



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Sidetracking: Is It Really a Cultural Norm?

Suzuki, Masako; Boogaart, Ronny; Garssen, Bart; Jansen, Henrike; Van Leeuwen, Maarten; Pilgram, Roosmaryn; Reuneker, Alex

Citation

Suzuki, M. (2024). Sidetracking: Is It Really a Cultural Norm? *Proceedings Of The Tenth Conference Of The International Society For The Study Of Argumentation*, 837-858.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4107895>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4107895>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Sidetracking: Is It Really a Cultural Norm?

MASAKO SUZUKI

*Research Center for Foreign Language Education
Keio University
Japan
masako@z3.keio.jp*

ABSTRACT: “Japanese are not good at debating.” That is a stereotype that the Japanese themselves often hold even now. “Japanese are not good at making a relevant rebuttal.” This sounds the same, however many educators namely Ryoko Nakatsu who taught debate and discussion for decades testified so. They suggest that Japanese students may tend to be good at constructing arguments but not rebutting. According to them, one of the biggest struggles many of their students faced was to present a clear opposite standpoint that directly relates to the standpoint advanced by the protagonist. This research tested this myth. Subjects took a test to see how often their rebuttal point was sidetracked before and after they experienced a ten-week training to respond with an opposite standpoint. The training first briefed the students on syllogism, Toulmin’s model and the third commandment of pragma-dialectics, and then let them practice choosing a counterargument.

KEYWORDS: coded rebuttal, counterclaim, debate class, dog-whistling, explicitness, fallacy, female, Japanese culture, rebuttal, sidetracking

1. INTRODUCTION

Debate classes do not need too much complication. Students who start learning the basics of argumentation such as syllogism and Toulmin’s model at the beginning of a semester aim to become able to participate in a simple debate by the end of the semester. It seems a leap, but students are capable enough. They usually do not have any problems learning what they need to do in the three phases of debating: construction, rebuttal, and summary. However, knowing what to do and being able to practice what to do are different. Students seem to struggle in the rebuttal phase especially and miss clear counterclaims. They often start sidetracking in the rebuttal phase. This is a problem because genuine rebuttal is essential for the integrity they feel in the debate, and without feeling integrity, it is difficult to enjoy the meaning of debating in society.

When the debate course persistently demands them to directly rebut what their opponent said, some students feel desperate and start blaming the culture they belong. For instance, being Japanese is one of their favourite excuses.

Debate tradition in Japan is often undervalued. In fact, Japan has a strong and long history of debating. Even when we narrow the scope of debating to modern American and British forms, it flourished in the Meiji and Taisho era when modern democracy urged people to rush to speech and debate halls. In 1873, Fukuzawa Yukichi started debate workshops at Keio (Fukuzawa, 1997). Soon, speech and debate became very popular nationwide. According to Haga Yoshiki, even people who had not been interested in politics came to debate events, actively listened to argumentative speeches, and enjoyed heckling in such an era. Because the heckling became so intense, the host of a public

speaking event in Sakaya Village, Nakakanbara County, Niigata had to explicitly request the audience not to heckle in October 1889 (Haga, 1999). In 1911, in his speech on the civilization of modern Japan, Soseki appreciated the audience in Wakayama for gathering the next day of another public speaking event (Natsume, 1988). In 1920, Togo Masatake, an American literature scholar, enthusiastically preached how the power of rhetoric could change the world, and how representing one's idea in public decided who one could be (Togo & Kikuchi, 1920).

Despite of the ardour for debating the country experienced, Japan is often described as one with a non-debating culture inside and outside Japan. Mysteriously, when Morita Akio and Ishihara Shintaro published "*The Japan That Can Say 'No'*" in 1989, it seemed that Japan as a weak debate culture was already a round consensus domestically and internationally. Torikai Kumiko analyses that silence as a virtue is a deep culture of Japan and "hasn't changed," borrowing Edward Hall's ideas of "high context" language and Okabe Roichi's of "beauty of silence" (Torikai, 2004, p.234). Some even track back to seventh-century literature and argue that the usage of terms like *kotoage* is proof of Japan being a country with the beauty of avoiding argumentation (Kawase, 2013).

