Interpersonal communication on the Japanese concept “Ma”

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Abstract: “Ma” is a Japanese word that contains very rich meanings. It is used commonly to refer space, time, and things in between by Japanese. The mutual understanding and agreement of such concept by group individuals is a key to sustain social harmonics. In the past, this concept is primarily discussed in literature/humanity fields, and little in scientific and engineering communities. In this presentation, I will try to offer a few examples (e.g. music appreciation of silence, Japanese comic story-telling, Rakugo) to demonstrate that it is possible to use an interdisciplinary approach to investigate the concept of “Ma” scientifically. Furthermore, this may provide a starting point for designers and engineers to device into the interpersonal communication on other abstract concepts.

Keywords: Interpersonal communication, Ma, Silence in music, Japanese comic story-telling

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Interpersonal Communication on Abstract Concepts

Social communication represents a core difference between machine and human interaction, and a grasp of its behavioral and neuro-scientific characteristics is a critical step for industrial application and scientific development. Numerous studies have been conducted to examine how we utilize natural languages and non-verbal cues in daily communications, but there is relatively little knowledge about how we communicate on abstract concepts although we make important decisions based mutual agreement on them a lot (e.g. fairness, aesthetics, and safety).

In literature, the most well-examined dimension is probably emotion recognition embedded in artistical performance [1] because many believe that emotional effects are the reason why people engage in these activities. The accumulated results so far however are still far from a converged conclusion agreed across studies. This confusing and sometimes inconsistent results come primarily because of lack of consistent adoption of emotional models, stimuli, and research approaches. In other words, while most research suggests a connection between emotion induction and contagion between emotion and artistic performance, it is not well established how to characterize these connections.

1.2. Interdisciplinary Dialogues on Ma

How about other abstract concepts communicated interpersonally?

We approached this broad yet important research endeavor by examining a Japanese concept called Ma (間). Usually referring as space, gap, or void, Ma (間) is a very important concept in Japanese culture well presented in arts (e.g. music, dance, Rakugo), in architecture (e.g. Japanese garden design, Noh theater), in martial arts (e.g. Aikido), in commercial use (e.g. advertisement, word use), and in social connotation (e.g. personal distance) [2]. Almost without exception, every Japanese seems to have an internal criterion to judge whether the placement of Ma appears appropriate or proper. However, it is unknown whether the seemingly consistent appreciation and understanding of Ma in these diverse situations among Japanese is really agreeable and whether it is carried out with identical brain representations under the same neurophysiological mechanisms.

In a series of talks and workshops between Feb 8–12, 2018, we first attempt to tackle this research endeavor by bringing in artists, scholars and scientists for a dialogue on Ma (間) in their respective practices at Tohoku University. “An Interdisciplinary Dialogue around Ma (間)” was sponsored and held at Research Institute of Electrical Communication. Contributions include twelve seminar talks, four workshops, and one public Rakugo (classic Japanese story-telling) performance. The scope of these contributions demonstrated how widely “Ma” is applied in our daily life.

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This paper uses two examples more relevant to acoustic communication in the next sections to provide a more detailed account of how cross-disciplinary dialogues can take place around the central research topic.

2. SILENCE IN MUSIC

By very rough generalization, we can divide music into two types according to how we appreciate the sound that composes it. One is that we focus mainly on the attack of the sound, and the organization of the attacks would form a musical phrase. The other is that we expect to hear the whole process of the happening of the sound. The latter is a very important aspect of music appreciation in Eastern music tradition, especially the literati music in China, Japan and Korea.

2.1. Silence in Eastern Cultural Music

Take Chinese Guqin music as an example, excerpts from works such as “Wild Geese Descending on the Sandbank (平沙落雁),” “Flowing Spring On the Rock (石上流泉),” “Water and Cloud on the Xiaoxiang River (瀟湘水雲)” are able to make good demonstrations. The aesthetics of this type of music is not for the melody or rhythm, but the awareness of the tone quality change of the sound envelope, which includes the tone color of the attack, and the decrease of volume after that. Moreover, sometimes the music would take even longer time after the sound has completely died in volume and not go on to the next sound. That is because although the sound has physically finished, the audience still need time to hear it in their heads [3]. In the poem “Ode to a Lady’s Pipa Play” by Bai Juyi, there is a renowned verse translated as follows:

“…Cold and jolted, it came to a halt.
Muted was the music, yet gloomy was the stillness that had begun to regret manifest.
Right then, no sound could compete with what such a resounding silence could carry.”

