

# International Communication Through Online Accommodation Services

オンライン宿泊サービスにおける国際コミュニケーション

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## 〈Abstract〉

This research aims to investigate how online accommodation services provide an environment in which international communication becomes necessary. Due to this, both the service providers and consumers are compelled to exchange information using international norms, with language choice being a prominent factor. User nationality, mannerisms, and accommodation review contents are also some of the factors under investigation in this paper. The purpose of this study is first to identify the social exchanges, both structured and unstructured, present in private hospitality exchange services and in the content of the fledgling industry of networked hospitality arrangements in Japan. Research focus is put on linguistic and cultural development, and on gathering and analysing related data. The research focuses particularly on cultural and linguistic data and, therefore, reveals how guests and hosts in Japan can best prepare themselves for and, subsequently, educate themselves through intercultural and multilingual hospitality experiences. The cultural and linguistic “pushes and pulls” that are being brought about by the shared economy, and methods of preparation and support for the people involved, are also revealed. The research data is gathered in a number of ways including surveying review sites, setting up a virtual “host property” to gather guests’ enquiries, and by booking and staying at a real host property as a guest (and logging guest-host communications).

## 〈Keywords〉

online accommodation services, international communication, language

## 1 Introduction: Who and What Should Place Students Appropriately in English Classes?

There has been a significant increase in recent years in the number of people subletting, or sharing, their homes to strangers via online platforms, with some researchers viewing the rise of this emerging shared economy as being unstoppable (Geron, 2013). The appearance of online companies such as Airbnb (Airbnb.com) which “permit ordinary people to rent out their residences” (Guttentag, 2013), or part of their residences (such as a spare room) to tourists has enabled the hosts and their guests to easily offer or take up accommodation that would previously not have been accessible. While economic factors underpin the supply and demand of this service (Sperling, 2015), there is

also a structured social exchange intertwined in this networked hospitality exchange (Ikkala and Lampinen, 2014).

Private hospitality exchange services, either paid or unpaid, predate the advent of the Internet with examples including services such as homestay accommodation organized by companies and educational institutions, and the system of holiday “house swapping” (home exchanges) through newspaper classified advertising (Boniface and Cooper, 1987). However, in recent years, the market for these services has exploded due to the presence and accessibility of online platforms which provide the technical infrastructure for hosts to promote their accommodation (Guttentag, 2013) and for guests to contact

them. They also help to decrease payment problems by acting as clearing houses for transactions, allowing the providers and receivers of hospitality services to focus on other, non-monetary aspects. This is true not only for hospitality, but also for other sharing economy practices which make use of idle assets and create new marketplaces such as in transportation (e.g. Uber, Lyft) and casual work (e.g. TaskRabbit) (Harmaala, 2015). Such disruptive technologies have opened the eyes of many people with varied purposes/goals to sharing and collaborative consumption.

In Japan, however, such services which involve human relationships and, in particular, dealing with foreigners have been slower to take off when compared to other developed countries (Van Buren, 2015). Although slower, it has made a significant impact in recent years with (taking Airbnb, a shared economy lodging site, as a research case in this paper) rentals now being offered in almost every city in Japan. With such a wide reach, such hospitality services need to be understood better in Japan, in terms of how intra and international cultural and communication exchanges are happening. The exchanges which occur in an online context are investigated in this paper.

## 2 Research Data Sources and Criteria

Data for this research was gathered from three sources:

1. *Online reviews of accommodation services in Japan* (by guests)
2. *Sourcing and staying in accommodation*, and gathering information from related online communications
3. *Setting up a virtual property* for a fixed period of time, and gathering communication data pertaining to this.

The above data reflects real life situations for the first two cases, and gathers real-life data from the guest point of view for the last case. This research data gathering could be described as an amalgamation of data from a multitude of case studies.

### 2.1 Online Reviews of Accommodation

Three places were selected for data gathering of online reviews. Two of the places were in Kanazawa city, Ishikawa prefecture, and the other in Gifu prefecture. The

criteria for selection and places chosen were:

- A. One place of accommodation should be in close proximity to an internationally well-known Shinkansen station.

Accommodation A was chosen as it was close to Kanazawa Station. This has become a well-known station served by a Shinkansen, with in-depth and positive reviews appearing in popular English-language international newspapers such as the Guardian (Booth, 2015) and the Wall Street Journal (Kwak, 2015).

- B. Another should be in close proximity to an internationally well-known tourist spot.

Accommodation B was chosen as it was close to internationally famous places in Kanazawa. Booth (2015) and Kwak (2015) mention Kenrokuen, Kanazawa Castle and The (21<sup>st</sup> Century) Museum of Contemporary Art in their articles, and Accommodation B is within walking distance of all of these.

