Content Analysis of Speeches at University English Speech Contests

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ABSTRACT

The author served as a judge at the annual English Speech Contest sponsored by the Fukuoka Student English Association (FSEA) in June 2001 and June 2002. A total of 24 original speeches with self-selected themes were delivered by students from five local universities. Among the topical areas considered were the challenges of technology and modernity, social problems and responsibility, and global citizenship. This paper explores the social and political significance of the speeches, which provided a useful snapshot of early 21st-century Japan in transition. Speech excerpts are placed into the context of current events by drawing on media sources, illustrating the evolution of Japanese society away from excessive dependence, centralization and uniformity, and toward an emerging paradigm of individual empowerment and responsibility, decentralization and diversity. It is concluded that the English speech contests offered bidirectional benefits. For observers, the events represented a unique window into the world views and English ability of young Japanese adults. Student participants utilized the contests as a confidence-building vehicle for communicating their voice and vision in a foreign language, while engaging in social consciousness-raising. It is

suggested that English speech contests could represent a valuable resource for describing changes in student attitudes over time, or for describing local conditions in different geographical areas. Excerpts from junior high school English speech contests in Aomori, judged by the author in the early 1990s, are introduced more briefly.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2001 and June 2002, I helped judge the annual speech contests sponsored by the Fukuoka Student English Association (FSEA), an organization with a 41-year history. This article provides an overview of the 24 original speeches delivered by students from five area universities : Fukuoka University, Fukuoka University of Education, Kitakyushu University, Kyushu University and Seinan Gakuin University. Speakers considered diverse themes and specific topics such as the challenges of technology and modernity (prenatal genetic screening, surrogate motherhood, stress, human isolation) ; social problems and responsibility (child abuse, bullying, prejudice against the physically disabled and mentally ill, mass media transgressions, eating contests, health care reform, educational reform, positive change through conflict) ; and global citizenship (land mines, nuclear disarmament, world peace). Several of the speakers, who were mostly female and about 21 years old, appeared to adopt highly expressive "English personas" in conveying messages of three general types : challenging authority, personal (even confessional) information, and the airing of society's dirty laundry.

Recently, the 20-something crowd has been unflatteringly branded as a hedonistic "new breed" incapable of the commitment to delayed gratification that defined previous postwar generations. Legions of college graduates are passing on joining Japan's company-based working world, opting instead to continue their

loosely structured employment as "freeters" in low-paying, non-career service jobs. "Freeters" frequently overlap with the swelling ranks of "parasite singles," an even less kind term referring to adults who forgo marriage indefinitely in favor of the indulgent affluence of living with their parents. Indeed, the commentator credited with coining the term "parasite singles" calls the group (up to 10 million strong) a "symbol of the impasse at which contemporary Japanese society finds itself. A feeling of being at a dead end arises when people have all they want at present with few prospects for the future, an emotional state that describes these singles to a tee" (Yamada 2000).

Students at the Fukuoka speech contests, however, strongly belied this harsh characterization. Displaying a serious nature and keen abilities for creativity and critical thinking, speakers were centrally concerned with social activism and consciousness-raising. Their messages illustrated Japan's ongoing sociopolitical paradigm shift away from excessive dependence, centralization and uniformity, and toward individual empowerment and responsibility, decentralization and diversity. Like post-September 11 America, Japan is now redefining the relationship between individual and community interests, searching for its own recalibrated balance of rights and responsibilities. The resulting tension and displacements are uniquely Japanese, though, for Japan is approaching that elusive point of equilibrium from the opposite direction.

Recommending social conflict

"*Please imagine. You are at the station. When you use a train or a bus, don't you feel something strange sometimes. You are constantly being told what to do, like a child. The station is filled with the words 'don't' or 'please.' Do you think this shows kindness and provides good services? Do you think this is really necessary to protect our lives? If you answered 'yes,' maybe you are used to*

being spoiled. If you answered 'no, it is unnecessary,' have you complained to the company?" -Nana Iriki (Kitakyushu University)

"Conflict or Harmony," the title of the Iriki's provocative first-place speech, had implications far beyond the officiousness of Japan's everyday noise pollution and visual clutter of signs bearing nanny-like messages, something that foreign visitors rarely fail to notice and Japanese have also begun criticizing. In the view of one Japanese academic, "This relentless hounding of the public with instructions issued by the authorities strongly contrasts with the passive, noncommunicative stance adopted by most of the public, thus depriving people of the ability to express themselves freely, thereby crippling self-determination" (Kobayashi 2000).

Iriki echoed the assessment. She recounted a previous summer vacation experience at an Australian train station, where the curt announcements and generally impersonal system initially struck her as cold. Upon deeper reflection, she decided, *"It is we Japanese that are puzzled when we go abroad and face a world that is 'unusual' only for us."* The speech continued by challenging Japanese to more vigorously exercise the virtue of civic courage, by taking risks and choosing conflict over harmony in order to reform society.

