

Language and Culture Relationships :  
Some Aspects of Japanese, Society, Culture  
and Interpersonal-Intercultural Communication.

「言語と文化の関係」

—日本語と対人異文化間コミュニケーション関係を中心に—

Shoji Mitarai

Today, some of the facile stereotypes with which the outside world tends to view Japan can be summarized as follows: No nation in the history of the world has risen economically to international prominence as quickly as Japan or Japan is the only great modernized nation of non-Western origin having cut itself away from feudalism. However, something that few if any foreign observers interested in things about Japan are prepared to admit is that “although Japan,” as Robert Christopher once wrote, “[unlike the United States and the nations of Western Europe] removed almost directly from feudalism, attitudes, behavioral patterns [and values], characteristic of a feudal society are still more prevalent,” particularly, in the language, which is a mirror of culture (p. 271, 2).

Given the deepening of economic, political and cultural relationships between Japan and other countries with every passing year, more and more people are being thrust into contact with the Japanese. The increase in the total number of those who are learning Japanese has accompanied this trend\*. What strikes or amazes people coming to Japan is the universal use and practice of exchanging name cards in a prescribed manner,

---

\* The postwar surge of interest in Japanese has not peaked, but continues to expand as the awareness of Japan's importance to other nations continues to grow. The number of people learning Japanese in Japan and other countries, according to a survey conducted by\*

whenever the very first stage of the introductions take place. The practice of exchanging them particularly takes Americans by surprise since the use of name cards in the United States is confined only to business purposes. Mente, in this connection, describes the function and the importance of name cards:

There is a prescribed manner for exchanging name-cards.... It is surprising how many foreign businessmen (and people) go to Japan, or greet Japanese visitors in their own offices, without having name-cards printed in Japanese. It is not a matter of courtesy. It is a reflection of your business (and personal) sense, your personal image of yourself and your company, your attitude toward Japan and more (p. 34, 4).

Besides revealing one's name (the name cards show the Chinese characters in which Japanese names are printed), they signify to the receiver the status of the company or organizations he or she represents and something about the person's position, thus showing instantaneously his or her status.

The concept of status pervades the lives of Japanese, wherever they

---

\*the Japan Foundation and the Ministry of Education, has increased nearly eight times over the past ten years. Today (as of 1987), about 600,000 students are taking Japanese in seventy five different countries. A basic question, however, is whether Japan and Japanese-language teachers have done enough to live up to learners' expectations (p. 2, 11). Similar views were already expressed by Yohji Tanabe, who had held a chair on linguistics and Japanese at the International Division of Waseda University. One of the major problems cited by him was that "no such a certificate program as teaching Japanese as a foreign language has been offered at Japanese colleges and universities. Of those who teach Japanese to foreign students, for example, there aren't many who have gained enough knowledge or training in the field of linguistics, including socio-linguistics and psycho-linguistics. This creates a major problem despite the growth or the popularity of the Japanese language (9)." Tanabe also points out some of the pitfalls which catch learners studying Japanese in his book "Eigo Rashisa to Nihon'go Rashisa" (10).

Language and Culture Relationships:  
Some Aspects of Japanese, Society, Culture  
and Interpersonal-Intercultural Communication.

may be because no Japanese regards himself as the exact equal of any other person. From a linguistic point of view, "the Japanese language does not allow any Japanese to so consider as there are only word forms that refer to superiors and inferiors. It is for this reason that a Japanese almost always relates another person's status to his own by his choice of words. That is, a person of equal status is looked upon as a superior, and the speaker humbles himself" (1).

Linguists normally observe that there are basically three different levels of the Japanese language. Niwa points out that "Formality differences in Japanese may be divided roughly into three levels: the informal (the low level), the semi-formal (the intimate level), and the formal (the honorific or high level)" (p. 490, 5). These levels of formality in the Japanese language are not mutually exclusive, yet can be combined to produce differing degrees of regard: it is possible to be both informal and respectful at the same time. The way in which a person can control or use the levels of formality in Japanese is determined by the following two elements, so to speak: the position, closeness, and proximity of individuals being involved and communicated to, including third persons referred to; and what Nakane terms the grouping or circle concept of insiders and outsiders. The first category of group includes one's family or individuals within one's own group. The second category of group is one's indirect associates or people whose background is relatively well-known. The third category includes those who are unknown-the strangers. Nakane puts it as follows:

(In the case of a work setting), if one is employed in a large firm or enterprise, the first category may be found among co-workers in the same section or division or the same factory building. The second category would would include all employees, including the employer,

of the same company—the number of which may easily be more than 10,000. The second category also includes school friends and graduates of the same university. ...There are several different kinds of persons which crosscut these(three) categories...(pp. 124-125, 7).

So far as the style of interpersonal communication is concerned, the informal and semi-formal levels or forms of the Japanese language are used within a group, whereas the formal level is commonly used with individuals outside one's own group. The Japanese are subconsciously and unconsciously aware that the proper level of the language be used for every instance and situation, and the use of the informal form of the language to a superior is the worst possible breach. The tri-level character of the language, which grew out of Japanese social system, is one of the primary reasons why the Japanese are so reluctant to strike up a conversation either in Japanese or in English with strangers in an intercultural communication setting. In general, formality levels of the Japanese language are controlled by conjugation of the main verb of a sentence, with the handling of other verbs indicating their gradations, but it must be mentioned that noun forms are also very often modified. Inasmuch as the major objective of this paper is not to introduce many aspects of Japanese grammar, grammatical accounts will be reduced as much as clarity permits. This is rather a paper intended to offer a series of aids which would enable learners of the Japanese language to communicate more effectively with the Japanese counterparts in an interpersonal-intercultural communication setting.

