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Critical Cultural Awareness through a Japanese "Hysterical Construction" and the "Karen Meme" in ELT

ABSTRACT

This study explores how integrating gendered discourse analysis into English language education can foster critical cultural awareness among Japanese learners. Focusing on two culturally embedded representations—the Japanese "Hysterical Construction" and the "Karen meme" in American English (e.g., Armstrong, 2021; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022)—the research examines how social ideologies and emotional expressions are intertwined. Following Kramsch and Hua's (2020) notion of language as a social semiotic system, this paper employs qualitative data from TikTok videos as an example of the analysis that can serve as heuristic cues for students. Particular attention is given to how hysterical emotion is discursively constructed (Boiger et al., 2013; Mesquita, 2022): while American discourse often frames emotion as a form of individual expression and entitlement, Japanese discourse tends to emphasize a self-other inseparability. The analysis reveals how socio-cultural norms shape these discourses and contribute to their reproduction. The findings suggest that incorporating such comparative discourse analysis into a four-week cycle of classroom activities can foster cross-cultural reflection and deepen learners' interdiscourse communication (Scollon, & Scollon, 2001).

Keywords: *critical cultural awareness, gendered discourse, hysterical emotions, ELT.*

Introduction

This study explores how integrating gendered discourse analysis into English language education can foster critical cultural awareness among Japanese learners. Focusing on two culturally embedded representations—the Japanese "hysterical construction" and the "Karen meme" in American English (e.g., Armstrong, 2021; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022)—the research examines how social ideologies and emotional expressions are connected across two languages. Van Doorn et al. (2012) also argue that emotional expressions not only convey information about others but also shape how people interpret the social context itself. Their findings suggest that emotional responses may function at broader social levels and raise the possibility that habitual emotional patterns contribute to forming and maintaining cultural identities. This pragmatic perspective also facilitates the understanding of language as a social

semiotic system (Kramsch and Hua's (2020).

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to propose practical classroom activities entwined with critical cultural awareness, employing theoretical approach to examine the discourse-based analysis to propose practical and effective classroom activities. Note that this study adopts a theoretical and qualitative orientation, rather than a data-driven approach, with the dual aims of:

1. comparing the rhetorical construction of hysterical anger in Japanese (Hisu-construction) and U.S. contexts (Karen meme), and
2. proposing a classroom activity design for English language teaching (ELT) that fosters critical cultural awareness through emotional discourse analysis.

To address the two points above, I formulated the following Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1. How is "hysterical anger" rhetorically constructed in Japanese and U.S. discourse? Are there any differences in the commonality?

RQ2. How can this comparative analysis be pedagogically applied in ELT to develop learners' cultural awareness?

By answering these questions, language learning moves beyond superficial skill acquisition and becomes an opportunity for cultural and self-analysis. It shifts the focus toward examining how emotion expressions—shaped by one's cultural background and individual disposition—can be articulated in the target language.

In what follows, this paper is organized into five sections. Section 2 reviews the literature on emotions as socially constructed categories and provides a socio-cognitive overview of both the Japanese hysterical construction and the Karen meme. Section 3 outlines the methodology, detailing procedures that teachers can adopt through rhetorical analysis (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Section 4 presents two illustrative examples that demonstrate how these frameworks can be introduced in classroom design. Section 5 describes the four-week cycle of classroom activities based on a sample syllabus, and Section 6 offers concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Emotion as a cultural and discourse practice

Emotion is a combination of cultural products and one's inner feelings (Barret F., 2006). As Littlemore et al. (2023) posit, human beings are emotional beings grounded in physiological changes and experiences, but how they express their emotions differs across cultures. It is also

tied to taking a stance as discursive practice (Jaffe, 2009): emotion is discursively constructed rather than fixed (Barret, F., 2006). In this paper, the expression of emotion is regarded as a social practice (Fairclough, 1993), showing their position or attitude with emotion. In general, people constitute a psychological construct that resorts to language and its use (Eiser, 2014, p.59).

Boiger et at (2013) investigate how situations afford emotional experiences and what a culture condones and condemns. They reveal that emotions are fluid; cultures shape the likelihood of emotional experiences under certain conditions. In this respect, Mesquita (2022) proposes two types of models: MINE and OURS.

Table 1 Two types of models (Mesquita, 2022, p.51)

MINE	Mental (Feelings are important) Inside (Inward focus; emphasis on the individual) Essence (Inward-out: emotion seeks expression)
OURS	Outside (Outward focus; emphasis on the social) Relational (Acts are important) Situated (Outward-in: emotional acts seek to meet social norms; suppression helps to cultivate the appropriate feeling)

As the table shows, the MINE model underscores the deep inner feelings within us, identifying emotions grounded in individual feelings. On the flip side, individuals in cultures with the OURS model focus on emotions arising from situated circumstances in interpersonal relationships. Broadly, Japanese culture tends to reflect the OURS model, while U.S. culture aligns more closely with the MINE model. As this is a general cultural model, every phenomenon can necessarily be explained by a clear-cut distinction. The distinction is instrumental in identifying differences in emotional reactions to a given situation between two cultures.