"For a long time, Japanese people have tended to avoid conflict and dispute. We think conflict is a bad thing and creating harmony with the surrounding people is a good thing. Therefore, we avoid complaining and try to be patient. Even if we are sure that something is wrong, most people ignore it. However, it is harmful for us not to complain. It means that we rely on others who undertake difficult tasks and it also means we are not independent. Moreover, don't you think we are irresponsible when we ignore these things? In such a situation, nothing will change in a positive direction. This way of thinking is called safety-first, or a negative attitude."

Such compliant, passive attitudes are a root cause of Japan's much-maligned

"spectator democracy," now being steadily superceded by a more independent, assertive approach. *"Kusai mono ni futa,"* a saying translatable as "if it smells, cover it up," goes far in explaining the cover-up culture that has long pervaded Japanese society, making acknowledgment of even minor wrongdoings tantamount to shameful betrayal of one's group. In recent months, remarkably, American-style whistle-blowing has exposed an accelerating stream of both public and private sector crime and corruption; national legislation to protect individual whistleblowers has even been proposed (Masui 2002). Last August, a firestorm of grassroots protest accompanied the introduction of a revised resident registration system, in which personal data for all Japanese were entered into a national computer database, along with new 11-digit personal identification numbers.

Scores of local government assemblies passed resolutions urging Tokyo to suspend the plan over privacy concerns. Several flatly refused to implement it. "The specter of a village assembly criticizing central government policy was previously unheard of," with one activist voicing the hope that "an ongoing wave of local resolutions will eventually topple a decision made at the highest level of the bureaucracy" (Otake 2002). A hotbed of resistance to the registration number scheme was Yokohama, a metropolis of 3.5 million people whose maverick, 38-year-old mayor was elected largely by vowing to publicly disclose the entertainment-related expense accounts of city officials. More than 800,000 Yokohama residents opted out of the national registry system under a special city provision which the central government is certain to disallow, setting up an unprecedented legal showdown. Also being vocally challenged is the government's related policy of family registration, a relic of the imperial past that discriminates against non-Japanese and their children, as well as Japanese children born out of wedlock. Information is indeed power, and it has become a bitterly contested commodity.

The thunderous "fall of the bureaucrats" has helped hasten the long-awaited

energizing of civil society. The reputation of nearly every government ministry has been severely tarnished by a staggering range of malfeasance and influence-peddling scandals, along with general ineptitude (accompanied by surly aloofness) that made possible the domestic outbreak of mad cow disease and contamination of the nation's blood supply with HIV and hepatitis, not to mention economic mismanagement on a grand scale. The "Koizumi Revolution" itself, named for the tenacious current prime minister whose reforms are being resisted most strenuously by bureaucrats and their backers in his own ruling party, reflects the reformulated state-individual relationship in its rhetoric if not yet its results. "Power to the people" is essentially Koizumi's message. Government slogans and billboards frame the process as a transfer of political locus "from the center to localities" and from "officials to citizens," adding more bluntly for good measure that "government is your job." Risk-aversion and seniority, meanwhile, are being elbowed aside as societal organizing principles by activism and *jitsuryoku-shugi* ("actual ability-ism"), as citizens more fully exercise on the ground the political sovereignty with which they suddenly found themselves endowed in theory after the war.

"This society is filled with a lot of contradictions and problems we cannot understand. Therefore, let's always question our surroundings. Even if your question is too small, you should say your opinion at once and be a person who creates opportunities for everyone to change our society. Do not be satisfied with your lives too much. Conflict is not a bad thing but necessary to improve ourselves and our lives. Yes, to keep harmony with others is more comfortable than breaking harmony, but to challenge ourselves, to leave a comfortable place, is often more meaningful and beneficial. Ladies and gentlemen, next time when you use a train or bus, look around you. Then, consider your daily life again deeply. There might be strange things you haven't noticed yet."

Paramedic system reform

Grabbing her audience's attention with the tape-recorded wail of an ambulance siren, Yayoi Nakanishi (Fukuoka University) pointed out that ambulances transport about 400 people to hospitals in Fukuoka city each day. Japanese emergency medical technicians function more as taxi drivers than as Western-style paramedics, however, as they are authorized to perform only a narrow range of non-invasive activities, such as securing a breathing passage and administering simple intravenous drips. Lives are being lost on a regular basis as a result.

"Japanese paramedics cannot carry out any medical treatment except these 'particular actions' because the Ministry of Health and Welfare has hesitated to widen it. Thus, only doctors can administer medical treatment. So our lives are in danger because of a law. Law or life, which should we choose? ... The major factor behind this serious problem is the fact that the Japan Medical Association really opposes allowing anyone except doctors to perform medical treatments. However, before we get anxious about medical treatment by paramedics, don't we trust too much the qualified medical doctors in hospitals?"

This confrontational comment referred to the medical malpractice lawsuits that have doubled over the past decade, another indicator of the erosion of deference to authority and the corresponding emergence of litigious attitudes among the Japanese public. Concluded Nakanishi, a member of a local group pushing for paramedic system reform, *"Please think again about what the Japanese government should do right now."*

Technology, demographics and human isolation

"Now, our society is making remarkable progress by industrialization and our

life is flooded with machines. Life is much more convenient than when I was a child, but the opportunity for touching humans is decreasing. The most serious problem is that modern children can't get acquainted with other people."

