	it is (alright), but actually she would want them to do it,
		<i>wa shite hoshii kedo</i>	
52.	Roro	Soosoo	yes, yes
53.	Kaori	<i>soo iu sutoreeto ni iwanai kara@</i>	but she would not say it in a straightforward way.
54.	Roro	<i>soo omoshiroi[...@omoshiroi@</i>	that's right, that's interesting@
55.	Kaori	<i>[@@] soo nihonjin wa itsumo sutoreeto</i>	@@ yes. Japanese people never say things directly.
		<i>ni iwanai</i>	
56.	Roro	soo	yes.

57.	Kaori	<i>iesu ka noo ka mo ienaishi@@</i>	they do not say yes or no@@
58.	Roro	<i>soo honto ni muzukashikatta ... ichiban ano tsuita bakari ichiban muzukashikatta wa ano chokusetsu ni iwanai </i>	so it was really difficult when I just arrived. The most difficult (thing) was not saying things directly
59.	Kaori	<i>soo</i>	Yes
60.	Roro	<i>demo watashi ga honto ni chokusetsu iu no wa mo hontoni nareta/</i>	but I am really used to saying (things) directly
61.	Kaori	<i>Un un un</i>	yeah uh-huh
62.	Roro	<i>ano igiri igirisu de honto ni chokusetsu iu no wa ichiban teinei </i>	because in the UK saying (things) directly is the politest way.
63.	Kaori	<i>soo soo soo ne</i>	yes, that's right, isn't it?
64.	Roro	<i>no de@ watashi ga@ ano tsuita bakari ... chokusetsu ni iu no wa a dame dame dayo dame dayo [tte itta]</i>	so@ when I arrived, (someone) said one should not say (things) directly
65.	Kaori	<i>[soo ne@]</i>	that's right
66.	Roro	<i>no wa watashi ga ... nande@ hidoi@@ watashi ga sore o shitai</i>	and I was like ... why that's terrible@@ I want to do that.
67.	Kaori	<i>Un</i>	Yeah
68.	Roro	<i>demo ... shi a shitakunai no yoono kanji ga shita [hoo ga ii@]</i>	but it's better if I do not (make it) look as if I really want to do it.
69.	Kaori	<i>[soo soo soo soo@@@] [wakaranai@@]</i>	that's right, right@@ It's hard to know (what to do)@@
70.	Roro	<i>[nande] wakaranai zettai wakaranai soo </i>	I absolutely do not understand why. That's right.
71.	Kaori	<i>Soo ne/ zettai u gaikokujin zettai omou to omou </i>	Yes, foreigners definitely think (like) that.

This repeated reiteration of a dichotomic cultural contrast between a 'Japanese' and an 'English' style enables Roro to invoke this as the reason for the difficulties she experienced when she first arrived in Japan, and behind her current struggle to adapt to this style. Perceived differences are thus not attributed to a perhaps still limited understanding of linguistic conventions, nor to personal dispositions, but to culture-based preferences; Kaori has also validated them as (national) cultural differences (despite the mention of some form of intracultural variation) and this can henceforth be invoked as a rather natural (common-sense) explanation for her current struggles.

Just as Roro did in line 62 regarding English norms, Kaori provides a plethora of metapragmatic comments on Japanese norms (elsewhere in the recording), which articulate ideologies of normative behaviours in some detail: 'not saying things openly to someone's face is a type of kindness' (*mento mukatte iwanai koto ga yasashisa dattari suru*); 'Japanese people feel that saying yes or no clearly is rude' (*iesu ka noo ka hakkiri itta hoo ga nihonjin wa shitsurei ni kanjiru*) and again 'Japanese feel that to wander away a little [from the main point] is gentler ...' (*dassen shita hoo ga yasasiku kanjiru no, nihonjin wa ...*).