Hysterical feelings are usually accompanied by anger. A natural kind of emotion, like anger, was thought to be behavioral and psychological changes (Barret, F., 2006). For instance, Blood pressure will rise, a scowl will form on the face, and there will be an urge to hit or yell (Barret, F., 2006). Lakoff (1987, p.382) posits that these kinds of physiological effects stand for emotion. Contrary to popular belief, contemporary theories of emotion propose that bodily reactions co-occur with a cognitive awareness that one is experiencing a feeling (e.g., fear), and it is this simultaneity that allows individuals to link the two. From this perspective,

contextual cues—rather than physiological changes alone—play a central role in how emotions are identified and experienced (Littlemore et al., 2023, p.3).

Moreover, Mestuita (2022, p.85) contends that demonstrating angry feelings is a form of taking a position in a relationship. More specifically, anger is dovetailed with the representation of power or status. This notion accords with hysterical outbursts, even if the feelings might be considered to be immature. Being hysterical or angry amounts to a rhetorical and legitimization strategy regardless of the cultural differences. Yet, the comparative analysis can yield what attributes and entitlements (social status, race, position, etc.) are the cornerstones for each culture, which will be discussed later.

The stance taking by expressing one's emotions is associated with shared communal ideologies. For example, traits such as warmth, emotional responsiveness, and empathy are typically attributed more to women, whereas men are more often associated with agentic qualities like assertiveness, ambition, and aggression. Women are also socially expected to display emotions such as joy, calmness, and modesty. Consequently, in many cultural contexts, the range of behaviors considered socially acceptable for women tends to be considerably narrower (Eagly & Wood, 1991). In the case of being angry with hysterical tone could be seen as such deviation of the socially embraced image for women in Japan and the U.S.

Japanese hisu-construction

Japanese "hysterical construction" (hisu-kobun, HK) has sparked an interest among younger generations since 2023. Initially, a Japanese comedian, Laland, created the HK as a joke, mocking the hysterical aspect of Japanese women (mothers). Many people started using the construction on platforms like YouTube or TikTok. According to Laland, there are several types of construction: 1) logical leap, 2) bold conclusion, 3) topic shift, 4) self-denial, and 5) verbal barrage. These categories are not entirely separated because they share the same quality, the hyperbolic description of the situation.

The logical leap is a pattern in which a speaker overinterprets someone's remarks and makes a logical jump to accuse or corner them. In the second type, the speaker abruptly draws a bold conclusion or proposes an absurd solution to end the discussion forcibly. The topic shift type is a pattern in which the speaker introduces a different issue unrelated to the current topic to gain the upper hand in the argument. In the self-denial type, the speaker excessively criticizes or denies themselves to elicit a reassuring response like "That's not true (That's not what I meant)." The last type is a pattern in which the speaker fires off a flood of words at once, losing

control of the conversation. From these observations, Laland defines the HK as follows: a construction that mothers employ to make the third party (kids) feel guilty through far-fetched argumentation and hysterical outbursts. Thus, the prototypical users of this construction are Japanese mothers.

All of the patterns draw our attention to hyperbole as a rhetorical strategy and to the OURS cultural model. For instance, Burgers et al (2016, pp. 164-65) summarize how one should define hyperbole: (1) scalar, (2) a specific shift between the propositional and the intended meaning, and (3) includes a specific reference (4) to real-world knowledge about the specific event. These hyperbolic elements explicitly in conjunction with the HK and the Karen meme.

Since the comedian created the HK, it might not be as academically significant. However, this paper argues that the HK is more than just a joke and that it reveals the unwritten norms and social expectations in Japanese society. In other words, the joke's exaggerated element is central, as humor functions not only to reinforce interpersonal bonds but also to assert power through mechanisms of control and aggression. (Goatly, 2012, p.131). A question arises about the kinds of power structures emerge those popular tropes. To answer this question, the following two sections cover the fundamental features of the Karen and the legitimacy of the comparative analysis, focusing on the background of this research.

Karen meme

Although the origin of the Karen meme is murky, there are some expositions on how it spread among people (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022). Some argue that Karen was coined by comedian Dane Cook in 2005, or it can be associated with the movie *Mean Girls* (Greenspan, 2020). A common notion from various views on stereotypical Karen is that she has short haircuts ('the speak to the manager haircut'), showing entitlement as being white, when something gets in their way. It was mid-2020 that Karen's identity was widely shared on social media when Amy Cooper, known as Central Park Karen, was involved. According to the *New York Post*, she was filmed shouting at science and comic-book writer Christian Cooper, who was just a birdwatcher and unrelated to her, and phoning the police to report that an "African American man" was "threatening" her as she walked her dog in Central Park's Ramble area. The video went viral, and the incident seems to be the driving force behind the Karen meme's hype.

