

PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION IN JAPANESE INDIRECTNESS AND HEDGING

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Abstract

This paper is an insight into the way in which indirectness is achieved in Japanese communication. We present two cultural principles that govern the Japanese culture— wa (harmony) and face — and we briefly discuss the role they play in the indirect style of communication that characterizes the Japanese. The relation between culture and language is further detailed in the section on indirectness and language, where we present the linguistic manifestations of indirectness, identifying the main strategies used for achieving indirectness and focusing on hedging, as a typical example of indirectness strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is already common knowledge that the Japanese prefer not to say things in a direct manner and always look for a roundabout way in communication. There are countless examples, especially in the world of business or politics, when the clash between the Western way of speaking and the Japanese way of constructing the discourse gave birth to misunderstandings and even conflicts. The ambiguity that characterizes the Japanese discourse is often not understood by people raised and educated in Western cultures. A famous example is the Japanese *Hai* (Yes), which can mean almost anything on the continuum from “Yes” to “No”, but which is almost exclusively interpreted as “Yes” by Westerners. *Hai* is actually an expression through which one shows that he/she is listening and paying attention to what the interlocutor is saying and does not necessarily involve agreement with what is being said. A mere sign of acknowledgement is thus often mistaken for a sign of agreement.

Before discussing what makes the Japanese discourse indirect, let us consider the following example from Donahue (Donahue, 1998: 221), where a Japanese student in the USA is asked whether she likes American food:

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“American food? Uh...what can I say? Y’know, I’m living with an American family now, so my, uh, my host father is a very big man, but in the dinner?...He always does not eat so much. Maybe I will, I will eat more than him...”

A person who is not familiar at all with the Japanese culture will probably understand very little, if nothing, from the student’s answer. What is basically a Yes/No question (“Do you like American food?”) receives a very complex answer, which is an attempt to cover a hidden “No”. Hesitation, fillers, changing the referent, softening the message– all these strategies are used to avoid a direct answer that might hurt the interlocutor’s feelings.

Although indirectness is not exclusive to Japan, it is often given as the defining characteristic for Japanese discourse and communication. Indirectness is usually associated with politeness and, since politeness and respect are highly valued in the Japanese society, it is generally considered that the Japanese use indirectness in their speech more than other nations. However, indirectness and politeness are not always related, since one might easily find examples of indirect expressions (invitations, requests, refusals etc.) which are not actually polite. Consider the following examples in English and in Japanese: “Would you please shut up?”, “Could you kindly leave the room right now?”, 「部屋を出てくれないかな?」。 All these questions employ marks of indirectness, but the message is hardly a polite one, which shows that the two concepts are not necessarily connected.

2. WHAT LIES BEYOND INDIRECTNESS IN DISCOURSE

2.1. *Wa* (harmony)

The Japanese preference for indirectness can be explained if we refer to the cultural roots of the problem. The relations between the individuals forming the Japanese society are based on a series of cultural principles that build and maintain harmony. Harmony is one of the most discussed cultural concepts that shape the Japanese mentality. The entire Japanese society and its dynamics seem to revolve around the concept of preserving harmony. The character that is used to represent the concept of harmony, 和 (*wa*), is actually used as an adjective to describe things that are Japanese or in the Japanese style, such as 和食 (Japanese food)、和服 (Japanese clothes)、和室 (Japanese-style/tatami room) etc. Rohlen stresses the "pre-eminent position of *wa* in the hierarchy of Japanese values" (Rohlen, 1974:47). He draws attention to the fact that *wa* "is undoubtedly the single most popular component in mottos and names of companies across Japan," and he generalizes: "To achieve *wa* is certainly a major goal for any Japanese group, and it also is an essential ingredient in the attainment of other goals. In this regard, it is something like 'love'

in American popular culture, for it is both a major means to social improvement and an end in itself." Quoting Honna and Hoffer (1989), who claim that "[...] harmony within the group is a key value in Japanese society", (Honna and Hoffer, 1989: 122), Wierzbicka points out that the Japanese *wa* and the English *harmony* are actually not one and the same thing, since *wa* has clear implications of "groupism" and "anti-individualism" (Wierzbicka, 1997: 249). She further asserts that "It is worth nothing in this connection that dictionaries often gloss *wa* not only as "harmony" but also as "peace" and "unity." "Peace" implies an absence of overt conflict and confrontation (that is, an absence of a situation where one person says, "I want this," and another, "I don't want this"); and "unity" implies that 'all these people are like one thing' and 'all these people want the same'." (Wierzbicka, 1997: 250). The emphasis on the group harmony is thus strongly related to the avoidance of conflict, which can be attained if there are no impositions on any of the members of the group. Linguistically, the 'no imposition' state can be reached when direct messages are avoided and the indirect way of communication is employed.

