

## **Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida: Examining his Speech Style through Sociolinguistic Lens**

*By Shoji Azuma\**

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has been Japan's top political leader since October 2021. Following the terrible assassination of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in July 2022, Kishida strongly condemned the violent act. Yet, the media's coverage has tended to emphasize the controversial close ties between Abe's and Kishida's LDP bloc and the Unification Church. Many Japanese citizens continue to criticize Kishida's connections with the Church as well as his government's justification for holding a state funeral for the late prime minister. The present paper examines how Kishida has been dealing with the recent overt criticism of these political and domestic issues. One finding shows that both Kishida's "speaking" and "listening" skills are deficient. While initially appointed to Japan's leadership due to his talent for "listening to others" (*kiku chikara*), Kishida now seems to have diminished, at least in his political speeches, in his communicative abilities to "kiku" (listen) and "hanasu" (speak). This study analyses Kishida's skills within the theoretical framework of "involvement strategy" and the rapport-talking style in conversation.

*Keywords:* emotion, involvement, Japanese prime minister, speech style, rapport-talk

### **Introduction**

Fumio Kishida (1957-) is a Japanese politician currently serving as Japan's prime minister and president of the leading Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) since October 2, 2021. Kishida has been described as an ideological moderate within the LDP and has stated that his government will focus on a "new model of capitalism" (*shin jiyuu shugi*) by implementing redistributive policies to expand the Japanese middle class (*chuuryuu kaikyuu*). Regarding foreign policy, he plans to continue revitalizing the Quad Security Dialogue in pursuit of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy with Asian countries and the U.S. (Akimoto, 2021). Kishida served for four consecutive years as Japan's foreign minister, the longest anyone has served in that post during Japan's postwar period. For example, Kishida was involved in arranging for U.S. President Barack Obama's historic visit to the city of Hiroshima, the site of one of the atomic blasts which ended World War II. A Hiroshima native, Kishida has consistently advocated for Japanese diplomacy to promote nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament within the framework of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (*Kaku heiki fukakusan jyooyaku*) (Johnson, 2022).

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In his first year as prime minister, Kishida has faced many challenges, both international and domestic (see Figure 1). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kishida actively joined G-7 political leaders in imposing economic sanctions on Russia in the form of oil and wheat exports, among others. Although Kishida pledged a “new form of capitalism” for Japan, his agenda has hardly moved forward. His cabinet has been weighed down by the daunting economic problems of inflation, the yen’s plummeting value against the dollar and the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Asahi Shinbun, 2022f).

Figure 1. Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida Speaks to the Media (Taken from Reuters, 2022a)



But more acutely, Kishida has faced political headwinds over the dubious ties between his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Unification Church. Due to growing public frustration over this issue (Takahara, 2022), the government’s decision to move ahead with the state funeral for former prime minister Shinzo Abe, as well as inflation and other politically controversial issues, the Kishida Cabinet approval rating has dropped to around 35%, its lowest level, according to some media reports (e.g., The Mainichi Shinbun, 2022a; The Japan Times, 2022b; Josei Jishin, 2022; Tokyo Shinbun, 2022; Yomiuri Shinbun, 2022b; Nittere News, 2022c).

In particular, the Cabinet’s handling of the Unification Church issue has not been received well by the general public of Japan. As a result, Kishida has ordered the education ministry to “investigate” the Unification Church concerning its “spiritual sales” tactics, the first time the government has exercised its authority (*shitsumon ken*) under the “Religious Corporation Law,” which allows governmental

investigations of religious organizations suspected of wrongdoing (e.g., Asahi Shinbun, 2022b; Kyodo News, 2022a; Yomiuri Shinbun, 2022a). “Spiritual sales” refers to the sales techniques used on Japanese consumers to coerce the buying of purportedly “supernatural” products at exorbitant prices.