Essentially, the term "Karen" refers to a stigmatized social identity and a pejorative label applied to specific individuals. The definition and key characteristics of Karen include: a

woman "thought to be misbehaving, rudely or in an entitled manner." The identity is attributed to a group of (mostly) American women, who are stereotypically middle-aged and white. While the attribution of the identity is clearly gendered: 84% of incidents involved women in the studied corpus, the male counterpart is sometimes referred to as Ken or Kevin (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2022).

Consequently, "Karen" has morphed into a catch-all name for entitled white women who demand to speak to the manager, whether it's the manager of a store, a restaurant, or, in the case of that Texas teacher, the president of the United States (Abcarian, 2020). The Karen behavior generally emerges in public spaces (e.g., roads and streets, stores, near home, parking lots, restaurants, parks, sidewalks, etc). Within the United States, the Karen social persona is viewed as emerging from offline encounters in which people reacted to perceived threats to their face in environments that normatively require courteous and civil behavior.

The background of the comparative approach from socio-cognitive approach

As Adams et al., (2014, p.2) argue, a researcher can use "deep careful self-reflection—typically referred to as 'reflectivity'—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and political." In this sense, a teacher's self-reflection—grounded in their own teaching experiences and socio-cultural awareness—is crucial for improving instructional design. I chose to focus on HK construction because it appeared in the 2023 Kyōtsū Test (standardized test) for Japanese university admissions. In fact, many Japanese high school students who took the exam pointed this out on social media (e.g., Twitter/X), which sparked my curiosity and eventually led me to watch a YouTube video by Laland. I not only enjoyed the content but also realized that the comedian captured how stereotypical Japanese women (especially mothers) express hysterical emotions remarkably well. Although the HK is framed as a joke, it provides valuable insights into the social norms and expectations embedded within Japanese gendered discourse.

This personal awareness naturally leads to further questions: *What if I compare the hysterical construction with an English counterpart that closely mirrors it? What can such a comparison teach us about English as a second language and about cross-cultural emotional expression?* This self-awareness is important as a Japanese teacher of English in that we have to conduct classes unique to Japanese identity. In this respect, Takaesu and Sumo (2019) contend that some Japanese students see Japanese English teachers as less qualified than native speakers. In Japan, some people still hold the idea of native worship, so much so that it is

required for Japanese teachers to have their uniqueness linked to significant critical cultural awareness.

Moreover, there is an issue of the distance between Japanese and English. It is safe to say that English is considered to be a low common ground for Japanese people (Zhu et al., 2025, p.29). In that scenario, language awareness brings us new insights about the target language, reflecting our own language and culture. As such, the comparative can be beneficial to grasp the importance of language awareness (Svalberg, 2016). They both highlight the hyperbolic nature of a particular attribute ingrained in each culture as a cognitively heuristic attribute (Maillat & Oswald, 2011).

As the counterpart of the HK, I chose a widely circulated meme because it is "an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online, especially through social media" (*Meriam-Webster*) It is fair to say popular words, constructions, or memes are socio-cognitive representations and social semiotic systems that reveal power structure, gender/racial issues, and many other multifaceted social representations (e.g., Potter, 1996; Van Dijk, 1998; Koller, 2011; Kramsch & Hua, 2020). The analysis allows us to observe cultural differences across the same themes, topics, and social issues. In other words, the comparative analysis of the Karen meme and the hysterical construction (HK) can facilitate learning by helping one reflect on oneself while simultaneously gaining exposure to a different way of thinking.

The prominent commonality between them is their hyperbolic nature, which includes at least five similarities: entitlement, selfishness, a desire to complain (being hysterical), and a victim mentality. However, cognitive models of social stereotypes (Lakoff, 1987) enable us to examine different socially expected norms. As Lakoff (1987, p.81) argues, "normal expectations play an important role in cognition, and they are required in order to characterize the meaning of certain words." The social stereotypes are also dovetailed with the frame and idealized cognitive model (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff, 2004; Hart, 2014). For instance, Lakoff (2002) proposes a strict father morality, where there is a Metaphor of the Moral Order based on Great Chain of Being: Men are naturally more powerful than women, men have more authority over women, men have a responsibility for the well-being of women (Lakoff, 2002, p.82). These fundamental moralities seep into both U.S. and Japanese societies, a situation in which a male-dominated structure is widely distributed.

Despite the emphasis on diversity in Japan, Japanese society is mainly for Japanese people who speak Japanese. A racial issue in Japan is not as prominent as in U.S. culture, to the point that being entitled has different meanings. In the Japanese context, a socially expected

behavior for women—"A mother, drawing upon the presumed source of maternal affection, is expected to accept her child unconditionally and to provide care and emotional support in a self-effacing and self-sacrificial manner" (Kuriyama, 2016, p.24)— might construct a social norm. Indeed, many women felt pressure from the socially constructed idealized image of motherhood.