-Megumi Fukagawa (Fukuoka University)

No nation has modernized its economy more rapidly than Japan, where the social fallout continues to be far-reaching. Various postwar factors have contributed to the rapid breakdown first of the traditional extended family and now of the nuclear family structure : relentless industrialization and urbanization ; fast-rising divorce rates, ultra-low birth rates and the graying of society ; the diversification of lifestyles and soaring number of single-member households ; and technology. Home video games and Internet-equipped mobile phones are just two of the machines that have curtailed face-to-face interaction and complicated the transference of values between generations.

During childhood, Fukagawa asked the audience, *"Who did you play with after school? I played with my grandmother or my sister or my friend. In particular, I played with my grandmother mostly. I learned from her how to throw otedama* (a traditional beanbag game), *how to do sewing, and how to communicate with neighborhood people. But most modern children have no brother or sister. Moreover, they don't live with their grandmother or grandfather. Instead, they have TV games, where it is possible to play alone. I want modern children to understand that TV games won't teach them how to communicate with others. We have to offer children a better environment."*

That will not be easy, due to a demographic hollowing out of society. Japan's birthrate is among the world's lowest and its population is the world's fastest-aging ; already 20 percent of Japanese are age 65 or older. Due to this double hit, the number of Japanese people is projected to peak at 128 million in 2006 and then shrink by nearly half over the next 100 years. Webs of family and community connections, once the epitome of Japanese social life, are fraying fast.

This has contributed to widespread alienation among youth, record numbers of whom are withdrawing into drugs and crime, frequently violent.

Wrestling with IVF, surrogate motherhood

"Suppose you are infertile. And there is little hope, if any, to have a baby. But both you and your husband want to have a baby at any cost. What would you do? Do you give up baby? You will ask for in vitro fertilization (IVF). You will try to get a surrogate mother. You won't hesitate to pay considerable amount of money for it. ... However, if we pay a lot of money to a surrogate mother, childbirth will turn into a business. Can it be all right? Someone may say it can be a business as long as they are paying for a labor of childbirth, not for a baby itself. ... But another social problem is that a baby can have three mothers. If in vitro fertilization used eggs from a third person, it brings forth three mothers : a biological mother, a surrogate mother, and a foster mother. Then what is 'mother?' On what basis do we call the baby our own?" -Naoko Kato (Fukuoka University)

Prenatal genetic screening

Used for detecting the existence in unborn children of conditions such as Down's Syndrome, prenatal genetic screening was discussed during a university seminar attended by Kayo Obata (Seinan Gakuin University). *"However, 90 percent of mothers have abortions when they receive the result that their babies have a high probability of disease or handicap."* Seventy percent of the students in her class were against prenatal genetic diagnosis. But one female proponent of the procedure said, *"'I want to undergo it when I get pregnant in the future, because it is a large economical load and a disadvantage for me to bring up a*

handicapped child.'

"I was very shocked to hear what she said, because I have a sister who is handicapped. What she said was against my sister's life. ... Moreover, our society seems to eliminate handicapped people. Do you know the term, eugenics?...It is necessary to reconsider the idea that having handicapped children is a disadvantage for us. All babies bring unique gifts, for example, character, talent, and so on. Don't you think a handicap is also individuality? Each baby has only one gift to the world. My mother is very happy to take my sister's gift."

Stress therapy

"Did you know that some dinosaurs died from stress? By the way, do you feel stress now? Today, we live in a stressful society, where persons are affected by many kinds of stress from human relationships, jobs and diseases, which may cause depression. According to the Japanese government, 55 percent of Japanese people feel stress. Only 55 percent? I doubted it. The other 45 percent of people do not notice their stress. Today, our society and environment are changing in a variety of ways as during the dinosaur period. If we live in stressful environments with no care for stress, humankind would similarly perish someday." -Rie Murai (Fukuoka University)

Calling it the "modern disease," Murai noted that stress can lead to autonomic imbalances affecting internal organs like the heart, resulting in higher blood pressure and related problems that often go undiagnosed. *Karoshi,* outright "death from overwork," has been both medically diagnosed and legally recognized in recent years. Japanese courts have ordered corporations to pay compensation to bereaved family members of *karoshi* victims, employees who worked virtually non-stop for weeks or months before succumbing. The age-old attitude of unquestioning endurance known as *gaman,* with its unmistakable element of

psychological denial, is yielding to more therapeutic approaches, such as the aroma therapy Murai recommended. Fortune-telling, partly as a modern means of stress management, has become immensely popular nationwide (Tajitsu 2001). "Twelve Step" programs for recovery from various addictions are even catching on.