This argumentation is supported by Kaori through the attribution of a timeless origin for this behaviour, further rationalised by the association with hierarchy:

Excerpt 6 [35'15"]

72.	Kaori	<i>mu mukashi kara ... etto nihonjin wa jibun no iken wa yutte wa ikenai ichiban ue no</i>	From a long time ago, um, Japanese should not express their opinions. The superiors ...
73.	Roro	<i>Omoshiroi</i>	Interesting(<i>whispering</i>)
74.	Kaori	<i>mukashi kara chotto ue no hito ga iu koto wa zettai hai kashikomarimashita </i>	to what the superiors say, they would just (say) 'yes, sir I understand'.
75.	Roro	<i>Kashikomarimashita@@ soo </i>	Yes sir', right
76.	Kaori	<i>Hai otonosama mukashi mo zutto@@ moo mukashikara ue no koto yutta hito zettai ... soo jibun no iken wa yuenai kara/</i>	Yes, from a long time ago, to your lord, to those who are superior, you absolutely should not express your opinions.

Note that the association with hierarchy is not really justified, since they had been discussing the fact that one can be indirect and vague also among friends, but invoking another well-established discourse (the hierarchical nature of feudal Japanese society) provides legitimacy to the discourse about restraint – if not by logic, by association.

4.2. Hazel and her British peer Sarah

Hazel and Sarah are both aspiring writers, and spend much time discussing this and socialising; Hazel recalls a memorable overnight visit to their Japanese friend's family home. They are soft-spoken and at times tentative, but well able to express different interpretations and nuanced opinions about the *manga*. They choose to follow the order of the guiding questions and read them out loud.

It is clear from the outset that both students have no problem identifying the meaning of the key-words in the *manga*, including that of *honne*, and the behaviours commonly associated with it. Already when discussing the first of the two episodes (not reported here), both try to avoid clear-cut dichotomies, provide examples that some behaviours are also observed elsewhere, and suggest that these are established (*nihonjinron*) discourses about Japanese culture (see 2.2). Through mutual questions and mostly modalised statements they seem to position each other as collaborators, rather than an expert and a novice. The discussion of the second episode continues in the same tone.

Excerpt 7 [14'23"]

77	Sarah	<i>maa nanka ... juuyoo no wa ... nanka ... maa ... nanka honto ni itai koto o ... nanka ... ieru ka dooka</i>	well, what is important ... ehmm ... is whether you can say what you really wish to say
78.	Hazel	<i>nn\</i>	Yeah
79.	Sarah	<i>maikeru wa sore wa nihonjin nitotte ... tottemo nanka ... nanka nihonjin no: oma- omotte omote to ura wa ke- nanka honto ni chigau to omotteiru rashii desu\ nanka ho- nihonjin no honne to nihonjin no iu koto</i>	Michael seems to think that Japanese people's private and public stances are really different ... ehmm, their true feeling and what they say
80.	Hazel	<i>nnn\ ... hontoo ni chigai to omoimasu ... ka.</i>	Umm ... do you think they are really different?
81.	Sarah	<i>un maa ... soo watashi wa kore wa kekkoo ... ma maikeru ga itta yoo ni nanka dono kuni no hito demo ... onaji da [to omoimasu]</i>	umm well ... I think that with regard to this issue people from any country are the same, as Michael said.
82.	Hazel	<i>n [soo desu ne] igirisu de onaji to omoimasu [@@@]</i>	I agree, I think in the UK it's the same.
83.	Sarah	<i>[hai igirisu mo kekkoo] [sono huu ni]</i>	yes England also is rather like that
84.	Hazel	<i>[hontoo ni] onaji@@@</i>	Indeed (it's) the same.

Sarah and Hazel are again both very cautious when comparing Japanese and British people. Even though a few lines later they will confirm that *honne* is quite evident in Japan (line 85) or that Americans tend instead to speak their minds (line 92) they proceed in a manner that seems to deliberately avoid categorical, dichotomic statements.