Not only the above general discourse which often sounds like cultural stereotypes but also debate coaches on the ground echo the Japanese culture not to disagree saying that their students struggled in debating especially in directly rebutting opponents. Nakatsu Ryoko who trained thousands of children and adults for debating in both Japanese and English language explains the Japanese culture of the mid-twentieth century and says that Japanese were culturally trained to speak extremely euphemistically, and questioning and inquiry were seen as cheeky, irreverent, and arrogant (Nakatsu, 2005, p.146). Utsugi Aiko who has taught debate courses at Keio University for long states that in Japanese society, it seems people subconsciously believe that one can avoid the unpleasant experience of being rebutted if they do not speak much. She emphasizes the significance of rebuttal and continues that generally in Japanese society, opposing or unique ideas are not welcomed much. If one argued against anyone, that person would be seen as 'strange'. The tradition of seeing assenting without saying anything as a virtue has not yet disappeared in Japanese society (Utsugi, 2016, pp.142-144).

If the culture to avoid debating indeed exists, then, it must be more so for women. The first woman who voted in modern Japan was Kususe Taki who started arguing against local and central government that women who pay tax deserve voting rights in 1878, made numerous speeches at public speaking events, and eventually voted in 1880. She was one of the first few women who could vote in the world. However, only four years later, the law was amended, and women once again were excluded from the political process. They had to wait until 1945 to regain the suffrage. The end of the war did not dramatically change the situation where women were severely discouraged from raising their voices. Nakatsu Ryoko recalls that her father did not allow her to disagree with anybody male (Nakatsu, 2005). Even today, parents rarely support their daughters' involvement in debate activities, and national school debate tournaments namely *Debate Koshien* are competed mostly by male-only or male-dominant teams with male-dominant judging pools. After graduating from school, the pressure to silence women only becomes larger. In 2001, then-head of the Tokyo Olympics Organizing Committee and a former Prime Minister, Mori Yoshiro said in his speech that women tended to speak for too long at board meetings, and his female trustees were wise enough to refrain from speaking at meetings too much (Nikkan Sports,

2021). In September 2023, Prime Minister Kishida reshuffled the cabinet, and among the 26 senior vice ministers of the second Kishida administration, the number of women was zero. Among the 28 parliamentary vice ministers, again, the number of women is zero. If Japan had a culture to avoid the main street of debating, women would be so marginalized to remote areas that there would be no street nearby. It is interesting that Nakatsu and Utsugi who urge Japanese students to publicly debate, openly disagree, and directly rebut are both female.

Obviously, scepticism about Sophists seems common everywhere and nothing unique to Japan. Orators have tried to present themselves as non-orators so that their public audience would not alienate them. Socrates described himself as a person with no elegant words, and in *“The Tragedy of Julius Caesar”*, Shakespeare made Mark Antony do the same. Is students’ mindset that they cannot become good at rebuttal as they are Japanese something beyond the general fear of sophistry? Is their sidetracking habit deeply cultural and thus, hard to change? If so, are female students less good at rebuttal? How much does culture affect our debate skills? These are the questions this paper aims to answer.

2. SIDETRACKING

Sidetracking this research anticipates starts with the lack of explicit counterclaim. Students in the debate courses who participated in this research are instructed to follow five steps to make each rebuttal point as shown in Figure 1. In the second step of the five, they were told to choose either warrant (major premise) or data (minor premise) to rebut as shown in Figure 2.