Shingo Fukamachi (Fukuoka University of Education) took first place at the 2001 event with his demonstrative description of "dance movement therapy," intended mainly for mentally ill patients but recommended universally for stress relief. (Fukumachi persuaded the entire audience to give dance movement therapy a brief try ; a separate speaker led audience members in practicing "eye gymnastics" for treatment of myopia.) Akane Iwanaga (Fukuoka University) expressed regret for the human costs of Japan's headlong push for modernization, suggesting stargazing as a solution. *"We rush through life and get stressed out. The developments of science and economy have brought about material wealth in exchange for peace of mind. Why don't you look up at the night sky tonight?"*

Enabling the disabled, empowering the weak

Several speakers chose themes illustrating the dramatic improvement in Japanese attitudes, and law, regarding mentally and physically disabled people and other weaker members of society. Prejudice and discrimination against people with handicaps ran rampant during the last half of the 20th century, as the nation's single-minded focus on economic growth left them excluded from public life, and culturally ingrained attitudes often made them pariahs even in their own homes. "Physical and mental disabilities seem to arouse powerful feelings of shame across Japan, and these emotions offer a disconcerting glimpse of the way in which society here sometimes works," observed the *New York Times.* An adult man in a wheelchair recounted for the newspaper his "childhood burden more excruciating

than his crippled body and deformed hands : the gradual awareness that what his father felt for him was not love but embarrassment, that even those he lived with regarded him as a monster" (Kristof 1996).

Today, marginalization of the disabled has not suddenly disappeared, but the taboo on discussing their problems has clearly ended. Broken people are no longer being tacitly blamed for their brokenness. Awareness and acceptance of society's wounded, walking and otherwise, are gradually increasing, facilitating their inclusion within local communities and elevating their quality of life. Dividing lines that formerly confined the vulnerable to separate compartments within society are growing fainter.

Prejudice against the mentally ill was examined by Sakiko Nakahara (Fukuoka University of Education), who described a television news report of a crime involving a mentally ill suspect. *"In this incident, the cause was not clear, but the mass media reported as if all mentally ill patients were dangerous. The mass media makes people have prejudices against mental disease. It's not too much to say that the mass media reflect our opinion. ... Because citizens fear to have relations with mental disease patients and object to establish (psychiatric) hospitals in their towns, most hospitals are established in the heart of mountains and isolated from the local community."* Housing discrimination results when *"a landlord or landlady frowns at their request and assumes that they are dangerous."*

Progress is being made. A few days before this speech, Japan's transportation ministry ordered the nation's three major airlines to allow mentally disabled people to fly on their airplanes ; such people had routinely been turned away unless accompanied by medical attendants. The day after the speech, the Japanese Society of Psychiatry and Neurology adopted a new Japanese term for schizophrenia in a move to increase public understanding, replacing the term meaning "split mind disorder" with one meaning "loss of coordination disorder."

Unfortunately, isolated tragedies like the fatal knifings by a 38-year-old mental patient of eight children at an elementary school in 2001 have fueled the erroneous preconception that, in Nakahara's words, *"mentally ill people equals potential criminals."*

In a speech about hearing impairment, entitled "Throw Away Our Sympathy," Eiko Hikida (Kitakyushu University) quoted a hearing-impaired person as saying, *"'Having obstacles is surely an inconvenience, but never unhappy. It may even enrich our lives. We don't need sympathy, we just need cooperation.' I heard these words said by a disabled person, and I was very surprised and shocked."* Hikida admitted to learning Japanese sign language, which was popularized by a TV drama series, for less than altruistic reasons initially. *"To tell the truth, my motivation for learning sign language was selfish at first. I thought sign language looked cool, so I learned. That is to say, I was interested only in sign language, but not really the hearing impaired people themselves or their difficulties."*

Ayami Kanegae (Fukuoka University of Education), in a separate speech on the same topic, recounted a true story about a deaf child who could not speak. The young girl wanted to use sign language but was forbidden to do so by her mother. *"Her mother had a big prejudice against sign language. She thought using sign language was shameful."* One evening when the girl was going to bed, she used sign language to tell her mother she loved her. *"But her mother didn't know what it meant. As usual, she felt it was shameful and uncomfortable. So she scolded her daughter for using sign language. The mother's concern had been toward other people's eyes rather than understanding her own daughter."* The story had a happy ending; the mother eventually learned sign language herself. Kanegae also mentioned a newspaper article about people with a wide range of disabilities now entering various professions in Japan, as employment barriers continue to fall. *"People with disabilities have a big possibility in order to select their own future, just like people without it. So we should not regard*

them as aliens."

"Barrier-free" has become an everyday buzzword, in fact, referring to everything from wheelchair-accessible elevators in train stations, to new laws allowing helper dogs in restaurants, to more progressive policies allowing the mildly disabled to attend public schools with other children. A wider government-sanctioned movement currently gaining momentum seeks to empower disadvantaged and vulnerable people of various classes: women, foreigners, children, crime victims, the disabled, Hansen's disease patients, descendents of former social outcasts and others.