In the U.S. context, too, such hierarchy is coupled with a socially shared standard, and racial hierarchy involves an additional layer (Harp, 2019). Exploring the overlap between White identity and male gender revealed a sophisticated comprehension of how hegemonic masculinity is sustained through dominance, hierarchical power, and intersecting social structures (Harp, 2019, p.38). This view is no exception for white women who consider themselves socially high status in confronting racial minorities.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical approach grounded in rhetorical analysis. The primary aim is not to conduct a large-scale corpus study, but to identify typical rhetorical patterns of hysterical reactions in Japanese and U.S. contexts, and to propose a classroom design that enables learners to engage with these patterns critically. To illustrate these patterns, a small number of representative examples were collected from TikTok and other social media platforms using the hashtags related to the Hisu-construction and the Karen meme. These examples are treated as pedagogical materials, not as systematic datasets. TikTok is better suited for pedagogical use, given that its algorithm constantly refreshes content, making it challenging to ensure reproducibility in data collection. I took the following steps to collect data to show an example of the analysis to students:

1. Enter the keyword—"ヒス構文" and "Karen meme—in the search box.
2. Click "For you" and review the top ten videos, respectively.
3. Check each influencer's number of followers and select the top two for the HK.
4. Identify the most viewed videos related to the Karen meme.
5. Compare how people express their hysterical emotions, paying attention to their rhetoric (e.g., metaphor, irony, etc), facial expressions, gestures, and other features.

As noted earlier, the HK serves primarily as a humorous construction, and the influencer created the joke by drawing on the prototypical HK pattern discussed in Section 2. For this study, I selected an influencer (michaela_sato佐藤ミケーラ倭子 (604.1K) with the largest follower counts, on the assumption that a higher number of followers generally corresponds to greater social influence.

Karen memes are often recorded by third parties who witness the so-called "Karen moments." On TikTok, however, the circulating clips tend to be those filmed by the individuals targeted by the Karen, and influencers typically upload edited compilations ranked by popularity. As a result, a single uploaded clip may contain multiple original videos. For this reason, I selected an example based on the influencers' rankings.

In socially significant discourse (e.g., political, gendered, and educational discourse), a rhetorical analysis plays a vital role in understanding the interrelation between language and discourse (Semino, 2008; Musolff, 2016). As the HK and the Karen memes intersect with gendered and racial discourse, a metaphor analysis can be indispensable. Metaphors are not mere linguistic decoration; they govern our thoughts and actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). To analyze metaphors in detail, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) was adopted to examine pragmatic functions within a socio-cognitive framework (Charteris-Black, 2018).

CMT views linguistic expressions as evidence of the systematic metaphors. For example, love is oftentimes conceptualized as a journey, phrases such as "our relationship has hit a dead-end street" "keep going the way they've been going," "It's been a long bumpy road," showcase the elements of a concept journey (source domain) is mapped on a more abstract, intangible concept love (target domain) (Lakoff, 1993, p.206). This general principle, or conceptual system, governs a language: understanding one domain of a particular concept in terms of a very different domain at the conceptual level. Importantly, recent studies (e.g., Hart, 2014; Steen, 2023) apply this theory to analyze discourse-based metaphors, which involve a crossover of conceptual and social dimensions. This study considers how metaphors are used in the HK, as the Karen meme involves more direct, spontaneous emotional outbursts than the indirect verbal attacks found in the HK.

In addition, I analyzed how speakers use gestures, gaze, and facial expressions (Andersson, 2024). For instance, gestures include throwing up your hands or arms, deictic pointing, head tilts, and lying on the floor. Gaze involves an angry/scornful stare and bugged-out eyes. Facial expressions include a look of disdain, a frown or scowl, and a sarcastic grin. The subsequent examples illustrate how these frameworks can be applied by students to analyze similar phenomena.

Examples

Example 1

Examples given in this section are not intended to determine whether my analysis is right or wrong. On the contrary, they are designed to give students heuristic cues to apply for their analysis, not for absorption learning. As Gergen (2015, p. 148) rightly argues, "Learning is an

integral part of taking action in matters about which one cares." With this in mind, the following analysis could be a model analysis for students. As an example of the HK, this section introduces Michaela Sato (佐藤ミケーラ倭子) 's video clip (00:37), in which she deploys a systematic animal metaphor to legitimize her position. The example below shows a conversation between the customer and the clerk.

Customer: I don't need the receipt.

Clerk: It has your pickup number on it, so if you could just—

Customer: No, it's fine.

Clerk: Oh, I see. So you mean the receipt I touched is too dirty for you? Then what, huh? Because you refuse to take your receipts, they'll pile up, and I'll end up buried in them and turn into a goat. Yeah, sure, I'll just survive eating nothing but receipts. Right? "A goat working the register at McDonald's." I'll be super famous, and they'll start selling meadow-burger or something and open an organic McDonald's. Is that what you want?

Customer: O-okay… I'll take it…

Clerk: No, it's fine. It's fine. I'll just go live my life as a goat now.

The excerpts start from the scene where the clerk asks the customer to receive the receipt. Once the clerk realizes her point does not get across, her attitude suddenly changes to hysterical, with the remark "e, nani (Oh, I see)," as shown in the following figure.