Excerpt 8 [17'28"]

85.	Sarah	<i>igirisu dewa nanka soo iu ... honne o iwanai ... hito wa ooi kedo: tashikani nihon dewa ... nanka soo iu hito wa ... ma motto ooi ... ki ga shimasu.</i>	In the UK there may be many people who do not express their feelings but indeed I have a feeling that there are more of such people in Japan.
86.	Hazel	<i>Sekai de kore nihonjin no kono yoona ano ... imeeji wa yuumei/ ... desu ka/ [igirisu] no wa yuumei da to omoimasu kara\</i>	Is this kind of ... Japanese image well known? Because I think that the image of British people is well known
87.	Sarah	<i>[nn]</i>	Ah
88.	Hazel	<i>igirisujin wa chotto [honne o iwanai]</i>	the British do not express their true feelings.
89.	Sarah	<i>[nanka soo iu imeeji ga] arimasu\ nanka nihon ... nanka sono ... sono yoo ni nihon to igirisu wa chotto niteiru to omoimasu</i>	Well, there are such images, well, like that Japanese and British people are a bit similar, I think.
90.	Hazel	<i>a, soo desu ne\@</i>	ah, is that right@
91.	Sarah	<i>un ... e kono manga de egakareteiru gaikokuiin ... igirisu- igirisujin kaishain maikeru no hannoo wa amerika ya yooroppa kara nihon ni kuru gakusei ni ooi hannoo dato omoimasu ka/</i>	<reading the question > um, ah 'Do you think the British company employees' (and) Michael' reactions illustrated in the <i>manga</i> are common among students coming from the US or Europe?'
92.	Hazel	<i>aa amerika desu ne/ zenzen chigau to omoimasu kedo [amerika wa]</i>	ah the US right, (they are) completely different, I think
93.	Sarah	<i>[nnn\]</i>	hn ...
94.	Hazel		the Ame ... Americans say their <i>honne</i> @ more often.

		... ano kore nitsuite ... ame amerikajin no wa motto ... hontoo ni honne o@ iu koto ga aru to omoimasu	
95.	Sarah	ummm	Hmm
96.	Hazel	soo desu ne ... chotto omoimasu ... demo yooroppajin/ ... nn ...	Right, I think so, but Europeans ... hmm ...
97.	Sarah	nnn	hmm
98.	Hazel	onaji kana/	I wonder if they are the same
99.	Sarah	tabun ... soo iu hannoo shimasu\ nanka watashi mo. nanka igirisu ... maa nitetemo ... watashi datte nanka ... nihonjin wa honto ni ... honne o iwanai ne ... to tokidoki omotte imasu ga\ mochiron minna mo onaji janai desu kedo	Maybe ... they would react like that, well I too, the British, despite being similar ... um sometimes think that Japanese people do not express their honne ... though of course not everyone is the same.

This pair is not only reluctant to align to the *manga's* dichotomies; they also explicitly acknowledge (intracultural) diversity. It is possible that Hazel's familiarity with interculturality and a heightened awareness of diversity – both in terms of her own heritage and mobile background, and her cosmopolitan milieu at home – make her less prone to stereotypifications and readier to recognise commonalities as well as differences. However, this is arguably also an easier stance to adopt when no other participant produces 'us-vs-them' polarisations, as in the dynamics between the pair we saw earlier.

Rather than formulating *honne* as a cultural dogma, this pair thinks through the question of how to evaluate *honne* by considering examples of actual contexts. They note that professional contexts may necessarily require that one refrains from openly speaking their minds (mostly for the opportunistic reason to avoid upsetting one's superior, and end up being reprimanded by them), but they also observe that, in contrast, to do so in a family context may be construed as 'lying':

Excerpt 9 [19'56'']

