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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 室蘭工業大学 公開日: 2020-03-23 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): Food, Culture, Communicative style, Cultural style 作成者: クラウゼ小野, マルギット メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10258/00010175">http://hdl.handle.net/10258/00010175</a>

# German Japanese Cultural Comparison of Breakfast Scenes in Films

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(Received 8<sup>th</sup> July 2019, Accepted 20<sup>th</sup> February 2020)

## Abstract

By comparing excerpts from the Japanese TV film 'Yuube no Curry, Ashita no Pan' and from the German TV film 'Die Freundin meiner Mutter', the meaning of breakfast for the respective cultures was worked out. A major goal is to illustrate the cultural background for the respective type of breakfast using frequently stated values or focal points of German or Japanese culture and thus to locate the relevance of such values in everyday life.

Keywords: Food, Culture, Communicative style, Cultural style

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Food plays an outstanding role in everyday communication, as Wierlacher (2013) has illustrated based on the three circles of culinary studies and hospitality developed by him. For these studies he also coined the term 'Kulinaristik'. In the second circle of this Wierlacher model it becomes clear that food in every culture is associated with signs, symbols, norms, rules and ways of speaking. In many cultures, food, its preparation, and consumption convey numerous messages which are often expressed both extra-verbally and non-verbally. Although Mehrabian (1972) already showed that this non-verbal part is very important in overall communication, it is rarely considered in the scientific analysis of everyday meals, especially breakfast. The respective cultural styles associated with this are rarely examined in this context (Wierlacher, 2018). The same applies to the aspect of time in communication, which, as Hall (1976) has already clearly pointed out, is of paramount importance in overall communication.

There are numerous detailed descriptions of meals, including breakfast, in literature. Just think of Thomas Mann's 'Die Buddenbrooks' or Heinrich Böll's 'Billiard um Halb zehn'. In both works the exact description of the breakfast scene is of great importance for the plot of the story.

However, the normal everyday breakfast is still rarely examined from an intercultural perspective (Wierlacher, 2018). The preparation and consumption of food are a total social phenomenon, as Mauss postulated as early as 1923, and carry all relevant aspects of the respective culture within these actions.

In this study, to return to Mehrabian (1972), the extra-verbal and non-verbal aspects of breakfast preparations in

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two films will be examined, since they reveal much about the actual communicative and cultural styles of the respective cultures and societies. Although it seems problematic to equate cultures with nations as in this comparison, this procedure is still common practice and appears to many as "the best of all bad solutions" (Bolten 1999, p.13).

All cultures are based on common values, and some of them are universal. The difference is that each culture emphasizes these values differently. Usually a certain range of values is predominant, as well as several acceptable and unacceptable verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Every culture has its glasses through which the world is seen (Moosmüller, 1997). This does not mean that people have no choice in their behaviour or expression. It rather means that these cultural frameworks are set by the members of a culture, mostly based on their cultural and collective memory (Assmann, 1992). These frameworks represent a link between an individual member of a certain culture and all its members. There may be aspects that overlap with those of other cultures, but a dominant communicative style still constitutes every culture (Galtung, 1985).

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 German culture and its communicative style

Stereotypes about German behaviour and the German style of communication have always existed, as for other cultures too. E. T. Hall (1959, 1985) and M. Hall (1985) were the first scientists to document German cultural characteristics in their research on the handling of time, spatial behaviour and the context dependence of communication. They describe German culture as monochronic, low-context-oriented, order-loving, and emphasizing the appreciation of rules. In his comparative analysis of American and German communicative styles, Nees (2000) describes that participants in German culture prefer long analyses and explanations as much as thorough planning. He further states that many participants in German culture attach great importance to professional competence, cultivate a very direct style of communication and prefer individualistic traits in fact-oriented contexts. At the same time, he acknowledges that Germans are very consensual, but that consensus is achieved through direct communication in official conversations where it is important to express one's opinion. The strong content and fact orientation causes a reduction in the importance of the relationship aspects of communication. "Direct attacks on the content of an utterance are common, but attacks on the person are avoided through impersonal and objective communication" (Nees 2000, p.63). One reason for this specific characteristic of the German communication style is the fact that honesty in conversation is generally valued more highly through open expression of one's own opinion than personal relationships.