The Unification Church came under greater scrutiny following Shinzo Abe’s assassination. The alleged assassin, Tetsuya Yamagami, believed Abe had strong ties with the religious group. Yamagami reportedly suffered severe financial hardship due to his mother’s donations of more than 100 million yen to the Unification Church, essentially bankrupting the household. Although clearly not justifiable, the assassination appears to have been strongly motivated by the hardship experienced by Yamagami, which, in turn, had been influenced by the Unification Church’s activities. The horrific incident of Abe’s public assassination by Yamagami using a homemade gun has created public outrage and vows of defiance by politicians and the media in Japan (e.g., Azuma, 2022b).

The impact of the assassination is better understood against the backdrop of current Japanese societal norms and values. For example, it is important to note the setting of the assassination. Abe was killed out in the open, near a crowded Kintetsu Line train station as he was delivering a campaign speech for parliamentary elections. The setting represents a democratic value cherished by most Japanese citizens and is something the public takes very seriously. Furthermore, the collective public outcry is magnified by the fact that crime itself is so rare in Japan. It is not uncommon to see cellphones and purses lying unattended in cafes. Gun attacks are extremely rare, especially in recent years and even more so in public settings such as this one. The shockwaves from Abe’s assassination have resonated across the globe. As one Japanese newspaper put it, “a bullet pierced the foundation of democracy” (Asahi Shinbun, 2022a).

Political specialists analyzing the Kishida Cabinet’s performance have provided varied commentary. A well-noted political expert, Prof. Izuru Makihara of Tokyo University, stated “[the Kishida Cabinet] was too late in realizing the impact of the Unification Church issue on public opinion and the Cabinet was not prepared to deal with the issue.” Continuing, he notes “Kishida seems to emphasize the importance of foreign affairs. But, due to the yen’s plummeting value and the economic crisis in Japan, Kishida should pay more attention to domestic issues inside Japan” (NHK, 2022).

Another specialist, Prof. Kooji Nakakita of Hitotsubashi University, argues “it is crucial to have some form of public agreement to keep and maintain ‘consensus building’ among Kishida’s LDP members, the opposition party, and most importantly, Japan’s general public. Can we really solve the Unification Church problem? This is a critical moment for the Kishida Cabinet and may determine whether or not it stays intact, and whether or not Kishida continues to be our prime minister” (e.g., NHK, 2022). The current economic, social and religious challenges facing Kishida and his Cabinet are daunting. The continuation of Kishida and his Cabinet in power, as the current leader of Japanese politics, is a pertinent question.

In this paper, let us examine Kishida’s treatment of various political issues in his speeches at formal press conferences and at House Steering Committee meetings. Do his speeches attract and persuade his fellow politicians and the general public

to adopt his views? How successful are his speaking skills? Furthermore, let us compare Kishida's speaking skills with the speaking skills of other political leaders. How should we analyze Kishida's speech style from a linguistic perspective? What are the necessary strategies Kishida needs to acquire?

### Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework will focus on the concept of "involvement" in speech. According to well-known sociolinguists such as Tannen (2007) and Chafe (1982), involvement in speech can be defined as "an internal, even **emotional** connection individuals feel which binds them to other people as well as to places, things, activities, ideas, memories, and words." Tannen (2007), citing Gumperz (1982), states that involvement is "not a given but an achievement in conversational interaction." Gumperz (1982) argues that involvement "describes an observable, active participation in conversation." Goodwin (1981) calls it "conversational engagement" and Merritt (1982) calls it "mutual engagement." From these comments, we may surmise that the key component for us may be what Bakhtin (1981) describes as "all language use is dialogic" (i.e., in the form of dialogue).

In essence, the concept of involvement in speech is something both speakers and listeners **jointly** produce. They both must recognize and understand speech in a very active and cooperative manner. It is not passively transferred from the speaker to the listener in a unidirectional manner. It is an active participation involving both speaker and listener. A speaker can be a listener and a listener can be a speaker simultaneously. It is indeed "dialogic" as Bakhtin has suggested.