Interestingly, in Japan these anti-discrimination efforts have come to be closely associated with "human rights." During International Human Rights Week in December 2001, for instance, I received in my mailbox a ten-page illustrated booklet called "Toward Ending Discrimination," produced by the Fukuoka City Human Rights Promotion Council (Fukuoka City 2001). The remarkable booklet advised that employment applicants should not be judged according to their birthplace; it is not necessary to formally investigate the background of marriage prospects; husbands should help out with housework and fathers should talk to their children; and foreigners, elderly people, handicapped people and people with HIV should not be discriminated against.

This human rights publication, which might raise the eyebrows of American taxpayers, represents a novel twist in the long line of "moral suasion" campaigns directed by the Japanese state. (Garon, 1997, introduced the term in his study of such campaigns in prewar and postwar Japan.) A new era has dawned in Japan, where the traditional emphasis on collective responsibility is being complemented, both from above and below, by insistent calls for victim rights, patient rights, children's rights, student rights, senior rights, non-smoker rights and animal rights. Regarding consumer rights, Aya Nishihara (Seinan Gakuin University) urged a boycott of aluminum cookware due to potential health concerns: *"If consumer*

demands for alternative products increase, the companies cannot help agreeing with our expectation."

The worsening problem of child abuse was confronted by Shinsuke Katsuki (Fukuoka University). Reported cases increased an extraordinary 16-fold over the past decade, from 1,101 in 1990 (when statistics began being compiled) to 17,275 in 2000. Part of the increase stems from newfound openness to discussing child abuse and recent laws mandating reporting ; actual cases are also way up, partly due to a lack of support for isolated mothers inexperienced at child-rearing. *"Maybe when you go home after this contest,"* he ominously concluded, *"you may hear a child's cry from the next house."* Convicted child abusers, at least in the more horrific cases involving deaths, are beginning to receive prison terms instead of the previously customary suspended sentences.

Sae Fujino (Seinan Gakuin University) reported on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, an increasingly diagnosed condition linked to chronic school problems like discipline breakdown, bullying, truancy and delinquency. She noted that up to eight percent of Japanese schoolchildren may be affected by ADHD, which can also lead to low self-esteem and lifelong social adjustment difficulties. Fujino struck a confessional chord in revealing her reason for choosing the speech topic. *"To tell the truth, I wrote this speech to make an apology. In my childhood, I had a friend who had ADHD. But because of ignorance, I looked down on him as inferior. At the time, I never thought that my actions could disturb his future. Now, I'm suffering from regret too heavy to bear."*

Victims of school bullying are also receiving greater sympathy and help than in years past, when it was sometimes assumed that victims were guilty of non-conformity and thus deserving of being bullied. Tomoko Okoba (Kyushu University) recited the contents of a suicide note written by an eighth-grade student, who appeared to have psychologically bought in to this warped view of the weak as at fault.

The victim of both bullying and extortion wrote in his will, as Okoba informed the audience, "*'Please don't accuse the guys who demanded the money from me. I have only one person to blame. It is me, because I gave the money to them obediently. I should have had the courage to stop it. If I had had enough courage to refuse to give them money, this situation would have been different, wouldn't it? I'm so sorry.'*" The boy's will also expressed "*his gratitude to his family and apologies for taking money out in secret.*"

There is now greater resolve for confronting the root causes of bullying, namely "the high-pressure atmosphere of a school system that produces such behavior and a society that sanctions it as a means of social control" (Kingston 2001 ; 117). Parents of student suicide victims are filing lawsuits against the parents of bullies and schools that fail to address the problem. Regarding the suicide epidemic as a whole, Japan remains a nation in need of healing. A record 33,048 Japanese took their own lives in 1999 ; 28,332 Americans did likewise the following year, in a country with more than twice Japan's population.

Global citizenship at home

Social fragmentation is the root cause of world conflict, according to Yukiko Ito (Seinan Gakuin University). She recalled her two home stays in Canada and Australia, where both her host families were immigrants who actively retained their traditional culture in the form of food, language and home furnishings. She also described attending a multicultural party featuring various national foods and dress, an experience that highlighted the importance of cross-cultural understanding for solving problems like global hunger and ethnic wars.

Ito advocated "*world citizenship in spite of the difference of nationalities, because our real nationality is human beings. But you should not neglect your culture or traditions. The families keep appreciating their roots and adapting to*

the new country. I learned this sort of idea could be used by a family scale. Don't you think we can enlarge this idea to the world scale?"

Eating contests

"On that TV program, what I saw was an unbelievable scene. In the match, there are many hamburgers, sushi and steaks. All of them are very gorgeous food. Five players clutch the food, and then however full they are, they continue to eat such gorgeous food against their will. It seemed to me that players ate something other than food." Asako Baba (Fukuoka University) criticized Japan's popular *"ohgui"* speed-eating contests (Miyake 2002), which Baba translated literally as "big eater championships." She insightfully connected the behavior to a very different TV image of starvation in nearby North Korea.

"One day, I saw one shocking scene in a kindergarten in North Korea. There were two heavily malnourished girls sitting on chairs. The girls were very thin, with broken hair. They can't eat enough food. They can't eat anything. ... Now Japan is rich. In such a situation, we Japanese people have foolish events like big eater championships and using food in penalty games. I think this is very shameful and very sad. My audience! Please remember, food is for eating with happiness and thanks. If the North Korean children who can't eat enough foods watch the scene of people eating hamburgers, sushi and steaks against their will, how will they feel?"