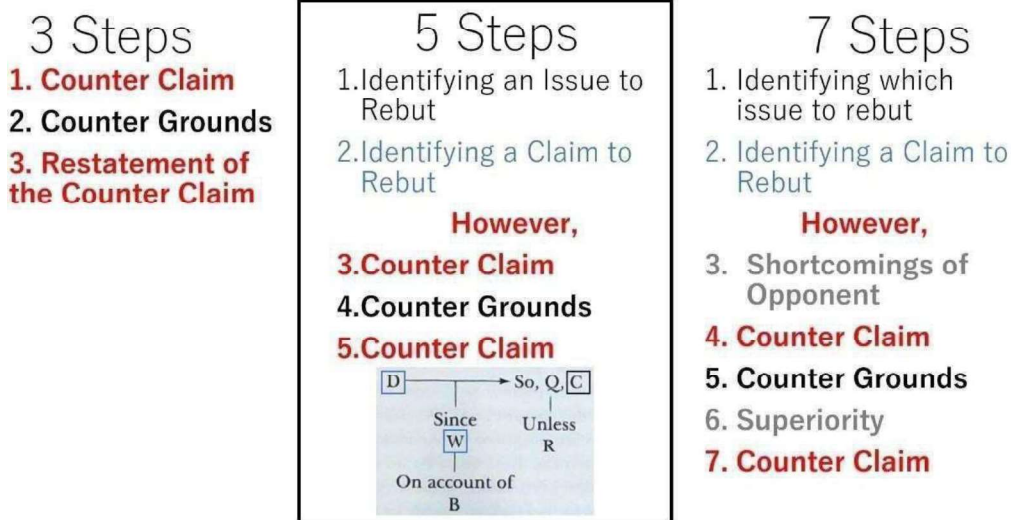


Figure 1: How to Deliver a Rebuttal Point

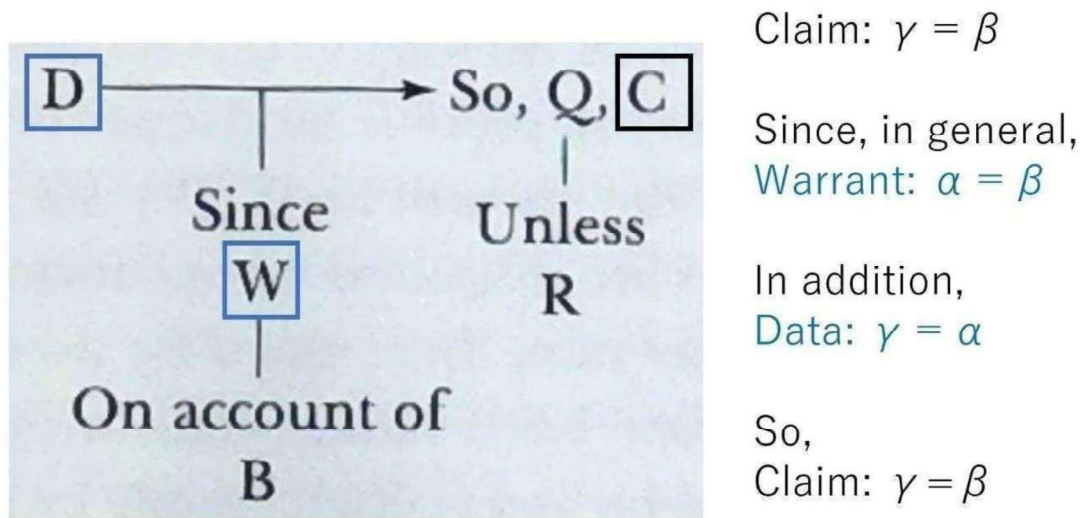


Figure 2: Toulmin's Model & Syllogism - Identifying a Claim to Rebut

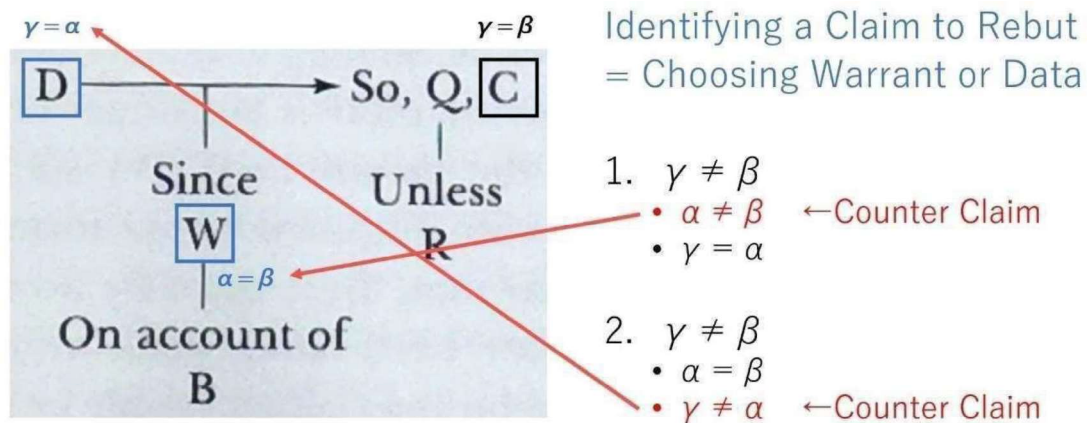


Figure 3: Toulmin's Model & Rebuttal - Direct and Explicit Counterclaim

When students were requested to present a counterclaim, it means that they were expected to either directly deny or make an opposite statement to the warrant or the data presented by the opponent (See Figure 3).

Students in debate courses learned above for ten weeks. They often started their rebuttal points by providing details of grounds, not counterclaims. Counterclaims they eventually revealed at the end of each rebuttal point were often indirectly related to the statement given by their opponent. Occasionally, they didn't have any counterclaims at all.

3. SURVEY WITH FOUR SECTIONS

This research conducted a survey with four sections in June 2023. The subjects were 317 students from five colleges. 192 of them expressed that they were male, 123 identified

themselves as female, and two decided not to express their gender. The survey was done in the Japanese language.

The first section had five questions and was to test if students identify two types of counterclaims; denial and flip. Concession can be a way, but it wasn't presented to the subjects as an option in this survey. Among the five questions, two requested students to choose answers which can sound rude to the instructor so that the survey can see how students react to the pressure. In the case of Question 1-1 below, students are expected to choose b and c.

Question 1-1: Many railway companies in rural areas with red figures, and if they are not allowed to set the fare themselves, they will go out of business.

- a. The government decides the fare so that the railway companies can make some profit, and the burden on users can be minimal at the same time.
- b. If railway companies with red figures are not allowed to set the fare themselves, they do not go out of business.
- c. Even if railway companies are not allowed to set the fare themselves, they will not go out of business.
- d. The railway companies are allowed to set the fare themselves.
- e. Railway companies with red figures are not only in rural areas.