- C. The final place was to be in a different prefecture, acting as a stopover for guests en route to another tourist destination (such as Kanazawa).

Accommodation C, an accommodation in the south of Gifu prefecture, was chosen as it was within reasonable distance (one hour) from Nagoya Airport (an international airport), near a highway, and just off the foot of the 昇龍道 – Rising Dragon Road (Goto, 2012), on the way to the Hokuriku region.

### 2.2 Sourcing and Staying in Accommodation

To avoid preconceptions affecting researcher observations, accommodation was sourced outside areas familiar to the researcher. As the researcher is based in Kanazawa and has not had experience of staying in the prefecture in which Accommodation C is located, this was selected as a place for the researcher to stay in and experience. In this way, the researcher could gain information directly by communicating with the host.

### 2.3 Setting up a Virtual Property

Both online reviews of accommodation, and sourcing and staying in accommodation provide research data from the point of view of guests. In order to gather (case study) research data about guests from the point of view of the

host, a virtual property was set up and temporarily advertised online. Photographs and location information (near to popular areas) were also created and put with the virtual property listing. It should be noted that the property listed does not exist in reality, and all requests to book were immediately rejected (with a plausible excuse) in order not to affect tourists' plans.

The virtual property is called Accommodation D, for the purposes of this research.

### 3 Research Data Gathered

#### 3.1 Online Reviews of Accommodation Data

The reviews given by guests who stayed at Accommodation A, B and C were analyzed for first language of the guests (presumed language, from home country of the guests), language use (in what language were messages written), host-guest interaction requested/offered, and the percentage of hosts who gave information in English. All data is taken from Airbnb.com, November 2015. The data is given in Table 1.

	Accommodation		
	A	B	C
No. of Reviews	7	21	11
% English L1 Guests	71%	24%	27%
% Messages in English	86%	71%	55%
% Messages in Japanese	0%	14%	27%
% Messages in Other Languages	14%	14%	18%
Accommodation Information in English	Yes	No	Yes
Guest Interaction Given/Offered	Yes	Yes	Yes (parents)

**Table 1: Online Accommodation Review Data**

#### 3.2 Sourcing and Staying in Accommodation Data

For the purposes of this paper, the researcher stayed in Accommodation C (Gifu) for one night. The entire house was booked (so it was not shared with others, including the host). The reservation request message was written in English and Japanese, giving the host the option to reply in her native language or in English. In fact, the host is not required (obliged) to send any messages under the Airbnb system, as an automated reservation confirmation can be

sent.

The following message was sent from the guest (researcher):

こんにちは。Hello! Your house looks so nice. I would like to stay there. とても素敵なお家みたいです。泊まらせていただきたいと思います。I'm looking forward to it! 宜しくお願いします!

In response, the host sent a total of seven messages, including information about the local area, activities available to take part in, and how help could be accessed. The following message is part of the first one sent from the host:

Mitake is very good place. I believe you can enjoy beautiful mountains and nature. I hope you like it. My place is very convenient to go to many places you should go to in Mitake. Rose is season now, and you can see many flowers at Rose garden.

The following is the second message sent from the host:

I leave key in the mail box. You can use the key to enter the house. When you check out, please leave key in the mail box. I'm not in Japan but my parents are living in next to my house. If you need some help, they will help you.

The host noticed a problem with the information input by the guest, and sent further messages to solve the issue. The problem was due to the wrong date being booked together with a logical error (the booking was made for a Friday night, but the guest commented they would arrive on Saturday). The host could notice this, and communicate this information, in English, to the guest, solving the problem. All messages sent by the host were in English, despite having had the option to reply in Japanese. It was noticed that the host's English was not at an advanced level, but that did not impede communication in any way.

Through the host's seven messages and the guest's six messages, a rapport was built up between the accommodation provider and the consumer. Furthermore, after arrival at the property, one of the host's parents (her father, living nearby) dropped by to say hello and to engage in conversation. He stayed for about one hour, talking in a mix of Japanese and broken English. He seemed interested in trying to communicate with foreign people.

The stay was very pleasant, and all written instructions in the house were trilingual – written in

Japanese, English and Chinese. This reflects the expectations and experience the host has of guests staying at the property.

### 3.3 Setting up a Virtual Property Data

In order to understand the communication relationship from the perspective of a host, a virtual property was set up. It was located in Kanazawa, within walking distance of both the main train station (served by the *Shinkansen*) and the internationally-renowned park (Kenrokuen). Standard photographs of a tatami room and of local attractions were also put up. The property was advertised for five days, with an open calendar offered for the following year. However, to avoid inconveniencing tourists, requests for bookings were quickly answered with “sorry, we suddenly became full for your dates”, to allow them to continue searching for somewhere else.