Contrastive studies of German and Japanese cultural behavior and communication styles emphasize the above-mentioned aspect of the directness of the German communicative style. Watanabe (2006) analyzed German Japanese business negotiations conducted in English. Her results show that German managers communicate in a very matter-of-fact manner, are focused on the topic at hand and make little reference to the previous speaker. An investigation by Hass et al (2017) of German students revealed similar auto-stereotypical assessments: they see themselves as direct, efficient as well as subject- and problem-solving-oriented. This is confirmed by Huijser in his book 'Managing Mindsets' (2011). The same cultural attitude can also be seen in the communicative style of news presenters (Tagesschau), the news content as well as the editing and camera work of this news programme (Krause-Ono, 2013), which is often dispassionate, distanced and under-laid with numbers. In summary, the German communication style and prevailing cultural characteristics can be characterized by a) a high degree of directness, b) a great appreciation of structures and rules, c) a clear distinction and separation between private space, time and professional life, and d) a pronounced factual orientation.

### 2.2 Japanese culture and its communicative style

Japanese have - in contrast to Germans - a clear idea of a specifically Japanese behaviour (Stahl, 1999). During the late Meiji period (1890-1912), certain characteristics regarded as Japanese were institutionalized, whether

through education, the media, or official orders (Gluck, 1985). Since then, a wealth of literature on Japanese uniqueness (Nihonjinron) has appeared (Sugimoto, 2001). The author also refers to the early studies, since their research results are still valid and recent publications (Hass et al, 2017) report similar results. Most authors argue that different schools and arts called *do* (way) in Japanese culture, such as *bushido* - the way of the warrior, *kendo* - the way of the sword, or *chadō* - tea ceremony, or the proper way of tea, share a common cultural basis. They all involve not only the mastery of a technique, but also the mastery of a moral code or behaviour, including appropriate verbal and non-verbal expressions (Coulmas, 2003).

According to Doi (1971) and Nakane (1967), already in the early stages of the sociolinguistic development of a Japanese child (through the choice of words, expressions and the underlying cultural concepts), strong emphasis is placed on the correct form of reciprocal behaviour in interpersonal encounters, with particular emphasis on emotional importance. Meaning-distinctive concepts such as *amae* (indulgence) (Doi, 1971), *enryo* (restraint) (Inoue, 1977) and *haji* (shame or embarrassment) (Inoue, 1977) are all used to define the *self* as well as the *other(s)*. These as well as *sasshi* (the ability to understand and sense the unspoken) (Nakane, 1967) are closely linked to the concept of the *seken* (the other), which is the basic orientation for outwardly directed behaviour (Inoue, 1977). All authors stress that these concepts would not be so explicitly present or represented if the point of departure were only the self and not the others. However, these concepts do not describe static positions, but change according to the situation in which the individual finds himself. In other words, they are strongly situation- and context-bound.

In Japanese society, "...instead of recognizing a single social reality, there is rather a multitude of possible perspectives of the self as well as of social life. Interactions in Japanese society focus on the right choice made from numerous possibilities. In other words, what one says or does will be different in different situations, depending on how one defines one's own perspective towards the respective social other" (Bachnik 1986, p.69).

Condon (1984) further shows that loyalty and group orientation have a high value in Japanese culture. Schroll-Machl (2003) gives concrete examples of Japanese behaviour in business situations, which is often perceived by others as vague, indirect and very reserved. The real issue is often face saving (one's own and the other's), harmony and consensus orientation. This takes time, as it is necessary to gather a lot of information and to cultivate relationships. In communication, aspects of relationships take precedence over factual aspects. A study by Hass et al (2017) discovered that even young students avoid being in the foreground and tend to orient themselves towards the current in-group. Great importance is also attached to details and aesthetics in all situations (Krause-Ono, 2013).

### 3 THEORETICAL BASIS

These idiosyncratic tendencies in the communicative styles of the two cultures, as depicted above, are also reflected in the meals, especially breakfast. As already indicated in the introduction, the theoretical background of this can be found in Wierlacher's three-circle model of culinary studies, which can be seen in Figure 1.