The second section was primarily to test if students could come up with a counterclaim themselves. Statements they needed to rebut were shorter and simpler compared to the ones in the first section. This section also tested if social pressure makes presenting a counterclaim more difficult for students as shown in Question 2-2 and Question 2-3.

Question 2-1: Mail posts in Japan are red.
Expected Answer: Mail posts in Japan aren't red.

Question 2-2: Ms. Suzuki is beautiful. Expected Answer 1: Ms. Suzuki isn't beautiful. Expected Answer 2: Ms. Suzuki is rather ugly.

Question 2-3: This course is interesting.

- a. This course is not interesting.
- b. This course is rather boring.

In its third section, this survey tested if students could identify the key premises of given arguments. In Question 3-1, they were expected to choose the major and minor premise as grounds for the given statement. In Question 3-2, as the statement is about the benefit, they were supposed to divide the minor premise into two: before/without and after/with gentrification.

Question 3-1: Not granting residency to the victims of human trafficking is wrong.

- a. Punishing victims is wrong.
- b. Without granting residency, victims of human trafficking are punished.

Question 3-2: Slowing down gentrification is beneficial.

- a. Without slowing down, local communities stop functioning.
- b. If slowed down, local communities keep functioning.
- c. Keeping local communities functional is beneficial.

Rebuttals with no clear counterclaim may be fallacious but very common and often unintentional. As long as the audience can infer right, the debate should go back on track. The last section of the survey had three questions and tested if students could comprehend implicit and coded rebuttals. In this section, students watched 5 min. video of “*Gojinimuchu*,” a TV program where one of two commentators repeatedly made coded rebuttals with implicit counterclaims. The program was aired on April 29, 2011, a month and a half after the East Japan Earthquake. The anchor, protagonist, and interviewee claimed that questioning the safety of food from Fukushima was a “harmful rumour,” and everyone should eat agricultural products from Fukushima. The program made commentators eat the produce of Fukushima live. The antagonist, Uesugi gave hints to suggest that the government lies, food from Fukushima can be contaminated, and scepticism around the safety of Fukushima produce is not a “harmful rumour”. Students answered three questions twice; before reading/watching what the codes mean.