Figure 1 A McDonald's store clerk exhibiting the HK behavior.

This is the first stage of the HK, a cue for an emotional transformation from a serene state to a hysterical state. As the emotion changes, so does the speaker's posture; the head tilts for a moment as the speaker says, "Oh, I see." At the onset of the HK, she broaches the far-fetched idea of the cleanliness of her hand, saying, "The receipt I touched is too dirty." This made-up reason why the customer did not receive the receipt is apparently off the wall.

However, the hyperbole brings the customer into the speaker's mental space (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014), where exaggeration with metaphors creates the seemingly legitimate claim.

The extended animal metaphor plays a vital role in constructing her account of what is happening in the ad hoc situation. A conceptual metaphor, PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, is underpinned in this context in which there is a mapping between the goat (source) to the clerk (target). The rudimentary mapping is extended as the conversation progresses: MEADOW-BURGER and ORGANIC MACDONALD'S correspond to THE RESULT OF CLERK EATING PILED RECEIPTS AS FOOD. The extended metaphor, using the words "meadow-burger" and "organic McDonald's," depicts the result when the customer refuses to take the receipt. Through the mapping from the source to the target, the speaker illuminates her view that plant-made McDonald's burgers are absurd and unthinkable. In this sense, the extended metaphor use significantly entrenches her lop-sided view that not taking the receipt is an absolute wrongdoing. This context-level interpretation also derives from epistemic correspondence, shown in the table below.

Table 2 The epistemic correspondence of the animal metaphor in context (K=knowledge)

source	target
K1: A goat is not a human being.	K1: The clerk is not a human being.
K1: A goat is an herbivore.	K1: The clerk is an herbivore.
K2: Herbivores eat plants.	K2: The clerk eats receipts.
K3: The clerk working at Macdonald's serves hamburgers.	K3: The clerk working at organic Macdonald's serves meadow-burgers.

The epistemic correspondence lays the foundation for the context-level correspondences that exist underneath it. These inferences create an extreme space that overwhelms the listener. Another essential rhetorical technique used in this HK is the rhetorical question: the speaker uses the question to take advantage, expecting the listener's answer to be 'no.' The speaker makes the listener bewildered with the fallacy of many questions. The systematic metaphor use and the rhetorical questions result in the ironic final remark, "I'll just go live my life as a goat now." This irony is not merely intended to attack the opponent as an individual, but it also embodies a victim mindset that invites pity by playing the sympathy card. The following section covers the typical Karen meme to compare with the HK.

Example 2

The section discusses the Karen meme video clip on "ranking the best Karen crashouts" (00:17). In this video, there is a brief conversation between the woman (the Karen) and the man, during which you can see the woman's extreme reactions, as in the following example.

A woman: Hey, Internet. This man and his doberman just attacked me and my chihuahua.

A man: It's not a doberman.

A woman: Aaaah!

A man: What are you doing?

A woman: Aaaah! Aaaah!He just bit me.

A man: No, he didn't.

A woman: Help! Police! I'm gonna call the police! Help!

The Karen's opening statement—the man and his dog attacked her—is entirely fabricated. She constructs a counterfactual space in which the man is the criminal and the woman the victim. After the man denies that the dog is a Doberman, she begins to scream, only further confusing him. At that moment, she placed her hand on her knee, performing the role of someone who had been attacked by them, as shown in Figure 2.

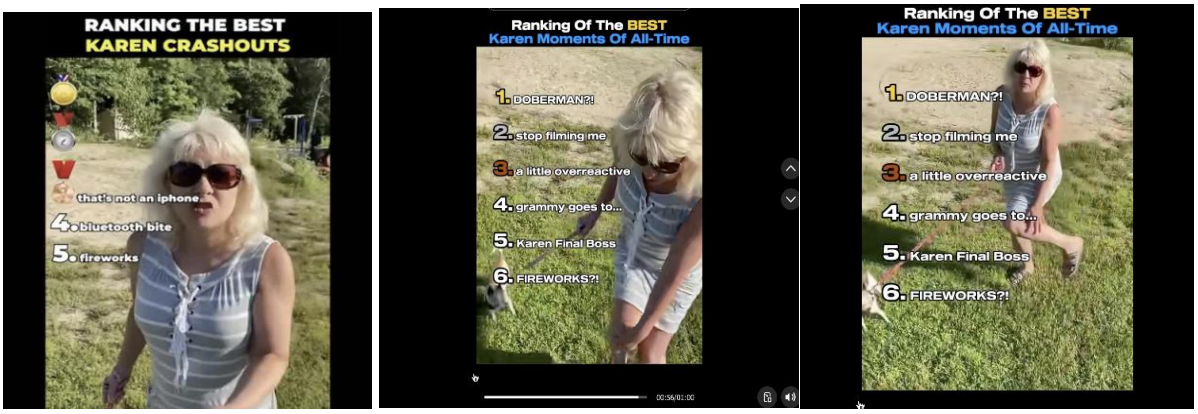

Figure 2 The Karen meme in TikTok (DOBERMAN?!)