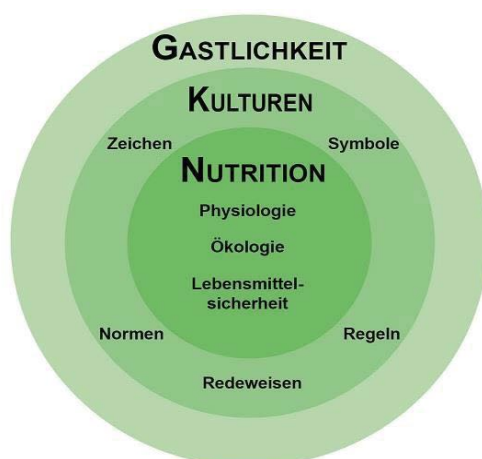


Figure 1: Strukturmodell der Kulinaristik (Structural model of Culinaristics)

Quote: "The innermost circle means nutrition, i.e. the physiological necessity to eat and drink. It includes ecological problems as well as questions of food safety. The second circle stands for the plurality of cultures. They turn the realm of necessity into a realm of diversity of meanings, rules, signs, norms, rituals, ways of speaking and symbols. The third and outermost circle represents hospitality. This is one of the oldest ways of communication with which people regulate their coexistence across cultural borders." (Wierlacher, 2018, p.13, translation by the author)

The second circle is most relevant for this study. It shows that communicative and cultural styles are reflected in meals. This will be demonstrated in this study through an analysis of breakfast preparation and its consumption in films. Meals in films must appear plausible and completely 'normal' to the viewer in order not to cause dissonance. Film sequences are therefore particularly suitable for an analysis of the respective cultural and communicative styles.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

This pilot study intends to illustrate that even in such inconspicuous, trivial situations as the preparation of breakfast, the cultural and communicative styles described above appear and presumably are the basis for the same. In the Japanese film 'Yuube no Curry, Ashita no pan' as well as in the German film 'Die Freundin meiner Mutter' we found breakfast preparation sequences of about the same length (66 and 50 seconds). Both sequences were without words and thus even more suitable for an intercultural comparison. The sequences were examined regarding the type of music, number, length and type of cuts. Since the sequences cannot be shown in an article, we have described the content of the individual cuts or scenes in order to make the following analysis comprehensible.

### 4.1 Information on the German TV film 'Die Freundin meiner Mutter' (The girlfriend of my mother)

The main characters are: the economically unsuccessful bookseller Jan, in his early 30s, shares an apartment with Hannah, his best friend since childhood. His successful and lesbian mother Viktoria, who supports him financially, would like to have a child with her partner Rosalie. Jan is supposed to be the sperm donor. Jan's father, an unsuccessful writer, lives in his wife's basement and takes care of the garden and laundry.

The script was mainly written by Martin Rehbock from an idea by the late Ilja Haller. The film is set in Hamburg. It is a comedy with an unusual theme, which is addressed in an uninhibited way. The film had a predominantly positive resonance with the audience. It contains several acts in which meals/food occur. Of these, a 50-second breakfast preparation was particularly useful for comparison with the Japanese film.

### 4.2 Information on the Japanese TV film 'Yuube no Curry, Ashita no Pan' (Yesterday's curry, tomorrow's bread)

The main characters are: Tetsuko Terayama, a 32-year-old employee who became a widow seven years ago. She lives with her also widowed father-in-law, a meteorologist and called Gifu by her, in his house. She was married to his son Kazuki for six years until he presumably died of cancer. Tetsuko's colleague Iwai would like to marry her. Oda, a neighbour, his wife and their 'hikikomori' daughter Takana (or Mumumu), a former flight attendant who, unable to smile, gave up her job and now almost never leaves the house.

The script was written by Izumi Kisara, a well-known Japanese writer. The scenes and actions are so natural and everyday for Japanese viewers they are completely salient and perceived as very familiar. Even more than in the German film, there are actions in which meals/food appear. The scene of the breakfast preparation was best suited for comparison.

## 5 RESULTS

### 5.1 The Japanese breakfast preparation

1st scene until 0'5": Close-up of a rice pot standing on a gas flame. It steams, splutters, and everything overflows despite the lid.

1st cut until 0'10": Close-up of the rice pot. Noises can be heard clearly and distinctly. No camera movements, no music, but the scene radiates life, warmth, closeness and energy.

2nd cut until 0'14": Close-up of a quaking green frog jumping on water plants.

