Motivational Language Theory and Japanese Expatriates’ Coping Strategy

ABSTRACT
This study applies Motivational Language Theory to examine how Japanese expatriates adopt various usages of speech acts to alleviate their interculturally induced stress in the host country. Qualitative data from 31 Japanese expatriates showed that the level of English proficiency is inversely related to levels of stress. Three types of coping strategies were used to overcome language and cultural barriers in the host country. These strategies comprised three speech acts. Motivational Language Theory allowed international management scholars to better understand the relationship between stress and coping in intercultural interactions between parent and host country nationals.

Keywords: International OB; Cross-cultural behavior; International human resource management; Overseas Japanese companies; Australia

Using a second language to work with others is a common practice for today’s multinational corporations (MNCs) (Chen, Geluykens & Choi 2006). Lack of language competence has been found to have undesirable organizational impacts (e.g. Lauring & Tange 2010; Peltokorpi 2010). International management scholars can use Motivational Language Theory to examine the negative consequences of cross-cultural communication in international business. Motivational Language Theory concerns managers’ communication with subordinates where the managers’ strategic communication not only alleviates the subordinates’ stress but also increases their motivational states (Sullivan 1988). Overseas Japanese companies are characterized by the aspects of multi-culture and multi-language (Okabe 2009), made evident by the intersection of parent, host and third country nationals. International management literature has shown that intercultural stress is a potential challenge in overseas Japanese companies (Okabe 2009). Despite this adverse effect, there has been little research on whether ‘language competency’ is being used as a coping strategy in these multi-culture, multi-language workplaces. Coping strategies are important as a way of allowing stressed employees to deal with difficult situations (see Dewe, O’Driscoll & Cooper 2010). However, there is little research on whether language competency is a potential coping strategy being adopted by Japanese expatriates in overseas Japanese companies. This is the main aim of the current study where Motivational Language Theory (Sullivan 1988) is being used to examine how Japanese expatriates cope with the adverse effects of working in overseas subsidiaries in Australia.

IMPACTS OF INSUFFICIENT LANGUAGE COMPETENCE
Language competence, which was once neglected by researchers (Feely & Harzing 2004), has now gained attention in international business (Maclean 2006). This is due to the undesirable impacts of insufficient language competence in MNCs (e.g. Chen et al. 2006). Henderson (2005) explains that English is a commonly used language within MNCs, and both linguistic and socio-cultural misunderstandings occur between native and non-native English speakers. This creates obstacles and causes conflicts that impair their socialization and attempts to build relations. She argues this is due to the lack of linguistic competence, and socio-cultural and socio-linguistic understanding, and differences in communication style. Harzing and Feely (2008) warn that those who have insufficient language skills are unable to participate actively in communication networks in MNCs, and consequently group boundaries are instigated. Social fragmentation is also reinforced due to language barriers, debilitating cooperation among people in organizations (Lauring & Tange 2010).

There are also adverse impacts on expatriates not equipped with sufficient host country language skills. This includes limitations in access to company information, feelings of isolation (Van den Born & Peltokorpi 2010), and poor cross-cultural adjustment (Peltokorpi 2008). Where Japanese expatriates’ English language competence is insufficient, this, together with differences in communication styles from the West, causes a bottleneck in the globalization of Japanese management (Okabe 2009). Thus, improving their English and communication skills are crucial if Japanese management overseas is to be successful (Okabe 2009).