Education crossroads

"My classmates and I belong to the Department of Education. We really want to be English teachers. However, the more classes we take about school education, the more anxious we are about the recent trends in principles of

education." -Ikuko Mutsuro (Fukuoka University of Education)

Based on the twin pillars of "latitude" and "comprehensive learning," Japan's new national teaching guidelines took effect in April 2002 amid a barrage of criticism. Latitude refers to an overall reduction in curriculum content of fully 30 percent, while comprehensive learning (also called "integrated learning") fosters the creativity and critical thinking skills that Japanese believe their children lack. Various catch phrases used by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MECSST) to describe the revised policies can be combined and rendered in English as "relaxed, cram-free education with latitude and room to grow." Underscoring the reality of Japanese public education as an institution in radical transition, last April also marked the completion of the fitful, phased-in move to a five-day school week. Public school students are now free on both Saturdays and Sundays.

Disparagement of the new guidelines notwithstanding, the policy background confirms that the education ministry is not needlessly tinkering with a perfectly running machine. "Relentless competition has stifled children," concluded one newspaper editorial. "It has robbed them of time to explore their interests and enjoy life, and virtually killed their individuality" (*Daily Yomiuri* 1997). School officials and the public alike noted with rising alarm that, while placing near-total emphasis on rote memorization and academic rankings did produce world-beater standardized test scores, "primary and middle schools were plagued with ever-worsening problems such as bullying and truancy. A dominant theory emerged that these problems resulted from the distortion of students' minds by the pressures of highly competitive entrance examinations for universities and colleges" (Furusawa 2002).

By the late 1990s, the term "classroom collapse" was coined to describe how entire middle school classes were becoming disrupted and unteachable due to disorderly students ; in some cases the chaos spread as far down as kindergartens.

Investigation of long-term truancy cases yielded another troubling term, "social withdrawal" syndrome. Plummeting levels of scholastic ability known as "academic collapse" began necessitating remedial education at successive rungs of the ladder. Related to this destabilized school backdrop were spiraling rates of juvenile crime, drug abuse and schoolgirl prostitution. While school administrators remained reluctant to use expulsions to deal with the unfamiliar problem of openly defiant students, violence including homicide and suicide involved students as well as teachers, who began burning out at unprecedented rates. Kinder, gentler schools certainly seemed called for.

The irony of Japan's pre-existing educational crisis, then, is that the very features of the highly regimented system that were so recently praised for its success (such as compulsory uniforms and socialization through group activities like daily cleaning) were suddenly being blamed for its breakdown. In this context, it seems reasonable that policy-makers are shifting the focus from sheer academics to character-building, broadening the scope of student life to include flexible activities like community volunteerism, and promoting the abilities to face challenges and solve problems individually. Grading system reforms also enacted last April, based on absolute rather than comparative assessment, encourage individual effort and deemphasize class rankings.

Yet Mutsuro and others opposed to the reforms are unswayed by the ministry's good intentions. *"I'm sure comprehensive learning is a very good education, if it works well. But now, nobody can correctly carry out the comprehensive learning that MECSST has in mind."* She described hearing a lack of concrete objectives during a ministry official's presentation at an educational conference, along with open dissension in the teacher ranks. *"I saw some school teachers who were bored with his talk. One such teacher said, 'It is troublesome. Why do we have to participate in this meeting?' I thought, comprehensive learning cannot be successful in the present situation. Comprehensive learning is too*

abstract and unprepared."

Regarding the "latitude" component of the new standards, mandating dilution of textbook content by 30 percent, Mutsuro predicted it will exacerbate the problem of general scholastic decline, while creating new divisions between the educational haves and have-nots. Japan's merit-based, "test-scores-open-doors" school system is proudly egalitarian, despite the crushing stress it often entails, making the prospect of such a two-tiered model very worrisome. Public schools are required to follow MECSST instructions much more closely than private schools. Indeed, since barely half of private schools have agreed to give their students every Saturday off, many will undoubtedly resist full implementation of the thinner curriculum. *"Therefore, if children want to get more academic ability, they will have to go to expensive private schools. Moreover, in order to pass the entrance exams of higher private schools, they will have to go to cram schools from an early age. This situation is unfair for students who can't afford it."*

In an acute case of unintended consequences, intensive cramming and competition is precisely what MECSST is trying to discourage. Thus, the ministry has awkwardly requested that cram schools, businesses providing supplemental lessons to millions of Japanese students, offer outdoor recreational activities on weekends. Officials have scurried to defend their reforms with slogans such as, "Let's allow families to spend more quality time together." Due to the dearth of non-school-related youth facilities, they have suggested that families should visit museums, historical spots and even ethnic restaurants together.