100.	Sarah	nn ... ja honne o iwanai koto ni tsuite doo omoimasu ka/	So what do you think of not expressing your <i>honne</i> ?
101.	Hazel	ermmm hitsuyoo da to omoimasu@ tokidoki@ ano kore kaisha ... no kaigi de nee ... anoo ... konoyoo ni anoo ... koto de hitsuyoo [... to omoi]masu\	umm I think it is necessary. Sometimes at company meetings, well ... something like that is necessary.
102.	Sarah	[un un]	uh huh
103.	Hazel	nnn ... hitsuyoo desu ka/ hontoo ni\	hmm ... is it really necessary?
104.	Sarah	maa watashi wama tashika ni soo iu jookyoo de nanka ... honne o iu hoo ga ii to omoimasu ga moshi jooshi wa anmari ... nanka hito no iken o kikanai hito nara ... nanka ... jibun no honne o iu no wa ... nanka anmari ... nanka ... honne o i ittemo kekkyoku jooshi ni o- okorareru nara	well I think that it is better to express <i>honne</i> in such situations, but if the superior does not listen to the others' opinions well ... then even if you express your <i>honne</i> , if you just get reprimanded in the end,
105.	Hazel	nn soo desu ne\@@@	yeah, that's right, isn't it@@@
106.	Sarah	maa ... iwanai hoo ga ii ... kamoshiremasen	it might be better not to express your <i>honne</i> .
107.	Hazel	nn soo\	yeah, right
108.	Sarah	demo: tashikani nichijoo de wa ma a itsumo honne o iu ... iu no wa: maa muri da to omoimasu\ demo mochiron ... maa tomodachi nara ma tomodachi ya kazokunara ... nanka ... sonna ni utotsu-tsu nanka ... uso o tsuku no wa ... ma dame desu kara ... demo un	Well, in daily life I think it is not possible to always express ... express your <i>honne</i> , but of course ... if you are (among) friends or family ... well it is no good to lie like that so, but yeah.
109.	Hazel	nn demo tokidoki/	yeah but sometimes
110.	Sarah	hitsuyoo desu@@	it seems necessary@@

Having discriminated between different contexts, they also find a counterexample, showing that 'white lies' are common in private/intimate contexts too:

Excerpt 10 [21'56'']

111.	Sarah	nn jaa jibun mo kono manga no nihon ni no ni ... sumimasen	<reading another question> um then 'do you yourself refrain from expressing
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	[ni]honjin kaishain no yoo ni honne o iwanai koto ga arimasuka/	your opinions like the Japanese (in the) company?
112. Hazel	[@] jibun no toshi o ... a minna mo ... sono koto ga aru to omou n [n kedo]	I think everyone (at) my own age ... also has to (do that), but
113. Sarah	[un nan]ka ... soo aa	Well ... yes, ehr ...
114. Hazel	nn ... un soo to omou ... [tatoe]ba dokode/	umm ... yeah I think that's the case ... for example where
115. Sarah	[nanka] un nanka ... saa nanka tomodachi ni ... nanka doko nanka tomodachi ni saso sasotta toki toka demo [ji]bujibu honto ni amari ikitaku nai kara	well um ehrm ... when you are invited somewhere by friends, by friends, when I myself do not want to go,
116. Hazel	[nn] aa soo ne@ [@sore wa wakarimasu@@]	hmm, right I can understand that very well.
117. Sarah	[etto: ... iiwake o tsuku]ttari toka sore wa yoku@@@	I make up excuses or something. That (happens) often@@@

5. Discussion

With regards to our research questions, the two pairs differ greatly in what they find salient, whether they take the *manga* at face value, and how they orient to their respective peer's position. Roro and Kaori's pair focuses on 'difference' between Japan and the West as a salient feature of the practices the *manga* describe, and take the *manga* narrative at face value. In contrast, Hazel and Sarah's pair seems to recognise 'similarities' and cautiously avoids dichotomous stereotypical interpretations of culture. The first pair positions the native speaker, Kaori, as the authority, while the second pair position each other as collaborators.

In interpreting the discourses about *honne* and its association to a 'typically' Japanese communicative style, Roro and Hazel inevitably must mobilise morally charged stances. The ideological nature of such discourses forces all participants to make their positions manifest. Of course, it is not possible to state unequivocally that the different dynamics we observed in the two pairs can be causally linked to the learner's *cultural* background, rather than personality, education, interpersonal contingencies, etc. Nor, of course, can one suggest that the stance adopted by these friends would be the same in other interactional contexts, or that other friends with the same background as Sarah and Kaori would have co-constructed the same dynamics observed here (e.g. not all Japanese participants would have spoken like Kaori). We can observe however how different epistemic stances (Ochs 1996: 422), clearly reflected in utterance design (modalised/unmodalised speech acts), index power a/symmetries which either enable or erase participants' voices and open up or prevent alternative interpretive possibilities.