Question 4-1: Which is the closest to what Uesugi meant?

- a. People who guarantee food safety are liars.
- b. Puruto-kun is cute, and what cute things say is true.
- c. Truth is hidden just like his T-shirt under the jacket.
- d. You need not brain but passion to find out the truth.

Question 4-2: Which is the closest to what Uesugi meant?

- a. Making politicians/celebrities eat on TV to promote eating certain foods is good.
- b. Making politicians/celebrities eat on TV to promote eating certain foods is wrong.

Question 4-3: Which is the closest to what Uesugi meant?

- a. This asperges is dangerous.
- b. This asperges is safe.
- c. We don't know if this asperges is safe.

4. RESULTS

The result of the first section is shown in Figure 1. The score is based on the number of correct answers and wrong answers. When students could choose the two correct answers, they scored two points. They scored minus one if they chose two wrong answers and one correct answer. The proportion of students with two points was generally low. However, there was a statistical difference between students in the debate course and others, and debating students scored higher.

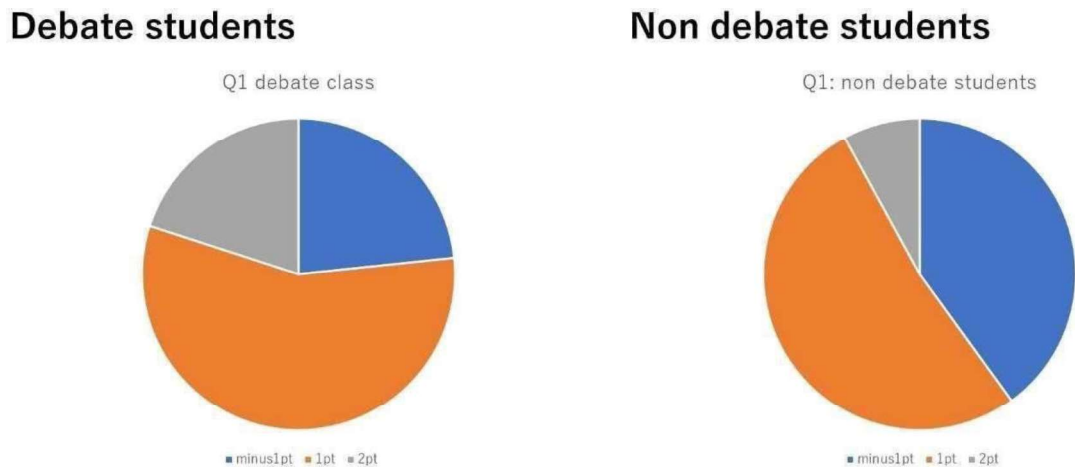


Figure 1. Choosing Two Counterclaims

As for the second section, many of the students answered right. They could respond with a denial type of counterclaim while flip was rare. The most frequently seen response was “It’s up to each individual.” This suggests that many students can come up with at least a denial type of counterclaim if the given statement to rebut is short and simple. Students did not show hesitation in responding to the questions with pressure.

In the third section, students struggled. Both students in the debate course and those in other courses could not identify the sentences to form syllogism, but students of non-debating courses suffered more. This suggests that the reason for sidetracking is this lack of skill to identify key premises of their opponent’s argument. They make unclear rebuttal points because they don’t pinpoint the statement to rebut.

Throughout the fourth section, only minority students saw the clash of arguments. Interpretation of the implicit rebuttal varied. The majority of the audience didn’t decode the coded rebuttal; inexplicit counterclaim, dog-whistling, or sarcasm, and having the knowledge to decode the rebuttal did not make the comprehension dramatically easier. Just as in Uesugi’s case, antagonists sometimes choose implicit rebuttal as a strategy, and some even try dog-whistling. However, it might not be strategic if the message does not come across for most of the targeted audience. Most of all, it leads to the sidetracking of the counterpart and becomes an obstacle to integrated debate. This result confirmed that explicitness in the rebuttal phase had significance.