**MOTIVATIONAL LANGUAGE THEORY, INTERCULTURAL STRESS AND COPING**

Language competence and communication skills are vital for expatriates to manage host country nationals (HCNs) successfully (Okabe 2009; Peltokorpi 2010). Sullivan (1988) states that desirable organizational outcomes are achieved with the use of strategic communication by managers. In explaining strategic communication, Sullivan (1988) proposed Motivational Language Theory, based on speech act theory (Austen 1962). He categorized manager–subordinate communication into three types of speech acts: uncertainty-reduction (perlocutionary) acts, meaning-making (locutionary) acts, and human-bonding (illocutionary) acts. Uncertainty-reduction (perlocutionary) acts reduce subordinates’ uncertainty, and include the manager clarifying information, instructions, goals, and so
Meaning-making (locutionary) acts assist subordinates in constructing mental schemas that are aligned with the culture, values, and expectations of the organization. These two types of acts enable subordinates to interpret information appropriately and work in a manner expected by organizations. Human-bonding (illocutionary) acts facilitate emotional bonding between manager and subordinates. This type of act is conveyed by showing care and concern about the well-being of subordinates, giving praise and encouragement, and so forth.

Employees experience psychological stress in intercultural workplaces when they feel uncertainty or ambiguity (Nurmi 2011). This indicates uncertainty-reduction (perlocutionary) acts should be employed to alleviate employee stress. Similarly, human bonding (illocutionary) acts are effective in easing employee stress by using empathetic expressions (Sullivan 1988). Employees need to understand expectations placed on them by their superiors, and how to meet the expectations (Katz & Kahn 1978). In particular, gaining an accurate understanding of expectations between expatriates and HCNs is arduous (Peltokorpi 2010), and misunderstanding these expectations incurs stress among employees (Katz & Kahn 1978). Meaning-making (locutionary) acts involve reconstructing a mental schema, which facilitates an understanding of managers' and companies' expectations (Sullivan 1988). Thus, meaning-making (locutionary) acts also serve to reduce employee stress.

Coping strategies are used to reduce one’s stress (Dewe et al. 2010). As successful use of the three speech acts of Motivational Language Theory assists mitigation of employee stress, application of this theory onto coping strategies in an intercultural context is logical. Examining effective coping strategies with Motivational Language Theory is thus deemed to be markedly pertinent.

Coping Strategies Types and their Effects

The well-known traditional coping strategies are divided into two categories: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g. Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Problem-focused coping strategy involves one’s efforts to tackle a stressful situation to alleviate the problem and stress. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, refers to withdrawal from the problematic situation or adapting to the problem source (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub 1989).

Aldwin (2007) proposes transformational coping, which facilitates improvement in competence, changes in values and perspectives, as well as development of personal growth and
wisdom. Successful transformational coping requires cognitive reframing (Aldwin 2007), and the cognitive reframing is triggered by experiencing uncertainty (Acredolo & O’Connor 1991).

In relation to the effects of coping strategies, problem-focused coping strategies are commonly acknowledged as being more effective in reducing stress than emotion-focused coping strategies (Latack 1986). Contradictory findings, however, were revealed by studies in the case of intercultural contexts (e.g. Schreuder et al. 2012; Stahl & Caligiuri 2005). Cultural influence is recognized as the reason for the contradictory findings (Schreuder et al. 20012 Stahl & Caligiuri 2005). In particular, coping strategy effects on people in a collective culture, for instance, Japanese employees, differ from the effects on people in an individualistic culture (Ohbuchi & Atsumi 2010).

In contrast to cultural issues, language issues have never been raised in coping studies in an intercultural context to the best knowledge of the researchers—this is despite the fact that the negative impacts of insufficient language competence on international management are confirmed (e.g. Lauring & Tange 2010; Peltokorpi 2010).

Peltokorpi (2010) decries the fact that studies on international management focus on cultural issues or language issues, but hardly ever on both. He strongly argues for the need for a simultaneous focus on both cultural and language issues. In particular, the English competence of Japanese expatriates is insufficient, and the language issue impedes successful management of overseas Japanese companies (Okabe 2009). Taking into account both cultural and language issues is thus vital when exploring coping strategies of Japanese expatriates.