To put this in another way, we can say that a speaker needs to be listener-oriented (as well as speaker-oriented) when he/she speaks. The speaker always needs to think of other listeners and pay close attention to them when he/she speaks. Thus, involvement requires an "emotional" element in speech, in addition to an objective, factual element or report-oriented speech. As Bateson (1972) as well as Tannen (1986; 2007; 2021) point out, speech "sends a metamessage of **rapport** between the communicators, who thereby experience and share communicative conventions and inhabit the same world of discourse."

Tannen (2021) provides an example from her own life dealing with her father who currently resides in New York, but who is originally from Poland. Tannen recounts how she told her father about a play she had written about her father's life in Poland, using his own words, and based on a trip she and her father had taken to Poland. When she finished sharing the play with her father, his reaction, to her surprise, was negative. Yet, the next day, her father conveyed his true feelings of **deep appreciation**. Let me cite below what Tannen has described.

I've written a play about his life, full of his words, and he doesn't seem to care. The next day he hands me a letter in which he tells me how moved he was and explains that he changed the subject because he didn't want to show his **emotion**. I'm sure he means he was afraid he'd cry. Wanting to write his feelings rather than speak them shows how strongly he feels about --- and how deeply he

appreciates --- my putting stories of his childhood into a play. (Tannen, 2021, p. 29, emphasis added)

Tannen's example shows us how **emotion** can play a significant role in speech. Her story, in the end, jointly produced a communicative experience, building rapport between her father and her. Indeed, her father was very appreciative of the story. It created, in this sense, a form of **rapport talk** for her father as well as Tannen herself. Her father listened to unspoken messages of rapport in the story. Incidentally, among others, Tannen (2007) argues that generally speaking, there are two types of talking styles. One is called "rapport talk," which is a style of communication that promotes social affiliation and **emotional** connection. The other type is called "report talk," which is a style that focuses on exchanging information with little emotional import.

To summarize, we can say that involvement strategies are dialogic, active, mutual and emotional. Taking an involvement approach will create the sense of dialogic and mutual participation between a speaker and a listener, on equal terms. In other words, while a speaker is actually speaking, a listener may not just be listening, but may also, at the same time, be "speaking" to himself/herself in an active manner. That a speaker is speaking and a listener is listening may only be one sense of speaking and listening. A speaker may also be listening simultaneously and a listener may also be speaking simultaneously, in his/her own mind. Each of them may be self-speaking or self-listening at any given time.

Incidentally, the idea of affective power of words/discourse has been postulated by other sociologists. For example, Prof. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi of UC-Santa Barbara seems to argue for the "aesthetics of political power" in Mussolini's Italy (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000). She comments on the boundaries between official history and people's lived experience by focusing on the affective nature in politics. She argues that memory, linguistically created by words/phases, plays a far more power role than historical facts. She further argues that collective memory through linguistic expressions is crucial for our understanding of historical events.

Let us retain the important theoretical framework discussed above as we examine Kishida's speeches. First, we will observe his speech style in the press conference held on August 31, 2022 (the citation will use an English translation provided by the Prime Minister's Office of Japan (Shushoo Kantei, 2022)). Then we will examine his speech style during a Diet session speech on September 9, 2022.

## Methodology

The methodology of the present study will use video-tape recordings of Kishida's speeches during a press conference and a Diet session in Japan. The review of relevant linguistic literature will also be examined. Our focus will be on involvement theory, which will comprise repetition, empathy, and rapport talk style in conversation including Gumperz (1982). Comparisons from African American speeches will be also discussed, including speeches by Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King Jr. Furthermore, various newspapers, magazines, and internet media

will be consulted regarding Kishida's and other Japanese politicians' talking styles. Such reports will be taken from a variety of newspapers and journals including Asahi Shinbun, Japan Times, Jiji, NHK, Nikkei Asia, Sankei Shinbun, and Tokyo Shinbun. Thus, this study will adopt an observation-oriented approach (e.g., Kishida's prepared transcripts) as well as a library and internet-oriented approach using a sociolinguistic conversational analysis (e.g., Tannen's books). Our primary aim is to explore political speeches in contemporary Japan and comment on significant sociolinguistic findings (e.g., Azuma, 2022a; Azuma, 2022c). We seek to answer questions such as: How do political speeches not just communicate to people but move them emotionally? Is a political speech strengthened by an emotional and psychological connection or **interpersonal involvement** between a speaker and a listener?