Roro accepts her Japanese friend's authority, feebly resists Kaori's ideology of *honne* as a homogenous national trait (interpreting it instead as a participant-oriented stance, though this alternative reading remains unattended), and ends up adopting Kaori's polarised distinctions in her own argumentative reasoning, suggesting 'assent to the same ideological construction' regarding NS and NNS positions, which shows its hegemonic nature (Liddicoat 2016: 426). The stereotype is then used as a heuristic resource for Roro to reframe the dilemmas she allegedly perceived when she arrived to Japan and is invoked to delineate a distinct self-identity in relation to the local community. As a result, the pair's argumentative domain remains limited to the comparison of – or rather contrast between – Japan and the UK, depicted as internally homogeneous and dichotomic entities (a characteristic feature of *nihonjinron* ideology; cf. Cook 2006).

Hazel and her co-national friend communicate in a more collaborative key, create a space to avoid the trap of the 'outgroup homogeneity bias' (Rubin and Badaea 2012), reflect on the inherently variable nature of all social groups, and consequently can imagine commonalities rather than differences – 'thread' narratives... [of] 'shared meanings across structural boundaries' (Amadasí and Holliday 2017). It could be argued that this stance does not afford this pair a 'better' interpretation, and possibly that they fail to appreciate the strength of the ideological construct of *honne* for some social groups, to notice its status as a widely recognised discourse

(Gee 2008), with its associated speaker indexicalities. It does however afford them freedom from essentialist fallacies.

Both friends act as mediators, in both cases arguably extending their peers' interpretations and creating potential for further learning and development, enabling the learners to achieve an understanding and a reasoned position vis-à-vis the notion of *honne* as presented in the *manga*. However, the quality of such mediation is rather different: while the pair sharing a similar background proceeds by mutual questioning and hints, in the other there is some clear sense of 'instruction'. The didactic deployment of the nominal expertise of the Japanese friend⁶ leaves binary and categorical representations unchallenged, notwithstanding the mention of exceptions by both interlocutors. Moreover, the native peer's mediation may carry enough authority to legitimise the ideology of a 'natural' order of things (e.g. *honne* as a time-immemorial cultural value), which makes alternative interpretations of such behaviour even more ineligible.

6. Conclusions

The study illustrates the contrasting ways in which peers mediate and collaboratively construct understandings of Japanese culture, as well as the mundane ways in which stereotypes and language ideologies can be reproduced, and possibly reinforced, in the course of joint reasoning. Our 'provocative' source text, highlighting stereotypical yet established discourses about Japanese society, encouraged a focus on differences rather than commonalities across cultural boundaries – one possible approach to the handling of stereotypes (cf. Holliday 2010: 137). However, we saw how the two pairs responded rather differently to the provocation. Although the transcripts reveal occasional points of misunderstanding, both pairs achieve a more than adequate coordination regarding the identification of *honne* as a practice, the recognition of 'typical' examples based on characters of different nationality, and the problems experienced by those interacting with those characters. Different perspectives and their rationales come to be appreciated.