Having been surprised, he said to her, "What are you doing?" which prompted her to scream more ("Aaaah!"), arguing that the dog bit her. Regardless of the man's denial, she broached the subject of calling the police. Indeed, the calling-the-police scenario is a typical tactic of Karens to legitimize their actions as if they are the right thing to do.

Note that they do not use ironic or sarcastic comments to claim legitimacy; instead, they express their emotions more straightforwardly toward the person. This characterization accords with the MINE model, which holds that emotions are individual inner feelings. Rather than involving others to make them feel guilty, they express their anger in their own way. In this type of accusation, there is no technical rhetoric to be found in the HK example. Taken together, the following features emerge:

- She constructed a counterfactual space, where the man and the dog attacked her.
- She screamed with a terrified facial expression, gestures (pointing a finger at a camera), placing her hand on her knees, leaning back a bit, etc, to show that she was the victim.
- She did not use complex rhetorical devices.
- She used her racial profile (being a white female)
- The fact that she thought the police could help her implies her unconscious superiority and entitlement.

The example above demonstrates that the Karen meme or behavior is deeply rooted in U.S. culture, unlike the Japanese hysterical construction. Nevertheless, they share the following features: entitlement, selfishness, a desire to complain (being hysterical), and a victim mentality.

Similarities and differences between the HK and the Karen

So far, we have discussed examples of the HK and the Karen behavior, respectively. We will observe prototypical stages in which they show their position. The following table demonstrates the HK process.

Table 3 The typical HK communicative strategy

Stage 1	A speaker holds a certain value, morality, and expectation.
Stage 2	A speaker's value, morality or expectation is violated.
Stage 3	A speaker uses bodily gestures, facial expressions and language to show that the speaker gets upset to clarify her stance and position.
Stage 4	A speaker uses the HK to construct an exaggerated space.
Stage 5	A speaker expands the space with rhetorical devices (metaphor, rhetorical questions) to make the listener feel guilty and overwhelmed.
Stage 6	A listener is forced to say "That's not what I meant."
Stage 7	A speaker concludes with an ironic remark based on the exaggerated space

The premise of the HK is that the speaker holds certain values, moral expectations, and assumptions formed through their subjective experiences. The construction is triggered when these expectations are violated, prompting the speaker to use gestures and facial expressions to signal their frustration. To draw the listener into her exaggerated emotional space, the speaker deploys rhetorical devices that overwhelm the listener, who eventually has no choice but to respond with, "That's not what I meant." At this stage, the speaker leverages the listener's resulting sense of guilt and concludes her remarks with irony.

The following table shows the prototypical characteristics of a Karen meme.

Table 4 The typical Karen's communicative strategy

Stage 1	A speaker holds a certain value, morality, and expectation.
Stage 2	A speaker's value, morality or expectation is violated.
Stage 3	A speaker uses bodily gestures, facial expressions and language to show that the speaker gets upset to clarify her stance and position.
Stage 4	A speaker constructs a counterfactual space.
Stage 5	A speaker starts to play the victim card, screaming to the person, lying on the floor, etc.
Stage 6	A speaker mentions calling the police.

The first three stages help us identify the features shared with the HK. Although the exaggerated and counterfactual spaces may overlap to some extent, a subtle distinction emerges. The counterfactual space is where the speaker fabricates a scenario that clearly contradicts the mutually shared context, as illustrated in Example 2. Within this constructed space, the speaker positions herself as the victim, portraying the listener as someone who attacks her both physically and psychologically. That is why they usually use a more direct way to express their emotions, without resorting to complex rhetorical devices. This counterfactually constructed world enables the speaker to adopt a victim stance, ultimately legitimizing actions such as threatening to call the police.

From the discussion above, the general differences between them can be summed up in the following way:

- The HK targets the third party's guilt, making them feel sorry with ironic remarks.
- The HK employs various rhetorical devices (metaphors, similes, etc.)
- The Karen meme does not involve sarcasm or irony.

- Karen meme employs unidirectional emotional explosion, meaning that it uses directives. Unlike the HK, the third party does not feel sorry for the speaker; instead, they react negatively.

The subsequent section discusses how English learners and teachers can apply this type of comparison to classroom activities.

Discussion

Across this paper, I have argued that a language should not be viewed as a culturally empty code by demonstrating the two examples in the preceding sections. As Kramsch and Hua (2020) argue, ELT practitioners need to cultivate a deeper awareness of the historical and political forces that shape language use, together with greater reflexivity, so that learners can recognize the power relations embedded in intercultural communication and understand the historical and symbolic dimensions associated with what is termed "symbolic competence." One way to deepen such social and political awareness is through the comparison of the way one expresses their emotions. Overgeneralization of social stereotypes or group memberships should certainly be avoided; however, attending to the processes of meaning-making allows us to notice aspects of discourse that often remain outside our conscious awareness (Kramsch and Hua, 2020, p.42).