### Kishida's Talking Style in Speeches

As mentioned in the theoretical framework section above, the involvement aspect of political speech requires the politician to pay close attention to his/her listeners. As will be seen in the press conference example below (Shushoo Kantei, 2022), Kishida's listening skills could be improved. Let us examine Kishida's statements at the press conference (for the sake of clarity, the English translation version of the press conference is used here).

*Kishida: Looking back now, it was one year ago that, harboring a desire to uphold Japan's democracy and the conviction that there can be no government without the trust of the people, I ran in the Liberal Democratic Party presidential election.*

Kishida starts by expressing his strong hope that "there can be no government without the trust of the people," which, in Japanese, is "*shin nakuba tatazu.*" The statement raises the fundamental question of whether or not the general public should trust Kishida's government. Kishida continues his statement as follows.

*Kishida: That said, I regard it as a very serious issue that right now, to speak frankly, the people's trust towards politics has been shaken. Returning to last year's starting point when I made the decision to run in the LDP presidential election, I must once more stand at the fore and work to restore trust in politics. I have renewed my determination to pursue politics of trust and sympathy.*

Kishida's statement that he has decided to "pursue politics of trust and sympathy" is noteworthy, if he really means what he says. Yet, his past actions do not match his words. Any Japanese citizen listener will ask himself whether he/she can trust Kishida to accomplish such a task, especially since Kishida is not currently doing what he said he would do.

Kishida's response to the media's question concerning the government and LDP's close ties with the Unification Church, underscores the difficulty Kishida faces in gaining the trust of the general public. Kishida offered the statement only after consulting with the LDP Secretary General.

Kishida: *As the president of the LDP, I offer my apologies with the utmost sincerity.*

Though appearing sincere, Kishida did not offer any substantive response to the question, and he replied only after consulting with the LDP Secretary General. Many senators and citizens were left with a negative impression that Kishida did not care to address the question and could not be trusted on this matter. This polite but evasive viewpoint is reflected in Kishida's other replies to questions at the press conference. Surprisingly, Kishida used the word *teinei* (polite) at least **six times** in his answers. The Japanese text (with English translations) of some of his comments are listed below. The word *teinei* is presented in bold letter.

Kishida: *Kokumin no minasama kara hikitsuzuki kenen ya ginen no koe o itadaite orimasu.*

*Jimintou soosai to shite sochoku ni owabi o mooshi agemasu.*

"I continue to receive comments of concern and doubt from the people of Japan. I sincerely apologize as the head of the LDP party."

Kishida: *Seiken no shoshin ni kaeri, **teinei** na setsumei ni zenryoku o tsukushite, kokumin no minasama no gorikai o enagara, kokusoogi o toriokonatte ikitai to omotte orimasu.*

"Returning to my first point, I would like to do my best to give a polite explanation, and while gaining the understanding and support of the people, I would like to carry out the state funeral."

Kishida: *Kokkai no ba ni oite watashi jishin hikitsuzuki **teinei** na Setsumei ni zenryoku o tsukushi kokumi no minasama no gorikai o enagara, kokusoogi, toriokonatte ikitai to kanngaete orimasu.*

"I will continue to be polite and confident in the Diet [House of Parliament], and do my best to explain myself, while receiving support from the people of Japan. I would like to proceed with the state funeral."