In Japanese Noh music, which dated back to the 11th century, has been selected to demonstrate the musical effect of silence in past literature. For example, the intense silence preceding a sound was thought to be more than a technically definable relationship, but rather, a balance state to rest the confrontation between sound and silence (i.e. “Ma”) [4]. In other words, although in Noh music, the sound itself already has its complexity and integrity for sensitive appreciation, it is not complete without the existence of silence standing up to it. As Toru Takemitsu wrote in his book Confronting Silence:

“…, this ma, this powerful silence, is that which gives life to the sound and removes it from its position of primacy. So it is that sound, confronting the silence of ma, yields supremacy in the final expression.” [5]

Of course, one can also find examples of silence in the first type of music mentioned above. The difference is that, the function of silence in the first type is usually a natural breath between musical phrases, or a dramatic suspension in order to create more significance for the next entrance (the opening of Beethoven’s fifth, for example).

When there is less information or less stimulation from outside, it requires more to be provided from inside. To be able to appreciate the silence in the second type of music, one not only needs to have sensitive ears, but also focused and quiet heart. Also, one needs to be rich in life experience to imagine and reflect oneself during the silence.

The concept and aesthetic of silence from Eastern cultures also influenced many Western avant-garde composers in the mid-twentieth century. John Cage and his contradictory 4’33” (1952) are perhaps the most frequently-acknowledged examples. Being revolutionary at that time, John Cage’s idea was to turn audience’s attention to the happenings when there was no sound made by the musicians. When the stage was silent, people would open their perceptions to their surroundings, or even the sound coming from their bodies, which was no less beautiful nor less meaningful than musical sounds. As John Cage wrote in his book Silence: Lectures and Writings:

“There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.” [6]

2.2. Joint Percussion Improvisation Workshop

To provide an experiential basis, a 3-hr workshop on Joint Music Improvisation with percussion was conducted. In this workshop, it stresses more on the interpersonal interaction triggered by sound than by silence as the participants were mostly novices and more familiar to experience music from the sounds. Only a few participants were musically trained, and the rest were from other unrelated fields. After a few warm-up sessions, all the participants were asked to form a circle and pick a percussion instrument by their own choices. The improvisation was completely free, except the sound that one chose to make should be a response to what one heard from the group, instead of random note-hitting. The outcome was quite harmonious, in which we could find people with similar instruments grouped themselves as a section playing certain patterns, or the whole group making build-up and build-down in unison. All this was done without prior design or verbal communication.

There were also moments when the music stopped and silence occurred. For the first run, it was the end of the piece for no one hit another note after that; however, for the second run, a new section started after the silence. The silence was perceived differently by the participants. Some
found it natural and smooth, while some felt uneasy during the waiting. Of course this can be contributed to the diverse background and experiences of the participants. After the workshop, a guided ‘retour d’expérience’ was conducted to help participants to sort their first-hand experience into possible research questions.

2.3. Silence: Too Absent to Ignore

In verbal communication, silence in literature is reported to be the most effective means of communication. It speaks with no sounds, grows with no substance, pains with no physical contact, manifests and conceals although it does not have any physical energy to be traced. It creates psychological phenomenon such as anxiety, suspicion, rejection, agitation, and isolation despite its lack of sound [7]. Silence in music might also exert similar functions although the scientific understanding is still at its infancy. It will be an interesting research endeavor to go beyond the descriptive and subjective interpretation and conduct systematically investigation to clarify the functional role of silence in acoustic communication.