Studies on coping strategies should expand our understanding of what constitutes coping thoughts and actions (Dewe et al. 2010: 149). The three speech acts of Motivational Language Theory offer a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes communication between managers and subordinates (Sullivan 1988). Motivational Language Theory predicts stress reduction and an enhancement of employees’ motivational states (Sullivan 1988). Employing Motivational Language Theory is thus pertinent to expand understanding on effective coping strategies. The following question is set for the current study.
Research Question: Are there any effective coping strategies that involve language and cultural issues perceived by Japanese expatriates in Japanese companies in Australia? If so, what are they? How are they used? Why are they perceived as effective?

METHOD

The current study's inquiries are inductive and involve ‘how’ and ‘why’ certain coping strategies are utilized. Language competence has never been taken into consideration in coping research. Thus, utilization of predetermined categories commonly used in quantitative studies (Patton 1990) is inappropriate for this study. The qualitative approach is exploratory, allowing the uncovering of new information (Merriam 1988); I thus adopted the qualitative approach. Multiple sources were utilized for data collection, including semi-structured in-depth interviews, field notes, documentation, observation, and archive records. Interviews were conducted with 31 Japanese expatriates from Japanese companies in Australia. Informants are from various industries including finance, trading, manufacturing, and tourism. The author initially posted letters written in Japanese introducing the author, explaining the research, and requesting participation in the study. The author followed this with the snowball approach, where the initial informants introduced their colleagues and/or friends from other Japanese companies. Informants were also found from the author’s network. Interviews were conducted at the informants' workplace and were recorded. Interview durations varied from 45 to 120 minutes. Following a claim by Marschan-Piekkari and Reis (2004) that using the native language of the informants increases the validity and trustworthiness of data, all interviews were conducted in Japanese.

Processing raw data amplifies the validity of study (Anderson & Skaates 2004). Qualitative data analysis software, NVivo (Qualitative Solutions & Research Pty Ltd.) was selected for the current study as it allows the analysis of raw data. Coding was carefully conducted based on existing theories, coping strategies and Motivational Language Theory. Themes were derived through recoding and linking data. For the purpose of verification of the findings, counting the number of phenomena is a powerful persuasive method (Miles & Huberman 1994). I thus adopted this method.

FINDINGS
The data analysis led to identification of three themes. These are: 1) communication, 2) hiring bicultural staff, and 3) indirect active strategy. Table 1 below lists summaries of these themes.

The first theme, communication, involves Japanese expatriates’ efforts to overcome language and cultural barriers, as well as differences in communication style and work culture. Nearly 50 percent of the Japanese expatriates who participated in the study expressed the opinion that good communication is vital for the establishment of good relations in companies, and they should therefore endeavor to improve their communication skills, especially with host country nationals (HCNs).

Overcoming language barriers is closely related to a lack of English competence in Japanese expatriates. Approximately 55 percent of Japanese expatriates admitted that their English language competence was insufficient to communicate with HCNs. In relation to communication style, approximately 40 percent of Japanese expatriates expressed their awareness that using the indirect style of Japanese communication impedes mutual understanding when communicating with HCNs. Thus, they need to increase their skill to be able to communicate with each other in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner. Moreover, differences in the work culture of Japanese companies means Japanese expatriates need to explain how and why certain things work in the companies. Thus, making an effort to increase clarity is vital. Japanese expatriates consciously offer explicit and comprehensive instructions and explanations in order to enhance the HCNs' understanding.

The second theme is hiring bicultural staff. This refers to HCNs who are familiar with Japanese people, culture, communication style, and/or have a good command of both the English and Japanese languages. Approximately one in every four Japanese expatriates explicitly stressed that they prefer hiring these bicultural staff for their companies. This is because they tend to not only understand the Japanese way of thinking and working at the workplace, but are also more likely to accept the Japanese way of doing things. They are somewhat ‘Japanized’, sharing the Japanese perception of work, and yet they also understand the Australian way of doing things, with which Japanese expatriates are unfamiliar. Japanese expatriates found it far easier to build a comfortable work relationship with these bicultural staff compared with other HCNs.
The preference and tendency to hire bicultural staff is illustrated by the fact that all the companies participating in the current study had some non-Japanese and/or locally hired Japanese employees possessing the characteristics of bicultural staff.