Kishida: *Kokumin no minan no samazama na goiken ya gohihan ni taishite, seifu to shite, **teinei** na setsumei ni zenryoku de doryoku o tsukushite ikitai to omotte orimasu.*

"In response to the various opinions and criticisms from the people of Japan, representing the Cabinet of the Kishida government, I would like to do my best to provide a polite explanation."

As the above examples show, Kishida appears to be polite and courteous, yet his intentions lack clarity and are ambiguous. He is good at reporting his plans in a way to show his willingness within the form of "report talk," but his speech lacks any affective, psychological and mental message, due to the absence of any specific details. In other words, Kishida seems to be good at "report talk," but not so good at "rapport talk."

Next, let us examine Kishida's speech during the September 9, 2022, Diet proceedings. Once again, we will notice that Kishida uses a "report talk" style as opposed to a "rapport talk" style. Similar to his speech at the press conference, his frequent use of the word *teinei* (polite) stands out. The regular reference to being polite contrasts starkly with the absence of any practical or detailed plan of

Kishida's agenda. The lasting impression is that Kishida is feigning courteousness, perhaps hoping it will superficially cover for his and his Cabinet's lack of progress on their political agenda. Let us observe some of the examples from Kishida's speech before the Diet.

Kishida: *Kokumi no koe o kiku, mata seifu kara samazama na kono kankei shoochoo no setsumei o ukeru, sarani wa senmonka, yuushisya no iken o kiku, koo shita teinei na Giron o tsumi kasanete seisaku o kettei shite orimasu. Ichibu no kono dantai no iken ni furimawasareru koto wa nai to shinjite orimasu.*

“[We] listen to opinions from the general public, our government receives explanations from related sectors, in addition, [we] listen to opinions from specialists. Through these varied and polite discussions, we have decided on our political plan. I believe that we will not be swayed by the opinions of this group [i.e., Unification Church group]”.

In the above example, Kishida maintains he will listen to the input from various perspectives, yet he simultaneously claims to remain unaffected by the opinions of the Unification Church group. Most importantly, he does not offer any detailed plan of performance or operation. In essence, Kishida is good at reporting what he plans to do, but he is weak in providing a workable, feasible and persuasive plan. Again, he may be a good “report talk” speaker, but he is not a good “rapport talk” speaker. Let us observe another example from Kishida's speech.

Kishida: *Jimintoo no ariyoo ni tsuite, teinei ni kokumin no minasan ni setsumei shinakereba ikenai to iu koto de, samazama no, sorezore no tenken sagyoo nit suite ima toritome o okonai, setsumei sekinin o shikkari hatashite ikoo to iu sagyoo o susumete iru tokoro de arimasu.*

“Regarding the nature of the LDP, we believe we need to explain it politely, and due to this, we are at the stage of planning our explanation and organizing our procedure carefully.

Again, Kishida attempts, in a polite explanation, to provide detailed information for his audience, however, he fails to actually provide any workable plan. He also does not address in any easy-to-understand manner, any of the topics of the session (COVID-19 cases, the state funeral plan, the Unification Church issue, the plummeting Japanese yen, wages, etc.). All Kishida does is offer tangential references to issues without any practical solutions. Let us observe yet another example from Kishida.

Kishida: *Teinei, setsumei ga, teinei de wa nakatta n deha nai ka, fujuubun, dewa nakatta ka to iu koto ni tsuite wa, seifu to shite kou shita handan wo suru koto, mochiron, daiji de arimasu ga, kokumin ni taisuru setsumei rikai ga jyuuyoo de aru to iu koto mo machigai naku jyuuyoo da to omoimasu.*

“With respect to the viewpoint concerning my insufficient or impolite explanation, our government decided this approach [of offering the state funeral]. This is of course very important. I think that a clear understanding for the Japanese people is absolutely important.”