Requests for bookings were from two Japanese (Guest 1, 2), one Chinese (Hong Kong) (Guest 3), and one French (Guest 4) during that time. The Japanese potential guests communicated in Japanese, and the Chinese and French wrote in English. Relevant information is summarized in Table 2.

	Guest			
	1	2	3	4
Nationality	Japanese	Japanese	Chinese	French
Language Used	Japanese	Japanese	English	English
Date of Contact	July 22	July 23	July 24	July 26
Date Requested	Aug 21&22	Nov 14	Nov 13,14&15	Nov 3,4,5, 6,7&8
Purpose of Visit	Sightseeing Trip with Family	Kanazawa Marathon Athlete	Kanazawa Marathon Athlete	JCI World Congress

Table 2: Virtual Property Booking Data

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Language Use

From the online review data, it could be seen that guests and hosts tended to use English to communicate, even in cases where their mother tongue was not English. Guests are not forced to write reviews but many chose to do so anyway, and in an international language (English). Japanese was sometimes used in cases where both the host and guest were Japanese, which is understandable.

Where the researcher stayed in accommodation, the host was given the opportunity to use Japanese (as the guest sent a message written in both English and Japanese). However, the host decided to continue the conversation in English, reflecting a willingness to use English as a communication medium, despite the host not being fully proficient in the language. Furthermore, the host positively made contact with the guest, showing that they were not making communication because they had to (to enable a transaction), rather it seemed to be to connect with the guest. This indicates an interest in language and culture.

For the virtual property (where the researcher acted as a host), the Japanese guests made contact in Japanese, while the non-Japanese made contact in English. This shows that Japanese guests may not be motivated by linguistic needs, and are more interested in travel for leisure, cultural, or other personal needs. However, foreign guests take it for granted that their language may not be understood by a host residing in Japan, and use English for international communication.

Overall, most communication on the online accommodation platform was carried out in English, and Japanese was a minority language despite the service being provided and consumed in Japan.

### 4.2 Culture

All of the hosts reviewed offered or gave some information or help in connecting with the local area, whether in terms of guided tours or oral advice. This indicates that the hosts are interested in making a connection with the guests and in sharing cultural information with them. More detailed information was gleaned from staying at an accommodation. It could be seen that the host was very positive about the local area, and was keen to have the guests experience local cultural events. Furthermore, such interaction extended to the host's parents, with a visit and an interesting conversation with the host's father occurring. This conversation included information about local industries and customs. It was also noticed that, when the researcher posed as a host, the purposes of the potential guests included local events and sightseeing. However, guests seemed to be less interested in connecting with the host in these cases.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

It was noticed that hosts showed an eagerness to interact with guests from a linguistic and cultural perspective, and this went beyond the basic economic transaction underpinning the online accommodation sharing service. The hosts were eager to introduce their home towns to the guests, with some even offering to give a free guided tour of nearby areas. When hosts were given an option to respond in their mother tongue or in (broken) English, they chose to do so in English in the cases where the guests were from abroad.

The above highlights the advantages that hosts can get from taking part in online shared accommodation services. Such services can be a way for them to use their foreign language abilities, even if they are not at a high level, and also to teach guests about their local areas. This could have additional benefits such as hosts themselves learning more about their local culture, helping to preserve such culture into the future through less experienced people asking the advice of (usually) older generations. Having local people with local knowledge involved in such a way can be a win-win for both the hosts and people in the local area, as well of course for the guests who are getting the opportunity to hear about the area directly with someone who was often

born and raised there.

Guests, on the other hand, were more interested in travelling to an area and in taking part in leisure, sports or cultural events. Interacting with the host seemed to be lower down on their agenda of priorities. This indicates that there is not an undue pressure on hosts to provide cultural services, and that hosts can freely choose whether or not they would like to offer them, resulting in participation in online accommodation services not being too large a burden on the host. This allows the host to concentrate on what they would like to gain from the communication exchange as long as the accommodation itself matches the needs of the guests.

What can be learned is that participating in online accommodation services can be beneficial for Japanese hosts not only from a monetary side, but also from cultural and linguistic viewpoints. Currently, online accommodation services are under debate in Japan, with interpretations of the law ranging from them being in a grey zone to being illegal. The benefits outlined in this paper to residents in Japan may prompt lawmakers to reconsider such laws for the cultural and linguistic education of the people.

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