The third theme, indirect active coping, refers to Japanese expatriates taking action without getting directly involved in the situation. In other words, Japanese expatriates would ask a non-Japanese HCN or a locally hired Japanese staff member to talk to non-Japanese HCNs on their behalf. For instance, when an issue arises about which Japanese expatriates need to caution or instruct a non-Japanese HCN, or pass a remark on, Japanese expatriates request locally hired host country managers to do so as an intermediary. These intermediaries were able to do this task more effectively than the Japanese expatriates could.

This strategy frees Japanese expatriates from experiencing stress and worrying about potential problems or misunderstandings occurring due to their lack of communication skills, English competence, and understanding about the host country culture. The strategy also allows them to avoid incurring potential damage to relationships with HCNs. Japanese expatriates at senior management level were particularly convinced about the significance of the strategy.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Three types of themes were found to be related to coping strategies perceived as effective by Japanese expatriates. Communication strategy was consciously employed to overcome challenges, including language and cultural barriers, and differences in communication style. Hiring bicultural staff was practiced to remedy these challenges by employing individuals who are conversant with the culture, workplace, communication style, and/or languages of both host and parent country. Similarly, in indirect active coping, HCNs played the role of intermediary to give instructions, or pass on a comment or a caution to another non-Japanese HCN on behalf of the Japanese expatriates. The two types of coping, hiring bicultural staff and indirect active coping, involve active utilisation of locally hired HCNs as a resource to improve the situation or avoid potential future problems. We thus term them human resource strategy. Cultural influence is acknowledged in coping research (Aldwin 2007; Ohbuchi & Atsumi 2010; Yeh & Liou 2012), while language competence issues, on the other hand,
are overlooked. The results suggest lack of language competence as well as differences in culture and communication style are related to effective coping strategy.

**Speech Acts Enactment in Coping Strategies**

In communication strategy, Japanese expatriates are required to make efforts to assist non-Japanese HCNs to understand Japanese companies. They thus need to explain how things work in Japanese companies and why in a manner that non-Japanese HCNs can easily understand. This strategy refers to a reconstruction of the mental schema and corresponds to one of the speech acts, meaning-making (locutionary) acts, in Motivational Language Theory (Sullivan 1988). Japanese expatriates also need to be clearer in their articulation in order to reduce any ambiguity and uncertainty from the perspective of non-Japanese HCNs. The strategy thus denotes uncertainty-reducing (perlocutionary) acts (Sullivan 1988).

Unlike the communication strategy above, Japanese expatriates are able to relieve themselves of some of the effort in the two speech acts, meaning-making (locutionary) and uncertainty-reducing (perlocutionary) acts, in communications with bicultural HCNs. Bicultural HCNs’ understanding of the culture, work practice, and/or languages enable them to more easily understand what Japanese expatriates intend to say. Similarly, in indirect acting coping, Japanese expatriates are spared the need to make an effort in meaning-making (locutionary) and uncertainty-reducing (perlocutionary) acts to communicate with non-Japanese HCNs. This is because intermediaries (non-Japanese or Japanese HCNs) are entrusted to do this task instead. The results hence show that human resource strategy (hiring bicultural staff and indirect active coping) assists Japanese expatriates enacting meaning-making (locutionary) and uncertainty-reducing (perlocutionary) acts where HCNs play a vicarious role of carrying out the speech acts. This also suggests the strategy is able to compensate for Japanese expatriates’ insufficiency in language competence and cultural understanding. Motivational Language Theory presumes communication between manager and subordinates is conducted directly and categorizes managers’ communication into three types of speech acts (Sullivan 1988). The current study, however, reveals expatriate managers are able to enact the speech acts successfully without direct communication with their subordinates, as well as without sufficient knowledge and understanding of the language, culture, and communication style of the host country.
Levels of Speech Acts' Involvement in Coping Strategies

The findings reveal each coping strategy identified in the current study is composed of two speech acts, meaning-making (locutionary) acts and uncertainty-reducing (perlocutionary) acts. The findings also show good communication is a vital tool for building good relations with HCNs, and communication strategy was perceived as effective for this purpose. This indicates that the two speech acts, meaning-making (locutionary) acts and uncertainty-reducing (perlocutionary) acts, assist in the establishment of good relationships between Japanese expatriates and HCNs.