"Few doubt that the scholastic abilities of young Japanese, from grade school children to university students, have declined markedly," stated a professor at a leading university. "In my opinion, the problem stems from the fact that in the 1990s, traditional Japanese virtues such as perseverance, diligence and seriousness were ignored. ... Mammonism is rampant. Intelligence gets little respect" (Sawa 2002). In fact, a glorification of underachievement loosely analogous to the

Generation X phenomenon in the U.S. one decade ago can be discerned among some Japanese youth. The challenges facing Japanese society thus extend well beyond the education system, where current crises are both a cause and an effect of deeper societal readjustments. It will be neither surprising nor wholly undesirable if rote test-taking prowess deteriorates further still, for MECSST appears committed to its redirected priorities of "human formation" and "education of the heart."

Another prominent academic (and author of the bestselling Japanese book, *University Students Who Cannot Solve Fractions*), however, warned of dire future consequences unless the national curriculum is immediately rolled back to 1980s levels. Kazuo Nishimura predicted that wealthy parents will outsource their children's education by sending them overseas, while within Japan globally competitive companies will hire qualified foreigners instead of unqualified Japanese, leading to even higher unemployment and social instability. The fundamental solution, the professor argued, lies in decentralizing the education ministry's power (Moriguchi 2002). Mutsuro's defiant speech also stressed decentralization, a theme being heard more often as the vertical structure of Japanese society continues to flatten out.

AOMORI JHS CONTESTS

In 1992 and 1993, the author also served as judge at the 26th and 27th annual Shimokita Junior High School English Speech Contests in Aomori Prefecture. Students likely composed their speeches in Japanese and teachers translated them into English, but themes and content were nonetheless student-selected. The Aomori JHS speeches thus represent a resource portraying the thinking and life experiences of younger students in the ax-shaped peninsula at Honshu's northernmost tip. Some speeches yielded information unique to Shimokita, a

remote and thinly populated region where major nuclear energy facilities have been sited despite local opposition.

According to Junko Kawaguchi (Odaira JHS), *"I fear the nuclear power station in Rokkasho. If it breaks, it will be a 'silent spring' next year. The government tells us that nuclear power stations are very safe, but then why are there no nuclear power stations in Tokyo?"* Sanae Narita (Kazamaura JHS) spoke with pride of the Nebuta festival and local self-identity : *"So I am very proud, because I was born in Aomori Prefecture. I am very happy, because I am Japanese."* Another student told of accompanying her sickly 78-year-old grandmother to Osorezan, a desolate volcanic landscape which, according to folk religious tradition, is a sacred gateway to the spirit world.

"We took Grandmother to Osorezan to see an Itako. An Itako is a blind woman who can talk with spirits. We asked the Itako for a second opinion about Grandmother's condition. Then the Itako's kuchiyose ceremony started. The Itako went into a trance. She was possessed by the spirit of my dead grandfather. Grandfather said through the Itako, 'Matsu, you look OK. But you are very, very sick. You must take care of yourself!' At first, Grandmother would not go into the hospital. But because of the Itako, we now believed the doctor. And Grandmother agreed to enter Mutsu Hospital. When I go to the hospital, Grandmother sometimes says she has been to heaven. It is full of beautiful flowers. She saw a soul in heaven three times. It was like a flashing blue light. Wow! Have you ever thought about death? I hope my grandmother will live for a long time. I want her to see my wedding someday." -Sachiko Tamura (Kawauchi JHS)

Other speeches were more typical of rural locations across Japan, offering glimpses of the daily routines and world views of seventh-, eighth- and ninth-graders. Students spoke of making 1,000 paper cranes for a cancer-stricken classmate, planting rice by hand during a spring festival, eating sashimi on the

family fishing boat, practicing *shodo* and the abacus, and the importance of daily greetings at home and school. Rural depopulation is severe throughout Tohoku, but not unique to the region. According to Kumiko Yabu (Ohma JHS), *"In winter, mountains are covered with snow and half of the fishermen leave the town because there are few places to work except fishing. Now what we are worrying about is that the population of my town has been decreasing year by year."* While working as an assistant language teacher (ALT) in Shimokita from 1991-93, I regularly visited a combined elementary/junior high school with a total of 12 students in grades one through nine; the *terakoya*-like school closed in 1998. Takeshi Tanaka (Isoya JHS) described a similar school: *"There are four boys and two girls in my class. Do you feel it's a small class? No! No! It's the largest class in our school. Everyone is a hero in my class. We are all very good friends."*

Takako Toriyama (Chikagawa JHS) told of a contented student life including volleyball club and walking to school with her two best friends. However, the 30-minute walk home from school in the evenings left her exhausted, so her parents agreed to buy her a bicycle after she reached the top of her class academically. Toriyama (like more than one of the FSEA university students) made a confession in explaining why she declined her parents' offer. *"I noticed I was selfish. I didn't think about my friends. I wanted to have an easy way to go to school without thinking about them. I am ashamed of my selfish thinking. I decided to buy a bicycle next spring. Misato, Natsuru and I will start to ride bicycles next spring together."*

Other speakers described future dreams of becoming professional athletes in judo and track and field, famous television journalists, fishermen like their fathers, and even famous haiku poets like Matsuo Basho, who lived from 1643-94. Pondered Naoto Takenami (Ominato JHS): *"I have decided to be the new Basho. I want to introduce my country's customs and culture to people all over the world*

through haiku. Three hundred years later, will my spirit fly over the world?"