2.2. Preserving Face

The concept of Face has been extensively studied and discussed in relation to politeness theories. Politeness is a pervasive aspect in human language and presumably all languages have means of encoding it (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987). At the level of social interaction, politeness can be found in good manners and etiquette, which generally shows concern to the partner, using either verbal or non-verbal strategies. Despite the presumed universality of politeness, the patterns of its linguistic realization are vastly diverse across cultures. The most common types of linguistic devices of showing politeness may include making one's statement indirect, often making use of circumlocution, lexical substitution, euphemisms, tags, or conventionalized formulae. These indirectness strategies are essentially intended to create uncertainty or ambiguity.

Face is defined as an individual's self esteem. It has two aspects, namely negative and positive face. Negative face is 'the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions' and positive face is 'the desire (in some respects) to be approved of' (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 13). When we interact with others in society, it is necessary to keep one's own face or to avoid threatening another's face. In order to avoid these face-threatening acts (FTA), we try to employ politeness strategies in our interactions. Brown and Levinson (1987) classify different kinds of such politeness strategies used according to the ways we react to FTA's. They also point out that the determinants of the kinds of politeness strategies used are the following three sociological factors: the relative power of the hearer over the speaker, the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, and the ranking of the imposition in doing the face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 15-16). In view of Brown

and Levinson's theory, politeness always implies indirectness. When a face-threatening act is involved in our interaction, we make a decision whether or not we should execute it. If we decide to do it, we can either do it directly, i.e. 'on record', as Brown and Levinson call it, or do it 'off record', which means it is done indirectly. If we do it without paying any consideration to the hearer, we do it 'baldly'. If we try to reduce the face-threatening effect to the hearer, we use either positive politeness or negative politeness. Positive politeness means that the speaker tries to save the hearer's positive face by reducing the distance between them. By negative politeness, on the other hand, the speaker tries to keep the hearer's negative face by valuing the hearer's personal territory (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 68-71).

Negative politeness is basically a distancing strategy, showing the respect to a person's right to act freely. On the other hand, positive politeness is basically a befriending strategy, showing the respect to a person's need to be liked and understood. Negative politeness seems to be more prevalent than positive politeness since the former seems to be safer, as it is less likely to lead to misunderstanding for apparent lack of deference and seemingly inappropriate friendliness. In the case of Japanese, the system of respect language (*keigo*) is a typical example of negative politeness.

3. INDIRECTNESS AND LANGUAGE

Brown and Levinson (1987) introduce a comprehensive definition of indirectness as a set of politeness strategies with the objective of reducing imposition on the hearer and/or bringing about solidarity between the speaker and the hearer. These markers are divided into three major categories:

3.1. Rhetorical strategies and markers: items in this category have a persuasive objective. They include rhetorical questions, tag questions, disclaimers and denials, vagueness and ambiguity markers, repetition, and irony.

Negative and interrogative forms are preferred in Japanese especially in requests and invitations, since the impact of the message is softened and the force of the utterance is diminished. Consider the following examples:

一緒に行きませんか。	一緒に行きますか。
(Won't you come with me?)	(Will you come with me?)
これ、買ってくれない？	これ、買ってくれる？
(Won't you buy this for me?)	(Will you buy this for me?)

In both cases, the negative question is felt as being more polite because the speaker does not impose his/her will on the interlocutor in a direct way.

3.2. Lexical and referential markers: Tools of this category rely on their meaning as well as relationships to indirectly approach/present a claim. They contain hedges and hedging devices, point of view distancing, downtoners,

diminutives, discourse particles, demonstratives, indefinite pronouns and determiners, and some understatement markers.