5. CONCLUSION

Sidetracking seems unlikely to be cultural. If it was deep culture, a ten-week course of debating probably didn’t change the students’ rebuttal skills. If it was, female students had to perform poorer than male ones. The statistical superiority of students of debate courses shows that rebuttal skills are something we can easily learn and improve. Superior performance, but not to a statistically meaningful extent, of female students suggests that the pressure not to debate does not ruin our debate skills although if we feel safe to practice

the skills outside the classroom, might be a different matter. In the society off campus, their debating skills might be hidden just as the yolk of over-easy eggs is hidden under the thin layer of white.

At the same time, students' struggle in rebuttal was found real. It might not be due to cultural suppression but due to the lack of training. Japanese students might struggle just as much as those in other parts of the world. However, this lack of rebuttal skills, more specifically how to explicitly present a directly countering claim, causes a significant problem because this study also confirmed that implicit rebuttal is often misunderstood or neglected. It makes genuine and fruitful debate nearly impossible. Thus, to improve students' rebuttal skills, instructors need to look at their comprehension skills more carefully. Their students might need extra opportunities to learn how to identify key elements of arguments presented by their opponents. Knowing how to pinpoint the statement that they argue against, they will be able to avoid sidetracking and make their counterclaim explicit.

Looking at the bright side, after the summer break, the vast majority of students who participated in this research came back to debate for another semester. Perhaps they had a tough time practising the rebuttal in the previous semester, but much more than that, it seems that they enjoyed debating. Even if people feel pressured not to debate in the real world, learning the overwhelming joy of integrating debates might let them involuntarily start debating outside the classroom. It must be hard to keep hiding the skills that they worked hard to acquire especially when they know the fruitful intellectual groove that exercising the skills brings to them. And according to the results of this study, debating with integrity or integrating rebuttal seems not too hard to learn. Hence providing more opportunities for more people to learn how to rebut explicitly and genuinely can be a shortcut to society with open debate. This must be a very bright prospect for anybody who teaches debating. This paper hopes to conclude with the sunny side up.

REFERENCES

- Fukuzawa Y. Tomita M. ed. (1997). *The Autobiography of Fukuzawa Yukichi [Fukuoujiden]*. Tokyo: Keio University.
- Haga, Y. (1999). *Speech and Japanese: Speakers Who Made History [Gengo to Nihonjin: Rekishi wo Tsukutta Hanashitetchi]*. Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Kawase, N. (2013). Kotoagesezu. *Kokoro no Mirai*, 10, 1.
- Morita, A., & Ishihara, S. (1989). *The Japan That Can Say 'No' ['No' to Ieru Nihon]*. Tokyo: Kobunsha.
- Nakatsu, R. (2005). *English and Destiny [Eigo to Unmei]*. Tokyo: Sangokan.
- Natsume, S. (1988). *Complete Works of Natsume Soseki 10 [Soseki Zenshu 10]*. Tokyo: Chikumashobo.
- Nikkan Sports. (2021). Chair Mori 'They Would Write That I Denounced': Complete Transcript 2 [Mori Kaicho 'Watashi ga Waruguchi wo Itta to Kakareru': Hatsugen Zenbun 2]. *Nikkan Sports*. Feb. 4, 2021. <https://www.nikkansports.com/olympic/tokyo2020/news/202102040000029.html> (retrieved on 2023/09/30)
- Togo, M. & Kikuchi, G. (1920). *Oratorical Speech and Free Rhetoric [Shikiji Enzetsu Yuben Jizai]*. Tokyo: Toseido.
- Torikai, K. (2004). *Mistranslation That Changed the History [Rekishi wo Kaeta Goyaku]*. Tokyo: Shinchosha.
- Toulmin, S. E. (1958). *The uses of argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Utsugi, A. (2016). *The World, English, and Japanese [Sekai to Eigo to Nihonjin]*. Tokyo: Hokuju Shuppan.