In the above statement, Kishida is addressing the government's decision to offer the state funeral for the former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, which decision received significant criticism from the people. After referencing several marginal justifications – that many foreign dignitaries will visit Japan and that Abe was the longest serving Japanese prime minister (8 years) – Kishida still offers no clear reason for holding the state funeral and seems to accept the people's criticism. While the state funeral decision could have been taken up for discussion by the Diet, since many people thought an LDP sponsored funeral (i.e., party funeral) would be sufficient, Kishida makes no mention of this. Kishida seems to have purposefully side-stepped the issue and offered no explanation for the decision. Kishida's treatment of this issue left the general public, and many members of the media, unconvinced and distrustful of the prime minister and his government. Kishida says that "a clear understanding for the Japanese people is absolutely important", yet he offered no understanding at all to his listeners. Again, Kishida seems to be a good "report talk" speaker, but not a good "rapport talk" speaker.

Some media have amusingly commented that Kishida should be named *kentooshi* instead of "prime minister" because he often uses the Japanese word *kentoo* (think about) (e.g., Nittere News, 2022a; FLASH, 2022). This association implies that Kishida only "thinks about" many things without taking any concrete action. The inference carries a negative connotation.

In contrast with Kishida's speech style, former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi was known for having an emotional "rapport talk" style. In a press conference held on August 8, 2005, the same day the Diet discarded Koizumi's proposal for privatization of the postal service (e.g., Shinbun Akahata, 2005), Koizumi addressed the general public and asked, with powerful conviction, if they wanted to really discard his proposal. Koizumi passionately defended his proposal directly to the Japanese citizenry. He was willing to speak openly to the people of Japan in an emotional "rapport-talk" style. Using such an involvement style in his speech he ultimately prevailed in getting the proposal approved by the Diet in October of that same year.

### **Involvement Strategy of "Repetition"**

As discussed briefly in the Introduction section, Tannen (2007) argues for what she calls "involvement strategies" to attract listeners. One of the strategies she suggests is "repetition" which means repeating a phrase throughout a speech in an effort to entertain, educate, and attract listeners. This repetition strategy is carefully examined by Davis (1985) in a study of African sermons. In his study, Davis (1985) discusses a series of repeated phrases he calls a "narrative formulaic unit" which is rhythmic and has a rhetorical crescendo. Fanselow (1983) discusses this same concept using his analysis of the talking styles of public school teachers with reference to repetition.

In her repetition research, Tannen (1986) cites one of the most renowned influential speeches made by Jesse Jackson during the 1984 US Democratic National Convention held in San Francisco, California. The speech was followed

by a standing ovation by audience members with thundering applause (Tannen, 2007). I only cite below a small portion of Jackson's lengthy speech which was delivered with enthusiasm, passion and conviction.

Workers, You fight for fair wages  
 You are right  
 But your patch labor, It not big enough  
 Women, You seek comparable worth and pay equity  
 You are right  
 But your patch Is not big enough  
 Women, Mother, Who seek Head Start, And day care, And prenatal care  
 On the front side of life, Rather than jail care and welfare, On the back side of life  
 You are right  
 But your patch Is not big enough  
 Students, You seek scholarships  
 You are right  
 But your patch is not big enough  
 Blacks and Hispanics, when we fight, For civil rights  
 We are right  
 But our patch is not big enough  
 Gays and Lesbians, When you fight, Against discrimination, And a cure for AIDS  
 You are right  
 But your patch, Is not big enough. (Tannen, 2007, pp. 179–180)

The repeated segments shown above provide an excellent example of how political discourse can create rapport, psychological cohesiveness and ratify an interlocutor's contribution to his or her audience. In this instance, the cohesion between speaker and listener is clear from the standing ovation and fervent audience applause.

In another example, Tannen (2007) refers to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. A master of poetic oratory, he excelled in the delivery of political speeches. His oratory vividly displays the amazing power of repetition. One of his most famous speeches was "I Have a Dream." The last section of the speech utilizes eloquent repetition. In the citation below, pay attention to the repeated phrase "let freedom ring" and the parallel references to mountains and hills in a variety of US states across the nation.