3. “MA” IN RAKUGO (落語)

Rakugo is a historical form of Japanese comic storytelling dated from the end of seventeenth century. It was developed by Buddhist priests to instruct moral and cultural values to common people who were mostlyiterate during that period. It usually ends with a punch line that made people laugh, and it has evolved to become a popular entertainment in time. To date, about three hundred popular stories are still performed as classic rakugo, and new stories are created by living rakugo artists. One interesting phenomenon is the effect of punch line continues to work even when the rakugo enthusiasts have already heard of the same stories many times and known exactly what is coming up. Such “kusuguri” (jabs of laughters) continues to be a study focus of humor in Japanese interpersonal communication [8]. In recent years, the performance of rakugo has extended to foreign language performances, and the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural interpretation and understanding have enriched this classic art. We invited an English Rakugo performance artist, Sunshine Katsura, to present a live show on February 8 as an opening warm-up of “An Interdisciplinary Dialogue around Ma (間)” in 2018. As a Classics major and a play writer, he revealed a different dimension of Ma presented in this classical tradition of performance.

3.1. Different Types of “Ma” in Rakugo

There are many dimensions of Ma exhibited in a rakugo performance, and here are some examples.

(1) The temporal Ma: The timing of words is quite explicitly a part of the craft and skill in comic storytelling. The most noticeable use is the pauses between storytelling, particularly the timing to deliver the punch line. The pause and the emotional intensity built up before the final punch line was a demonstration of the mastery of a performer.

(2) The spatial Ma: Rakugo is also termed “sit-down” comedy in Japan as the performer, unlike the “stand-up” comedy in the western entertainment, has to sit on a cushion during the whole performance. With the constraints of the physical movement, the performer instead utilizes other techniques to extend the space by their body gesture or props (e.g. fan, handkerchief) to create an imaginary space.

(3) The social Ma: The most interesting, by far the most effective one, is the social distance between the performer and the audience. Unlike artistic shows reserved for selected groups, rakugo is the artistic entertainment for everyone. Therefore, the storytellers usually try to shorten the distance between themselves and the audience by self-deprecating jokes (lower the social status of the story-tellers), or by flattering statements to the audience (arise the social status of the viewers), or both.

(4) The cultural Ma: when a rakugo is performed in a foreign language other than Japanese, additional cultural consideration is added to the weight. There are several possible layers of cultural gaps: the storyteller’s cultural background to the origin of the story, the storytellers’ cultural distance from the audience’s origin, the audience’s cultural origin and the story’s origin. This cultural triangle requires to be well-handled to create boundary-free connection in the performance.

3.2. Challenges behind a Live Performance

In a comic performance like rakugo, the biggest tragedy happens when no one laughs. While humor theories are invested in request of the reason to make things funny, to date, there is no formula that guarantees to work for everyone at any time. In other words, there are fluid factors that all live performers agree on that determine the final success of a show. For many, “audience connection” matters greatly from the beginning of a show.

While “audience connection” sounds abstract, it can be seen as one type of interpersonal communication with a demanding pre-defined relationship: one side is to make the other laugh. A skillful master usually spends the warm-up sessions to study and analyze the audience before the real story is delivered. This opening session plays a critical role to bring the audience into the “zone” and prepares them to be entertained afterwards. In other words, the audience and the artist performer need to be agree on the most adequate expression of Ma at that particular moment at that
particular location. It is a dynamic interchange and negotiation. How to quickly assess the respondents’ reactions and act accordingly is a challenge for any live performance including rakugo performers.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this paper, we summarize an initial attempt to incorporate the Japanese concept of “Ma” as a venue for scientists to further examine about how abstract concepts are communicated among individuals. We have explored the concept of Ma from various directions, with two examples relevant to acoustic communication introduced here: the silence of music and the live performing Japanese comic story-telling. They both provide accessible materials which are culturally-relevant and communicative.

Recently, scientific efforts have been invested into development of measureable and quantifiable tools on abstract concepts such as Ma. It is now possible to combine psychophysical methods, behavioral observations, brain-wave recordings, machine learning, and computational modeling to approach this subject which was previously investigated mainly in descriptive and subjective manners (e.g. [9]). We want to suggest that there may be one underlying mechanism that contributes and determines our appreciation and understanding of the concept of Ma. This may be a good stepping stone that provides the first glance of how human beings communicate with each other on abstract concepts that form social norms, values, and systems.

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