

# Dealing with Contradiction in a Communicative Context: A cross-cultural study

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Communication provides an access to a huge amount of information. By communication one may largely surpass the knowledge individually acquired by benefiting from the knowledge acquired by others. However, communication entails a risk of manipulation. Our speaker may want us to act in such way that will satisfy his desires. In particular, he may voluntarily provide us with misleading information that will lead us to behave in way that will be beneficial to him. Dealing with communicated information involves thus the adaptive problem of dealing with a significant amount of false information. Evolutionary approaches to communication (Krebs and Dawkins, 1984; Sperber, 2001) suggest that we should be equipped with cognitive mechanisms designed to protect us against manipulation attempts. According to these approaches, one may expect that socially acquired knowledge will be granted with a smaller degree of credence than individually acquired knowledge especially if these two types of knowledge diverge. In other words, when an addressee receives a communicated piece of information that contradicts with her own beliefs, she is unlikely to take it into account to revise her initial set of beliefs.

However, cross-cultural psychologists have argued that the way people deal with contradictions may largely depend on folk conceptions about the nature of the world and may thus differ according to the culture in which these conceptions have emerged. According to Nisbett and his collaborators, East Asians (Chinese, Japanese and Koreans) rely on a *holistic* view of the world which is defined as an orientation towards the relation between the part and the whole. The holistic view involves *dialectical* thought processes that lead to accept contradictions (meaning that truth can be found in two contradictory propositions) and to search for a “middle way” between competing viewpoints. In contrast, westerners are supposed to rely on *analytic* thought which involves the tendency to decontextualize the form from the content and to focus on the rules of formal logic. According to analytic thought contradictions are not acceptable: if two viewpoints are contradictory, it follows that one is true and the other is false.

In this study, we present an empirical work that compares the way French and Japanese students deal with a communicative piece of information that contradicts with their own perspective. According to the evolutionary standpoint, participants from both populations should show the same bias towards their own view. According to the culturalist approach, Japanese should be more inclined to take

into account the opposite viewpoint and should show a less pronounced bias towards their own view than French.

In Experiment 1 participants had to read a small scenario in which they had imagine themselves as adopting a particular stance on the way of carrying out a particular activity ‘A’ for which they are assumed to be quite experienced in. More specifically, they had to hold the view that a possibility P1 is better than a possibility P2 to achieve A. Then participants had to imagine that they encounter another person who is also relatively experienced in activity A but that person claims that it is the possibility P2 that is more appropriate to achieve A.. Participants are therefore confronted with a view that is at stark contrast with their own and are then asked whether they would adopt P1 or P2 in the future. Here is how the “salesperson” scenario was framed:

*You are a salesperson working in Brittany [In the Japanese version: an area of Japan]. You make the trip between Brest and Quimper [two Japanese cities in this area] very often. There are two possible routes, one that passes through Landrieu and the other through Guersac. You think that the route that passes through Landrieu is much faster than the one that passes through Guersac.*

*In a roadside restaurant, you meet another person who is also a salesperson. She/he works in the same district and also makes the trip between Brest and Quimper very often. You are coming to discuss the two possible routes and she/he is telling you: “I think that the route that passes through Guersac is much faster than the one that passes through Landrieu.”*

*In the future which route will you choose to make the trip between Brest and Quimper as fast as possible? The one that passes through:*

*Landrieu                      Guersac*

In this Experiment, the results indicate that participants of both populations show the same tendency to answer in a way that favoured the view they had to hold. One can however object that a forced choice procedure may incite participants to polarise their answers and may not provide the best method to elicit fine-grained differences between the two populations. In the second Experiment, we used the same scenarios but participants were offered the possibility to provide their answer on scales. For the salesperson scenario, the two scales were the followings:

*The route that passes through Landrieu is the fastest*  
*Never*

*Always*

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

*The route that passes through Guersac is the fastest*  
*Never*

*Always*

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

As for Experiment 1, the results reveal that participants of both populations did not show any significant difference and both exhibited the same bias towards to their own perspective. These results are in line with the evolutionary hypothesis and seem to indicate that when people are directly involved in a situation of communication they largely favour their point of view whatever the cultural context in which they are embedded.