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.  
 So let freedom ring  
 From the prodigious hill tops of New Hampshire.  
 Let freedom ring  
 From the mighty mountains of New York.  
 Let freedom ring  
 From the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.  
 Let freedom ring  
 From the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado.  
 Let freedom ring  
 From the curvaceous slopes of California.  
 But not only that.

Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.  
 Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.  
 Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi.  
 From every mountainside,  
 Let freedom ring. (Tannen 2007, 89-90)

We can see in King's speech the use of the repeated phrase ("Let freedom ring") as a linguistic involvement strategy which attracts voters and the general public. The repetition of sounds, words, phrases, and the naming of various states (e.g., New York, Colorado, California) unites the listeners together to experience and feel the same way as King. Repetition as well as the evoked imagery causes the audience members to connect and mutually participate (both as speaker and listener) in sense making.

In contrast with Kishida's "report talk" style, we can clearly see the effect of involvement strategy in Jackson's and King's speeches. Evidence of such rhythmic repetition and crescendo cannot be found in Kishida's speeches. The strategy of repetition can be a powerful tool for politicians in persuading people to accept and move towards a common goal. Repetition and involvement strategies create clear-cut imagery, connection and meaning with listeners and can help establish positive relationships between politicians in Japan and the Japanese people.

### Concluding Remarks

Prime minister Fumio Kishida is currently facing many political challenges. Some of the most pressing political issues which require his attention (e.g., Jiji, 2022), include:

- (1) Energy and the environment
- (2) National security concerns with China, North Korean and Russia
- (3) Wage increases and investment in human resources
- (4) Plummeting Japanese yen

Each of these issues is an enormous political challenge for Kishida. At present, it is unclear how Kishida plans to handle them and whether he will be successful as he navigates political leadership in Japan. Aside from his political challenges, Kishida has linguistic challenges which need improving. How he speaks to politicians and the general public can be vastly enhanced. When he became prime minister of Japan a year ago, Kishida was known for his listening skills (*kiku chikara*). It was said he excelled at listening to others and paying attention to their viewpoints, even those with negative opinions. In a recent campaign speech on September 17, 2022, Kishida stated: "It has been said that I am a boring speaker, but my strength lies in my ability to **listen**. I am the leader that this era requires" (Nikkei Asia, 2021). When Kishida reached his 100<sup>th</sup> day in office, he apparently hoped to show the public his self-touted skills of listening to people and the swift government action on coronavirus measures (The Japan Times, 2022a).

Nevertheless, as we have noticed from studying his political speeches, including the press conference and his speech to the Diet, Kishida is not a **talented communicator**. Initially, he may have hoped that his listening skills would have helped him, but unfortunately, his speaking skills remain inadequate and he, apparently, is not an adept listener either. He is merely speaker-oriented and not listener-oriented. He speaks about his vague political plans and what he wants to accomplish, yet he avoids speaking about what his listeners want to hear: a detailed, well-explained and easily understood plan for the Japanese people. Kishida needs to better understand that effective communication and understanding by his audiences can be achieved through the creation of a shared world of images (shaped through expressions) and the **mutual** contribution of both speaker and hearer in an **interconnected** participation of positive sense-making. How is this accomplished? It is very simple -- through strategies of involvement (e.g., repetition).

At the October 2022 funeral service for the slain former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Abe's wife, Akie Abe, spoke of her and her husband's fondness for their home prefecture, Yamaguchi. Akie made the following public statement (Asahi Shinbun, 2022d). "My late husband really loved Yamaguchi prefecture. I love the prefecture as well. Because of this affection, I firmly assure you that I will do whatever I can to take good care of this prefecture. Will you please help me to accomplish this task?" By this statement, Akie communicated her commitment to support the people of the Yamaguchi prefecture. By publicly declaring her formal tie she expressed solidarity with the people. Linguistically speaking, Akie has publicly shown us her emotional and psychological attachment to the Yamaguchi residents, as well as the Japanese public. Speaking for the first time since her husband was killed, her comment was her own "rapport talk" style.