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the speech content analysis described in this paper was not strictly linguistic. Rather, the focus was on the social and political significance of the messages the FSEA students used English to convey. The speech contests offered bidirectional benefits. For observers, the events represented a unique window into the world views and English ability of young Japanese adults. Student participants, meanwhile, utilized the contests as a confidence-building vehicle for communicating their voice and vision in a foreign language, while engaging in social consciousness-raising. Speech contests could represent a valuable "time capsule" resource for describing chronological changes in student attitudes. That is, comparing speech content from the FSEA contests in 2002 and 1962 would yield information about the types of issues and events that became more or less important to university students. Moreover, comparing speech content from distinct geographical areas (for example, Hokkaido and Okinawa) might produce original ethnographic data about regional similarities and differences. Some speeches from the Aomori junior high school contests depicted what might be termed a Shimokita "micro-culture" or localized "sub-society."

A description of current events placed the FSEA speeches into a deeper context. "Have the Japanese changed?" asked a special New Year's Day 2001 newspaper supplement (*Daily Yomiuri* 2001). Although people everywhere are always changing, the pace and scope of transformation in Japan have been noteworthy. "The rising levels of truancy, bullying, materialism, moral laxity and delinquency among youth have spurred a national introspection, focusing on what has gone wrong" (Kingston 2001 ; 118). Pessimism and apathy, hallmarks of the much-discussed "Japanese disease," abounded throughout the 1990s. "Japan is a

relative newcomer to the club of wealthy industrial nations, yet in regard to a wide range of modern ills, it has pulled abreast of countries that have enjoyed the fruits of maturity and prosperity far longer," lamented one social commentator. "(T)he nation itself has fallen victim to the ills of an advanced industrial society almost before it had a chance to enjoy the rewards" (Sugahara 1994).

Referring to "rapid changes in the industrial and social structure (that) have given rise to social destabilization," Yamazaki considered the attitudinal effects upon Japanese youth of the collapse of the company-based lifetime employment and seniority systems, events that occurred seemingly overnight during the dramatic swing from double-digit economic growth to long-term recession. Emergency restructuring, along with general economic evolution, has entailed "the collapse of the system of transition from youth to adulthood that has functioned in Japan until now. ... Now, there is a need to rebuild a social system that supports individuals under greater burdens while also valuing their independence and responsibility" (Yamazaki 2002).

The momentous shift from a culture of excessive dependence, now well past its expiration date, to one of individual responsibility is central to this social rebuilding project. Also involved is a progression in national values and mindset : from the vertical, centralized and uniform way of thinking that produced the manufacturing-based "Japan miracle" to the horizontal, decentralized and diverse arrangements needed in the information age (Underwood 2002). Detailed prescriptions for national regeneration are the subject of intensely polarized debate, not a bad thing for any democratic society, especially since all parties agree the nation has reached a decisive turning point. In this sense, Japan's glass may be optimistically considered half-full rather than half-empty.

"Conservatives argue that stressing ethics in school, encouraging respect for national symbols and seeking inspiration from Japan's rich traditions and culture can help alleviate the anomie and alienation that plague society." While the

conservative critique of the problem does contain convincing elements, most of the right's recommendations are less likely to carry the day among average Japanese, especially youth. "Progressives tend to focus on recasting society to permit more individuality and self-fulfillment as a means of encouraging people to identify with a community that currently seems unattractive, stifling and overly demanding of self-sacrifice for reasons that appear uncompelling to increasing numbers of Japanese" (Kingston 2001 ; 118).

Japan Insight *(jin.jcic.or.jp/insight/index.html),* part of the government-affiliated Japan Information Network, provides a surprisingly candid overview of the wide-ranging social, political and economic adjustments currently being wrought, with section headings such as "Changes in Self-Image and Individual Fulfillment." Even more candid, and patiently hopeful in a manner evocative of the older Japan still coexisting within the newer, was the January 2000 report of the prime minister's blue-ribbon Commission on Japan's Goals in the Twenty-First Century. An overview of the commission's final report, "The Frontier Within : Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium," can be read online at *www.ca.emb-japan.go.jp/AboutJapan/Politics/pmcomm1.html,* or in "Rethinking Japan" *(Japan Echo 2000)*.

The commission's august members called for "fostering the spirit of self-reliance and the spirit of tolerance, neither of which has been given sufficient latitude so far." They went on to issue a bold rallying call. "We are not pessimistic over Japan's future. These are vast potentials within Japan. The main actors are individuals ; individuals will change society and the world. From this will emerge a new society and a new Japan. ... It is not realistic to accomplish our ambitious goals in one generation" *(Japan Echo 2000)*. Similarly ambitious about recreating Japan, Fukuoka's college students are in more of a hurry.

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