In this sense, even though the present study is theoretical, it offers implications for designing classroom practices tailored to developing critical cultural awareness beyond treating language merely as a tool for communication. Scollon and Scollon (2001) propose a discourse-based approach, "interdiscourse communication," through which analysts can examine how identities and meanings are constituted in interaction. According to Scollona and Scollon (2001), discourse systems comprise "generation, profession, corporate or institutional placement, regional, ethnic, and other possible identities." Accordingly, the comparative analysis in this study provides a suitable foundation for proposing practical ELT activities.

This paper proposes a hypothetical course titled "Introduction to Language and Culture," consisting of approximately 14–15 sessions, following a typical Japanese university semester structure (see Appendix A for a sample syllabus). Each session would last either 90 or 100 minutes. Since each class period at the current institution—Kobe Pharmaceutical University—is 100 minutes, the course design proposed here follows that format. The class size is relatively small, with approximately 15-20 students per class. The following steps outline how the instructional sequence can be implemented over a four-week cycle of classroom activities.

Table 5 The four-week cycle of classroom activities

WEEK 11 (Introduction) — 100 minutes
1 The instructor introduces the concepts of hysterical construction (HK) and the Karen meme.
2 Students read brief summaries of relevant research papers.
3 The instructor presents selected TikTok and YouTube video clips.
4 Based on Steps 1–3, each group synthesizes their observations regarding cultural similarities and differences.
5 The instructor presents examples (see Section 4) after asking students opinions based on the step 4.
5 The instructor poses additional thought-provoking discussion questions.
6 Students engage in group-based discussion activities.
WEEK 12 (Small Project-Based Activity) — 100 minutes
1 Students select one emotion from major emotional categories (e.g., happiness, sadness).
2 They identify Japanese and English expressions using dictionaries, reading materials, or social media sources.
3 Each group member conducts a brief pragmatic analysis of the expressions they collected.
4 Groups present an outline of their planned presentation.
WEEK 13 (Presentations) — 100 minutes
1 Each group presents the results of their analysis.
2 Question-and-answer session.
3 Instructor feedback.
WEEK 14 (Presentations & Wrap-up) — 100 minutes
1 Each group delivers a second presentation on their findings.
2 Question-and-answer session.
3 Instructor feedback.

In Week 11, the instructor introduces the foundational concepts of HK and the Karen meme by distributing a handout summarizing key findings from previous studies and reviewing

the content with students. In addition to the textual materials, the instructor presents selected TikTok and YouTube video clips. This introductory phase, corresponding to Steps 1–3, occupies approximately the first 50 minutes of the session. Following this, students are placed into groups of three or four, and asked to synthesize their observations of cultural similarities and differences and articulate their implications. This group work lasts for about 15–20 minutes. The instructor then poses additional discussion questions designed to encourage reflection on students' personal experiences:

Q1. Have you ever encountered someone behaving hysterically in Japan (e.g., a mother, friend, or acquaintance)? How did that person express their emotions?
Q2. Have you ever observed hysterical behavior in people from other countries? How were their emotions expressed?
Q3. How do you usually express your own emotions as a Japanese speaker?

These questions serve two purposes: (1) to encourage students to reflect on their own cultural backgrounds, personalities, gendered experiences, and personal histories; and (2) to provide opportunities for them to practice articulating their thoughts in English as a communicative tool. However, these questions alone are not sufficient for fostering critical thinking beyond personal opinion-sharing. To prompt deeper engagement with culturally embedded assumptions, the instructor introduces the following questions:

Q4. Apart from individual differences, do you think the contrast between Japanese and U.S. emotional expression is merely a phenomenon reflected in popular constructions and memes? Can we generalize patterns in how people express emotions in both contexts?
Q5. Do you think the "construction" and the "meme" not only reveal underlying stereotypes but also reproduce socially constructed and intentionally emphasized aspects of those stereotypes?

Question 4 encourages students to consider external factors that may shape cultural differences in emotional expression. In contrast, Question 5 prompts them to reflect on how their own behaviors may contribute to the reproduction of socially shared norms. The subsequent group discussion on the intersection of language and culture lasts approximately 15–20 minutes. Taken together, these activities enable students to gain a rudimentary understanding of the two cultural representations, reflect on their subjective experiences and contextual factors, and recognize how individuals participate in sustaining social norms.

As noted earlier, students develop a basic understanding of cross-cultural differences in emotional expression through reading materials and group discussions. On WEEK12, each

group undertakes a small project by selecting one emotion from basic emotional categories (e.g., happiness, sadness) (Eliot & Hirumi, 2019). Group members are assigned specific roles to gather examples using Instagram, dictionaries, YouTube, or other sources, which they then analyze from a sociocultural perspective. After collecting these resources, each student prepares an outline for the presentations scheduled for WEEK13 and WEEK14.