In related remarks at a Diet session, ex-prime minister Yoshihiko Noda gave a farewell speech to Abe. He described Shinzo Abe as a politician who was "fearless and would never give up." Akie, who was sitting in the Diet gallery section, was moved to tears through Noda's "rapport talk"-oriented speech (e.g., FNN Prime Online, 2022; Sankei Shinbun, 2022b; Nittere News, 2022b).

"Rapport talk" makes listeners feel appreciated in a positive way. Prof. Atsushi Aikawa of the Tokyo Gakugei University states that expressing the phrase "thank you" becomes more effective if we pay attention to its psychological impact (Asahi Shinbun, 2022c). He suggests adding a comment as to why the "thank you" is meaningful to the speaker. It is not enough to just say "thank you." The additional explanation creates critical thinking (e.g., a practical reason for the expression). Making a clear and detailed comment (in addition to offering the appreciation) helps listeners understand, appreciate, and respond positively to the speaker's utterance.

In the context of Kishida, his providing a very practical and detailed explanation would be like adding a comment to a "thank you." Just saying "thank you" alone would be equivalent to Kishida's "report-talk" style. "Rapport talk" for Kishida would require an emotional touch to words and phrases rather than his simple and superficial expressions in a "report talk" style. There is no guarantee that if Kishida makes adjustments linguistically to his speaking style, he would be

able to right the government ship. He may not be successful in creating a decisive moment that stirs public sentiment about his speech style.

Recently Kishida's cabinet has had problems. When Kishida appointed his own son, Shotaro Kishida, as his executive secretary, it triggered a backlash from the opposition bloc (e.g., The Japan Times, 2022c; The Mainichi Shinbun, 2022b). In addition, Kishida recently accepted the resignation of his economic revitalization minister, Daishiro Yamagiwa, the first person to resign from Kishida's government since he took power last year (e.g., Reuters, 2022a; All Nippon News Network, 2022; Asahi Shinbun, 2022b; Sankei Shinbun, 2022a; Sankei Shinbun, 2022c). His quitting is likely to further damage Kishida, whose approval has tumbled to record lows after the Unification Church controversy (President Online, 2022; Suponichi, 2022; Asahi Shinbun, 2022e; The Mainichi Shinbun, 2022c). Recent media reports have stated the following:

“The Kishida cabinet does not listen to the voice of the people, and it makes a fool of them.”

“The cabinet does not understand relevant issues and it has not solved any issue.”

“Kishida is not considering the national sentiment of the people.” (Suponichi, 2022)

As recent as November 11, 2022, another minister, Yasuhiro Hanashi, the minister of justice has stepped down, becoming the second minister to leave Kishida's cabinet. Hanashi succumbed to widespread criticism over uncomfortable comments he made regarding his duties. He referred to signing off on executions (*shikei*) as a “tedious” task (Reuters, 2022b; The Mainichi Shinbun, 2022d; Asahi Shinbun, 2022g; Kyodo News, 2022b). An additional minister, Minoru Terada, the minister of internal affairs and communications, resigned on November 20, 2022, in connection with a funding scandal. At present, this is the third cabinet member to leave in less than a month in a severe blow to Kishida's already shaky cabinet.

Despite Kishida's domestic political problems, at a recent U.N. General Assembly in New York, Kishida urged the world to reaffirm the importance of the rule-based international order and **unity** amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. He also criticized Russia for threatening the possible use of nuclear weapons in the conflict (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). It is unclear whether the world will reach some sort of **unity** as admonished by Kishida.

Whatever the outcome may be, internationally or domestically, Kishida's biggest political misstep so far might possibly be failing to bring unity to his country. For Japan's future, we have to wait and see whether Kishida adopts a possible “rapport talk” style to accompany his leadership role.

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