3rd cut until 0'18": Half total shot of an outer wall and gate to a ground-level house / property behind it. Bushes, trees, laundry stands can be seen. From 0'15" on, music begins for the first time, individual tones plucked on guitar or violin can be heard gradually evolving into a simple calm melody. Simple piano strokes underline them and then take over the melody. Everything is very calm and slow. Frog in Japanese means 'Kaeru', which also means 'come/go home'.

4th cut until 0'25": The camera is fixed in a medium long shot. In the front Gifu is sitting at the dining table. On the right-hand side there are figures and other things on a windowsill. In the back part is the kitchen, Tetsuko is standing and cutting something on a sideboard. Open shelves and a refrigerator can be seen on the left-hand side. At the back is a wall with a window. In total there are three windows and the room is naturally well lit. Gifu puts the newspaper away, gets up from the chair, goes into the kitchen to the gas stove and adjusts the flame. Tetsuko is cutting something. Meanwhile, the music has become a quiet, simple melody plaid by a string instrument and a piano.

5th cut until 0'28": Close-up of the cucumber slices and the kitchen knife cutting them, which is held by Tetsuko's hand.

6th cut until 0'29": Medium long shot of Gifu taking the plate from the shelf on the left and placing it on the right next to the cucumber slices cut by Tetsuko. He briefly says 'hai' (please).

7th cut until 0'33": Close-up of Tetsuko's fingers placing the aubergine and cucumber slices on the plate.

8th cut until 0'35": Close-up of a plate next to it, as well as the fried salmon slice, which is placed on it using of a turner and chopsticks.

9th cut until 0'37": Close-up of a bowl with natto plus the chopsticks with which Gifu stirs the natto.

10th cut until 0'45": Close-up of a pot with soup into which Tetsuko stirs miso using a ladle and chopsticks. After three seconds, the camera slowly moves up to Tetsuko's focused face. Stirring in his natto, Gifu walks past her from left to right towards the window.

11th cut until 0'53": Close-up of Gifu looking up out of the window while still stirring in his natto. In the background Tetsuko is turning from the gas stove on the left diagonally to the fridge behind Gifu. When Tetsuko opens the fridge, Gifu turns his head back to her, holding the bowl and the chopsticks in his hands. Tetsuko takes a plastic box and an egg out of the fridge. She gives the plastic box to Gifu, who is half turned towards her.

12th cut until 0'57": Close-up of a saucepan in which bacon is sizzling. The camera is motionless. Tetsuko's hands are cracking an egg and putting it onto the bacon. A kitchen clock shrills in the background. The gentle music ends here.

13th cut until 1' 0": Half close-up of Gifu standing in front of the rice pot saying 'wow'. Tetsuko is standing next to Gifu in front of the saucepan and holding chopsticks in her hand. Gifu picks up a towel to lift the lid off the rice pot. Tetsuko looks at him from the side.

14th cut until 1'03": Close-up of Gifu's right half of his face and Tetsuko frowning at him from the side.

15th cut until 1'06": Close-up of the lid that was removed with a towel and the freshly cooked and steaming rice in the pot. One hears Gifu saying 'oho'.

### 5.2 Summarizing the Japanese breakfast

Including the introductory scene, there are 15 cuts in 66 seconds. Almost all shots last more than 4 seconds. Food, its preparation, as well as the protagonists are shown in close-ups.

The atmosphere is calm, harmonious and without haste. The protagonists carry out the preparations calmly anticipating breakfast. The quiet music in the background accompanies their actions. The sounds of the kitchen, such as the spluttering rice pot, the slicing of the pickled vegetables, the sizzling of the bacon, the stirring of the miso or the stirring of the natto, can all be clearly heard and are even emphasized. The movements of the protagonists are calm and natural. It is a homely togetherness, so is every morning. Verbal communication is not needed.

The breakfast consists of rice, miso soup, fish, bacon with egg, pickled vegetables and natto. The food is in the center with many close-ups and aesthetic in its simplicity. There is no direct statement about the personal relationship of the protagonists, but the familiarity and liveliness of the everyday common action is emphasized in each cut.