Speaking about a person instead of addressing that person is one of the indirectness devices often used in Japanese. “Direct address implies direct involvement, while reference, even when it fulfills an appellative function, creates greater distance and hence reduces the potential threat to the addressee’s face. Not to address a person too directly seems to be a very general politeness strategy that relates to territoriality, that is the recognition of other persons’ spatial and symbolic territories” (Coulmas, 2013: 114). In Japanese, the use of the second person personal pronoun is very rare and it is often considered impolite. What is generally accepted is the use of the interlocutor’s name or words indicating his/her profession.

3.3. Syntactic markers and structures: They are indirectness devices manifested in the sentence structures including passive voice, nominalization, and conditional tenses.

Utterances in the passive voice are considered more formal and indirect than those in the active voice. The interpretation of the patient as the subject of the sentence diminishes the role of the agent (who, in most of the cases, is overtly expressed only if necessary) and the perspective on the situation becomes an indirect one. In Japanese, a form which is a homophone of the passive voice is actually used as a honorific form. An action regarding the addressee or a third person worthy of respect is put in a passive voice. Consider the following examples:

みんなに笑われた。

(I was laughed at by everybody)

先生が笑われた。

(The teacher laughed)

The honorific use of the passive voice corresponds to the functional use of the verbs *suru* (to do) and *naru* (to become), the latter being used for referring to an action in a polite way. Saying that a certain state of affairs has come about rather than attributing it to an actor’s intervention is indirect and hence more polite, since overt responsibility ascription is avoided. (Coulmas, 2013: 113-114).

4. HEDGING

The dictionary definition of hedging presents it as the act or method of reducing the risk of financial loss on an investment, bet etc. or as a cautious or evasive statement (our underline). As a verb, to hedge means to evade decision or action, especially by making non-committal statements (our underline); to guard against the loss in a bet, the paying out of a win etc. (Collins English Dictionary). In communication, hedges are expressions used to communicate the speaker’s weak commitment to the information conveyed. By hedging, speakers moderate the assertive force of their utterances.

Hedging is not necessarily verbal, often including body language, gestures, facial expressions and so on. The non-verbal hedges actually accompany the verbal hedging expressions for a stronger effect. In writing, emoticons take the role played by non-verbal hedges in face-to-face communication. Moreover, para-verbal hedges such as tone of voice, intonation, laughter, stretch talk are also widely used, creating a buffer-zone where both interlocutors feel comfortable and not threatened.

At the morphological-lexical level, hedges cover a rather wide area of items, ranging from morphemes to complex expressions. The table below includes a categorization of hedges at the morphological-lexical level:

Category	Examples
verbals/auxiliaries	みたい・よう・そう・らしい・ぼい、たり(する)、～やら、でしよう・だろう、～という、じゃないか、かもしれない、思う・思っ て、気がする、感じがする、見える
adverbials	ちょっと、けっこう、たぶん・おそらく・たしか、一応・とりあ えず、だいたい・たいてい、たんとなく、たいぶ、ほとんど、く らい・ころ・あたり
nominals	ほう、ふう、あれ・それ・これ
particles	とか、かしら・かな、など・なんて、なんか、と・って、ね、け ど、か
suffixes	風、的、系
connectors	というか

CONCLUSIONS

Hedging is not, however, a phenomenon that stays solely within the morphological domain. It is the usage of the items mentioned above that confer them the property of hedging. Let us consider one example: the sentence-final particle \square , which can get various interpretations depending on the context in which it is being used. In a sentence like ブカレストはきれいな町ですね (Bucharest is a beautiful town, isn't it?), the particle \square can be used for seeking agreement, which is actually its basic function. However, in a different scenario, where, for example, two tourists are taking a walk in a 'not so clean' part of Bucharest, the above-mentioned sentence may be easily interpreted as an ironic utterance. Hedging is therefore a pragmatic device for showing indirectness and it should not be limited to the morphological-lexical level. The fact that hedging expressions acquire their hedging function only in use and that said function is not an internal property of the semantics of the above-mentioned examples is a very good illustration of the idea that language is

an activity (*energeia*) and not a product (*ergon*) (Coseriu, 2000: 236-237). It is the usage of language and not the inherent meaning of the words and phrases that we use that allows us to communicate effectively.

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