On WEEK13 and WEEK14, each group delivers a 10-minute presentation on their findings, followed by a 5-minute Q&A session. Because each group member approaches the topic from a different viewpoint, the presentations would be dynamic and diverse. The instructor provides feedback after each presentation. Finally, the instructor presents one of the comparative analyses of HK and the Karen meme discussed in the previous section as a concluding illustration. This four-week cycle of classroom activities affords several advantages:

- Students develop an understanding of the importance of "interdiscourse communication."
- Students learn to analyze linguistic expressions of emotion while connecting them to sociocultural dimensions, thereby engaging critically with both their own language use and the target language.
- Students can learn about the pragmatic aspects of how emotions should be expressed across cultures (e.g., the MINE and OURS model) and the dynamics of interaction.
- Students engage in self-reflection, connecting their identities and experiences while simultaneously practicing effective English communication.
- Students actively participate in project-based learning.
- Students learn practical presentation formats and, through receiving feedback, develop the ability to engage in academic communication with their peers.

Ultimately, these approaches can enhance the quality of English learning that would otherwise remain limited if teaching practices focus solely on grammar and the four skills. It is essential to critically examine both learners' and the target language through the lenses of identity, culture, and society.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how a comparative analysis of the HK and the Karen memes can be pedagogically mobilized to foster cultural awareness in ELT. By foregrounding emotions as socially constructed categories rather than purely physiological reactions, the study

demonstrated how the OURS–MINE distinction broadly maps onto Japanese and U.S. sociocultural contexts. The HK, while framed through humorous performance, illuminates culturally embedded gendered stereotypes, and the Karen meme likewise provides a discursive site through which socially shared images and labels become visible. The incorporation of the rhetorical analysis using SNS-based examples was essential for capturing emergent patterns of socially circulated perceptions.

Drawing on this theoretical foundation, the discussion proposed a four-week cycle of classroom activities based on the comparative analysis. The instructor's analysis is not intended as a generalized claim but as a heuristic starting point that enables students to examine analogous phenomena independently. The pedagogical value of this approach lies in equipping learners with critical awareness of how language, culture, and identity intersect in everyday discourse.

The principal limitation of this study is its theoretical nature; empirical testing is necessary to assess the validity and pedagogical effectiveness of the proposal. To address this, I plan to adopt the syllabus in the appendix for the next academic year and collect students' responses as the empirical data for further analysis.

Although this study focused on Japanese and English, the approach presented here is replicable across other languages. By examining language and culture through a metacognitive lens rather than at a surface level, efforts to understand others ultimately deepen self-understanding, which in turn circulates back into enhanced understanding of others. This reciprocal cycle offers a valuable pathway for cultivating culturally grounded interpretive competence in ELT.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest. The analysis and interpretations were conducted independently, and no external influence affected the content or conclusions of this research.

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Appendix A

Table 6 Sample syllabus

WEEK1	Overview of course topics: • Cognitive linguistics and rhetorical analysis • Language and culture • Emotion-related expressions • Critical awareness of multi-layered discourse (e.g., power structures) • Social stereotypes (e.g., gender, race, etc.) Goal: Students will understand the overall structure of the course, grading criteria, and languages used (English & Japanese).
WEEK2	Introduction to cognitive linguistics: • Historical background and key concepts Goal: Students will gain a foundational understanding of the scope of cognitive linguistics.
WEEK3	Introduction to metaphor from a cognitive linguistic perspective: • Basic concepts of conceptual metaphor theory Goal: Students will understand the fundamental principles of conceptual metaphor theory.
WEEK4	Introduction to metonymy from a cognitive linguistic perspective: • Basic concepts of metonymy and related rhetorical devices Goal: Students will understand the fundamental mechanisms of metonymy and related rhetorical devices.
WEEK5	Cognitive model of "anger" (Part 1): • Basic understanding of emotion conceptualization based on Lakoff's (1987) analysis (Case Study 1) Goal: Students will understand how physiological reactions relate to emotion-related linguistic expressions.
WEEK6	Cognitive model of "anger" (Part 2): • Continued exploration of Lakoff's (1987) analysis (Case Study 1) Goal: Students will deepen their understanding of how physiological reactions relate to emotion-related expressions
WEEK7	Socio-cultural aspects of "anger":

	• Understanding emotions as socially constructed categories (based on recent research) • Understanding emotions as stance-taking, entitlement, and legitimisation strategies Goal: Students will understand the socio-cultural influences shaping emotional expressions.
WEEK8	Language and power in discourse: • How language functions within multi-layered discourse Goal: Students will understand the socio-cognitive relationship between language and power.
WEEK9	Introduction to social stereotypes: • Cognitive aspects of stereotypes from a cognitive linguistic perspective • How discourse constructs and reproduces social stereotypes Goal: Students will understand how social stereotypes are constructed through socio-cognitive processes.
WEEK10	Methodology for discourse analysis (metaphor analysis): • Basic understanding of metaphor analysis in discourse • Applying concepts from WEEK 1–10 to real data Goal: Students will understand how to conduct their own discourse analysis using cognitive linguistic tools.
WEEK 11-14	See Table 5