It should also be mentioned that after 66 seconds Tetsuko says 'just a moment', but the following action is non-verbal again for 50 seconds and proceeds as follows:

Tetsuko takes Gifu's rice bowl and tips the rice of another bowl into his. She holds it out to him until he takes it, while she looks at him from the side all the time. Gifu slowly takes the bowl, looks at it and takes it to the dining-table. Tetsuko spoons rice from the rice pot into a bowl, takes it and walks past Gifu through two rooms to the house altar. She kneels in front of it, puts the bowl in front of a photo, and strikes a small gong. Then she folds her hands, lowers her head for 3-4 seconds, stands up and walks back. The camera zooms in on the photo of a young man on the house altar with a full rice bowl in front of his picture.

The dead are also provided with food at the same time as the living. And the next morning a living person eats the rice not eaten by the dead. To live and to prepare food together is part of everyday life and normal. The actions and motions are known. Everything is familiar. To trust and understand each other. There is contentment even without words.

### 5.3 The German breakfast preparation

1st scene until 2": Long shot of cranes and ships in a harbour. The pictures are accompanied by upbeat instrumental music from the keyboard.

1st cut until 5": Long shot of cranes and ships. In the foreground there are branches and leaves of a shrub/tree in close-up and partly blurred.

The music for this sequence was composed by Tobias Wagner. It is peppy from the keyboard; the dynamic theme will be repeated throughout the breakfast preparation scene.

2nd cut until 15": Full shot of two diagonally opposite doors at the end of a corridor. From 6"-11" the left door opens, Jan comes out of his room, sleepy, in his striped blueish-yellow underpants and grey-brown T-shirt, half reaching for his crotch. He walks half towards the camera to the right across the hall, probably into the bathroom. From 12"-15", the right door opens, and Hannah emerges from her room a little restless wearing a short dressing gown. She goes left across the hall into the kitchen.

3rd cut to 16": close-up of Hannah. The camera travels from her hands holding the mocha pot up to her face. Her mouth is distorted because she cannot open the pot.

4th cut until 20": Close-up of her hands holding the mocha coffee pot, still trying to unscrew it.

5th cut until 21": Medium long shot of Hannah standing behind a shelf table. Behind her part of the kitchen with a blue wall, clock, sink, sideboard as well as shelves with spices etc. and kitchen utensils on hooks can be seen. Before her on the shelf table there are bananas and a bowl with grapes. Hannah cannot open the mocha coffee pot, her left hand holds the pot to the side.

6th cut until 22": Close-up of her hand holding the mocha coffee pot. The latter is taken dynamically by Jan's left hand.

7th cut until 26": Close-up of Jan going to the sink with the mocha coffee pot. Both he and Hannah are visible from behind. She takes a metal can containing ground coffee from the sideboard, and while she turns and places

the lid on the shelf table in front, he opens the mocha coffee pot over the sink.

8th cut until 27": Close-up of Hannah from shoulder to the back of her head. Her right hand takes from Jan's right hand/arm the hopper of the mocha coffee pot.

9th cut until 28-29": Close-up of her right hand tapping the coffee grounds from the hopper into an octagonal tin can.

10th cut until 29-30": Close-up of Jan's right hand holding the water-receptive part of the mocha coffee pot under the tap and filling it with water.

11th cut until 30-31": Close-up of Hannah's left hand holding the hopper. Her right hand spoons ground coffee powder from the can into the hopper. Her hand and the container are at the center. Hannah is standing at the shelf table.

12th cut until 32": Close-up of Jan who is visible from the shoulder halfway from behind. He is still standing unshaven over the sink and is yawning. On the wall in front of him there is a shelf with spice containers, a coffee grinder and behind it a picture with apples and pears. The running of water can be heard.

13th cut until 36": Medium close-up of both. Jan is standing in front of the sink on the left in the back, holding the container filled with water and is moving in Hannah's direction. She, having finished pouring coffee powder into the hopper in her left hand, now with her right hand puts the lid on the can. Then she turns towards Jan and with her right hand takes the water-filled lower part of the mocha coffee pot from his right hand. Hannah's left side is visible, and Jan is seen from behind.

14th cut until 37": Close-up of a hob on the gas stove where Jan is igniting fire with a lighter. The thumb and index finger of his hand holding the lighter are also visible. The flicking of the lighter is noticeable.

15th cut to 38": Medium close-up of a dynamic scene: Hannah moves to the left, closing the mocha coffee pot, Jan moves to the right to the sideboard, takes the cutting board with bread on it in both hands and places it on the shelf table in the foreground.