The findings suggest human resource strategy (hiring bicultural staff and indirect active coping) plays a vicarious role of Japanese expatriates practicing meaning-making (locutionary) acts and uncertainty-reducing (perlocutionary) acts, suggesting that the strategy is also composed of the two speech acts. Hiring bicultural staff enables Japanese expatriates to build comfortable work relationships with bicultural HCNs far easier than with non-bicultural HCNs. Indirect active coping allows Japanese expatriates to pursue their intentions without direct confrontation with non-Japanese HCNs, assisting them to avoid experiencing potential misunderstanding, stress, and harm in their relationships with HCNs. This suggests both coping strategies found in our study assist in enhancing relationships between Japanese expatriates and HCNs. Human bonding (illocutionary) acts of Motivational Language Theory refers to promotion of positive relations between managers and subordinates (Sullivan 1988). Thus, the findings indicate that communication strategy and human resource strategy involve three types of speech acts where uncertainty reduction and meaning making acts are the primary speech acts and the involvement of human-bonding (illocutionary) acts are the secondary acts, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

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Insert Figure 1 Here

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Motivational Language Theory lists three types of speech acts; interrelations among them are not discussed. The current study suggests that perceived effective coping strategies that connect with language and culture involve all three types of speech acts. These speech acts are interrelated to one another with differing degrees of involvement.

Coping Strategies and Personal Growth
Uncertainty spawns reflection, which leads individuals to reconstruct their own perceptions (Acredolo & O’Connor 1991), and provides an opportunity to reframe an individual’s mental schema (Aldwin 2007). This cognitive reframing engenders personal growth and development of wisdom, and a coping strategy that induces cognitive reframing is vital should the coping be effective (Aldwin 2007).

The findings reveal all coping strategy types identified in our study involve uncertainty-reduction (perlocutionary) acts. Communication strategy refers to direct interaction between Japanese expatriates and HCNs where Japanese expatriates need to make efforts to reduce the uncertainty of HCNs. Simultaneously, the intent is to increase HCNs’ understanding about how things work in Japanese companies. In this process, Japanese expatriates need to reflect on the situation, including how they can increase clarity and what they need to understand about the culture and workplace of the host country. HCNs also need to consider expanding their understanding and absorbing new information. This indicates that communication strategy induces reflection among HCNs as well as Japanese expatriates.

Contrary to the communication strategy, hiring bicultural staff enables Japanese expatriates to reduce the level of effort they need to make in interacting with HCNs staff at work. This is because the hiring biculturals strategy allows Japanese expatriates to communicate with bicultural staff. Similarly, Japanese expatriates are spared having to make the effort to take part in indirect active coping as the task is delegated to another HCN. The findings thus indicate that human resource strategy (hiring bicultural staff and indirect active coping) does not incite the same level of reflection among Japanese expatriates as is found with the communication strategy. Reflection leads to reconstruction of the mental schema, which refers to meaning-making (locutionary) acts (Sullivan 1988). Reframing one’s mental schema increases knowledge and skills, as well as generating personal growth and wisdom over time; its effects are long-term as opposed to short-term (Aldwin 2007). The results thus suggest that communication strategy is effective, especially from a long-term perspective where it facilitates increased knowledge, skills, and development of personal growth and wisdom over time. Alternatively, human resource strategy is a quick and easy-fix approach, which does not induce the same effects as communication strategy does. It is effective from a short-term perspective.
CONCLUSION

The present study is carried out in pursuit of revealing coping strategies that involve language competence and understanding of culture in coping strategies perceived as effective by Japanese expatriates in Australia. My study expands understanding on effective coping strategies of expatriates in MNCs where English is used as a second language in their overseas assignments. Language issues have been neglected in research on coping. I, however, reveal language competence, together with understanding about culture and communication style, intersect with effective coping strategies. Hence, we strongly suggest these three issues should be taken into account as an important component influencing coping strategies in MNCs.