However, and although it might be counter-intuitive, the mediation by 'expert' local friends may be less conducive to a nuanced understanding – let alone a critical engagement – and conversely, mediation in power-symmetrical interactions may be more beneficial for the purpose of (non-essentialist) intercultural understanding. Our observations show how power asymmetry, a strong presumption of knowledge and expertise paired with a well-meaning keenness to impart the knowledge of a native expert to an international student, and finally a preference for dichotomic thinking and a disregard for outsiders' metapragmatic knowledge constrain all participants' horizons and interpretations, and prevent a two-way exchange – a problem of intercultural communication highlighted by several commentators. Together with the universal language-ideological reasoning of 'erasure of differentiation' (Irvine and Gal 2000), that we saw when language internal variation was first mentioned and then completely ignored (line 45), we also see the pervasive effects of asymmetrical positions on reasoning, interpretation, and further positioning. Lid-dicoat's (2016: 420) observation that: '[...] NS power over language can have consequences for NS participation beyond aspects of the talk itself' can be reformulated, based on the stances we observed, by replacing 'language' with 'culture'. Such stances perpetuate native-speakerist ideology and the concomitant problem of 'one-way linguistic and cultural uniformity, in which only international students are expected to accommodate cultural and linguistic difference' (Kubota 2016: 355). Peers may display less expertise in the pragmatic conventions of the language studied, or less familiarity with widely circulating discourses (though neither of these is necessarily the case), but at the same time, they may be more conversant with interculturality (the ability to appreciate others' positions, perspectives, rationalisations); they may possess the interactional skills which allow the overcoming of dichotomic thinking in which exclusive categories are presupposed and taken for granted, create sufficient space for all participants to share resources/

knowledge/hypotheses, develop alternative positions and create new understandings, which is conducive to multidirectional learning and, ultimately, the discovery of commonalities beyond possible differences.

Just like Cook's (2006) dinnertime talk, casual reasoning with peers occasioned by discourses of 'typicality' should be seen as part of the socialisation process. What learners get socialised to is not uncontested cultural phenomena, but ideology-mediated indexicalities, i.e. participant's subjective attributions of social meaning and values to what constitutes 'typical' behaviour. When NS unproblematically support stereotypifications, they may do so as a form of deliberate 'othering' or for protecting their self-identity, but they may also be themselves swayed by the authority of printed accounts (just like textbooks in the language classroom). While interacting with NS enables learners to recognise the logic of local cultural representations, familiarity with which is of course an important component of intercultural competence, it does not necessarily provide opportunities for the exploration of alternative interpretations, a necessary step to uncover their ideological nature. This is the advantage of interaction with NNS peers.

Notes

1. We use these terms, potentially suggesting that cultural backgrounds can be unproblematically linked to nationally defined characteristics, as no more than a practical shorthand: as shown in 3.1, they indicate the participants' contexts of primary socialisation and education but, as we discuss, we take these to be discursively constructed positions rather than self-explanatory cultural attributes.
2. SOAS University of London is a small size higher education institution in London, that specialises in the study of Asia, Africa and the Near and Middle East. Its students (around 5200 UG and PG on campus) are roughly in equal number from a UK and international background, including many from the school's specialist regions. Campus life is therefore characterised by a particularly diverse, cosmopolitan culture, in which intercultural interactions (among students and staff alike) are the norm rather than the exception.
3. Data collection started about six months before the beginning of a compulsory YA in Japan (taking place in year 3 of the students degree; they have therefore studied Japanese for two years before going abroad). Of the 14 pairs who completed the task, we present the students who were enrolled in the same degree (Japanese and Linguistics) to maximise comparability. Prior to the YA, students took the SPOT90 (Simple Performance Oriented Test containing 90 items) proficiency test. Their scores place them at an intermediate level (Hazel 60, Roro 59) (see, for example, Lee 2020 about this test).
4. The difference in length has to do with such factors as the target students' Japanese oral fluency, (although similar proficiency as measured by SPOT), and different levels of preparedness.
5. This is surprising in terms of 'territory of information' theory (Kamio 1994), based on which Kaori arguably has less epistemic authority on 'foreigners' matters' than Roro.
6. This stance is different from Liddicoat's (2016) 'didactic voice' insofar as it is not only triggered by metadiscourses on language, but similar insofar as it generates unequal power positions.

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Appendix. Transcription conventions

@	laughter
[]	overlapping
/	rising intonation
\	falling intonation
...	micropause
... ..	pause of ½ second or more.

The timestamp indicates the point in the recording where the relative excerpt begins.