16th cut until 39": Close-up of Hannah's right hand placing the mocha coffee pot on the hob of the gas stove.

17th cut until 40": Close-up of Jan from the front. He is standing at the shelf table and raises his right hand. Behind him Hannah can be seen from behind in front of the gas stove. Her right arm goes to the right and is half covered by his right upper arm.

18th cut until 42": Close-up of Jan's outstretched right hand. Hannah's concentrated face is visible from the side. With her right hand she puts the handle of a bread knife into Jan's right hand. His hand grasps the handle.

19th cut until 43": Close-up of the cutting-board, of a piece of whole grain bread as well as Jan's left hand holding it and of the bread knife with which he cuts 2-3 slices.

20th cut until 47": Dynamic medium close-up of both. Jan in the center is still cutting the bread. Hannah on the right can be seen from behind. She takes three white plates from the top shelf on the wall, turns forward, takes one white plate with her right hand and places it on the shelf table.

21st cut until 48": Dynamic close-up: Her right hand places the plate in front of the chopping board on the shelf table. With his left hand, Jan tosses rather than lays three slices of bread on it. His right hand still holds the bread knife in his hand.

22nd cut until 49": Extreme low angle close-up of Jan on a motorbike. Both his hands are resting on the handlebars and he is wearing a helmet. His motorcycle light is on.

#### 5.4 Summarizing the German breakfast

Including the introductory scene there are a total of 23 cuts in 49 seconds! Most cuts are very short and take only 1-2 seconds. Large compositions and close-ups dominate. Apart from the protagonists, mainly things and objects can be seen.

The mood is slightly tired. Nonetheless, even if something is troublesome, what has to be done will be done. This seems to be underlined by the upbeat, rhythmic, repetitive music. The beat accompanies the cuts as well as the movements of the protagonists. Even if the two are not in the best mood, they are a well-rehearsed team



preparing breakfast. Their movements flow smoothly into one another. Words are not necessary. Both are efficient and focused on their tasks.

The breakfast consists of coffee and bread, maybe also the bananas and grapes seen at the beginning. The latter is pure speculation though. The preparation of breakfast and its contents (coffee and bread) are purposeful. Everything is task-oriented, and the actions should be quick and efficient. The espresso or mocha should wake them up, the wholemeal bread should give them energy, so they can start working afterwards (final scene on moped). No statement is made about the personal relationship of the protagonists. The food or the meal itself is not emphasized. The focus is clearly on things and tasks.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Both sequences manage without words and nevertheless clearly convey each culture's different communicative styles in everyday life. One can argue that they are only part of a film and thus posed. But even in a film, everyday situations can only go unchallenged if they agree with the everyday life of most of the viewers and thus can pass 'unnoticed'. This is the case in both films.

German breakfast preparation is characterized by a high degree of task orientation and efficiency. The individual sections show objects whose context is linear and simple. The fact that something is annoying is not necessarily hidden. Time-conscious, perfect and professional are further adjectives that come to mind. The electronic music which rhythmically drives the action and masks almost all other noises reinforces this impression. The necessary is done, but the food is rather spartan (coffee and bread). This preparation largely conveys the otherwise often described (Schroll-Machl, 2002) German communicative-cultural style.

The sequence of the Japanese breakfast preparation, however, is characterized by numerous interwoven aspects. The wordless but joint and interrelated preparation of different dishes is filled with familiarity, peace and serenity. Not only the protagonists and the food can be seen. Also, all other aspects, like the house, the kitchen itself, the arrangement of the things, the natural light as well as the simple music, which is restrained and thus clearly revealing of all aspects, are of great importance. All these details, in all their complexity, result in an aesthetic simplicity. Even the dead are not forgotten in everyday life but are part of life. There is no simple task orientation here. The context is too big to be manageable for a single person. Relationship orientation is indispensable. This breakfast preparation also shows quite clearly the often described (Huijser, 2011) Japanese communicative-cultural style.

The reproduction of an everyday life which is self-evident for many succeeds by appropriate camera attitude, camera guidance, recording length and the play of the actors. The communication expressed mainly non-verbally in the two analyzed sequences illustrates more than words the German as well as the Japanese communicative-cultural styles.

However, as this is only a pilot study, further studies and the inclusion of other cultures are necessary.

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