Analysis on coping strategy with Motivational Language Theory enriches understanding of the constituents of effective coping strategy and contributes to the literature on both coping strategies and Motivational Language Theory. The current study reveals effective coping strategies involve three types of speech acts, namely, uncertainty-reduction (perlocutionary) acts, meaning-making (locutionary) acts, and human-bonding (illocutionary) acts. The theory enlists three types of speech acts, but it does not explain how these speech acts are related to each other. My study, however, uncovers the relationships. That is to say, effective coping strategies primarily involve uncertainty-reduction (perlocutionary) acts and meaning-making (locutionary) acts, and the two speech acts assist in promoting human-bonding (illocutionary) acts.

The current study also reveals analysis with Motivational Language Theory indicates what coping strategies have long-term and/or short-term effects. Coping strategy that involves reframing the mental schema is effective as it amplifies knowledge and skills, as well as developing personal growth over time (Aldwin 2007). Reframing the mental schema refers to meaning-making (locutionary) acts (Sullivan 1988) and is an outcome of reflection, which is triggered by uncertainty (Acredolo & O’Connor 1991). Uncertainty-reduction (perlocutionary) acts are effective in reducing uncertainty (Sullivan 1988). My study thus suggests coping strategies that involve the two speech acts have the long-term effect of personal development.

Managerial Implications
Management of overseas Japanese companies needs to be particularly mindful about planning what should be included in training for offshore assignments. Including just language or just cultural training is insufficient. As suggested by the present study, understanding of and competence in language, culture, and communication style should be considered as one component of the training. This will increase utilization of communication strategy, which will result in encouraging personal growth.

Limitation

This present study’s findings are obtained from Japanese companies located in an English-speaking country, Australia. In cases where the host country is not an English-speaking country and both expatriates and HCNs are partially bilingual, the same findings may not be obtained. Moreover, coping strategies that are not identified in our study may be adopted between them.

Future Research Implications

Taking into consideration the limitation described above, I suggest conducting a similar study on coping strategies used by expatriates in a non-English-speaking country where both expatriates and HCNs are partially bilingual, for instance, Japanese expatriates located in Europe or Nordic countries. For the purpose of finding generalizability of the current study, the study could be replicated in other English-speaking countries, such as in Japanese companies in Canada or the United States.

In conclusion, my study demonstrates that analysis of Motivational Language Theory's speech acts enriches understanding about coping strategies in relation to stress in intercultural interaction between parent and host country nationals. In particular, I identify that the theory allows prediction of whether coping strategies will incur positive effects from a long-term perspective. The application of this theory might offer a vital key to explain inconclusive results of effective coping strategies found in an intercultural context.
REFERENCES


Table 1: Themes of Coping Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Name</th>
<th>Comments Which Represent Theme</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>There are so many cases where things don’t go smoothly. This is because our instruction [to HCN] is bad, I mean, we don’t explain things to them properly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Bicultural Staff</td>
<td>Because they [bicultural HCN] know what the Japanese don’t want to do, and they know that some issues will not proceed without doing certain things, so they don’t insist on their own preferred ways. Yeah, so in a sense, they accommodate us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Active Coping</td>
<td>Well, I didn’t tell her [non-Japanese HCS] [about the mistake she made] in person. I told other (non-Japanese host county) staff holding a similar position with her to tell her that she must investigate about the problem [caused by her mistake] right now.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Speech Acts of Effective Coping Strategies
Motivational Language Theory and Japanese Expatriates’ Coping Strategy

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