In general, the Japanese language, which is kin to both the Ural—Altaic and the Polynesian lingual families, is an affixing language like Finnish. And its formality is largely determined by suffixes added to the root of each verb. As a means of communication, the Japanese employ

Language and Culture Relationships:  
Some Aspects of Japanese, Society, Culture  
and Interpersonal-Intercultural Communication.

two verb forms, which are conjugated slightly differently, depending upon the ending of the infinitive or dictionary form. First-conjugation verbs finish with “iru” or “eru” endings, and the root is found by removing the final “ru”; all other verbs are called Second conjugation. The Second-conjugation verbs include a few irregulars with “iru” or “eru” endings which are not in the former class, and the root of a Second-conjugation verb (Go-dan Dooshi) is found by removing the final “u” from the infinitive.

The following examples illustrate the suffixes which are added to verb roots to form the informal level and semi-formal level (Other suffixes in some cases may be added to the verb roots to form the passive and causative verb forms, that are themselves then conjugated in the same way):

Informal	Semi-formal		Tense	
First Conj.	Second Conj.	First Conj.	Second Conj.	
“-ru”	“-u”	“-masu”	“-imasu”	Non-past
“-nai”	“-anai”	“-masen”	“-imasen”	Negative
“-tai”	“-ta”	“-masita”	“-imashita”	Past(Perfective)
“-nakatta”	“-inakatta”	“-masen deshita”	“-imasen deshita”	Negative
“-yoo*”	“-oo”	“-mashoo”	“-imashoo”	Tentative

(\*“oo” means an extension of the single “o” sound.)

Some other examples of two commonly used words, “Miru”-to see (First conjugation) and “Suru”-to do (Second conjugation), are:

	Informal	Semi-formal
see, will see	miru	mimasu
do not (will not) see	minai	mimasen
saw	mita	mimashita
do, will do	suru	shimasu
did not do	shinakatta	shimasen deshita
let us do (something)	(Nanika) shiyoo	(Nanika) shimashoo

The formal, or honorific, form of Japanese (which is different from

the aforementioned informal and semi-formal) holds different forms and makes a clear distinction between the speaker and the other person. The humble form of the formal language is used for the first person and the honorific form is used for the second and third person.

The humble form of Japanese is produced by adding the honorific prefix "o" and the suffix "i" like "shimasu (to do something for you).". The standard honorific form is produced by prefixing the same "o" and adding the suffix "i" like "-ni narimasu (from "naru" meaning "to become" literally).". Only "shimasu" and "narimasu" are conjugated to indicate tense by using other semi-formal endings (pp. 490-491, 5).

For instance, from "toru (to get or take something for someone)" the following can be observed: I will get it for you. — Otori shimasu; He (They) will get it for you. — Otori ni narimasu; and He (They) got it for you. — Otori ni narimashita.

From "okuru (to send something to someone)": I send (will send) it to you. — Ookuri shimasu; She (They) sent it to you. — Ookuri ni narimashita; and She (They) did not send it to you. — Ookuri ni narimasendeshita. It also should be noted that many common verbs, as previously described, have different formal equivalents. A case in point is an example of "mairu" which is the humble equivalent of "iku" meaning "to go" and "kuru" indicating "to come," and "irassharu" and "oide ni naru" are honorific equivalents of these and also of "iru" meaning "to be (at or in).": I will go/come this afternoon. — Gogo (ni) mairimasu; He/she/you/they will go (come or be here) this afternoon. — Gogo (ni) irasshaimasu (oide ni narimasu).

Inasmuch as an example of the grouping concept was shown earlier, let us here consider an employee in an office communicating with his or her employer. Niwa provides the following example:

Language and Culture Relationships:  
Some Aspects of Japanese, Society, Culture  
and Interpersonal-Intercultural Communication.

(If she were talking with a member of the staff, she would use the semi-formal or informal forms of Japanese). If she were speaking with a member of another firm, she would refer to her employer using the humble form, because the individual she is addressing is the 'outsider.' If, however, she were speaking to her employer's wife, she would use the honorific form, as she herself is now the 'outsider' (p. 490, 5).

The honorific prefixes such as "o-" and "go-," are often used in less formal contexts. These prefixes are added to second or third person related nouns, and they oftentimes eliminate the need to include a person reference: Ogen'ki desu ka.—How are you?; Go-zon'ji desu ka.—Do you know something about it?; and O-hitotsu doozo. —Won't you have (try) that (this)?

There are roughly six directional verbs in Japanese-equivalent to the English words "give" and "receive." These verbs are used in pairs; one showing that the speaker is an inferior (a subordinate) to the other person in the action, the other verb forms putting the speaker both in a superior and in an inferior position. And when the other person (in the action) is a third person, the verb selected will define his position, whereas the position and relative closeness of the addressee is shown by the formality of the ending suffix. The directional verbs are "kureru" and "kudasaru" meaning—gives (to me/us), "ageru" and "yaru" signifying—I/we give to..., and "itadaku" and "morau" indicating—I/we receive or get from; "Kudasaru," "ageru," and "itadaku." The three which consider the speaker as an inferior (a subordinate) are the only ones used generally in direct address. The following are the use of the directional verbs:

You gave me this dictionary.—Kudasatta jisho desu. (informal)

I will give you a dictionary.—Jisho o agemashoo. (semi-formal)

I received your letter.—Tegami o itadakimashita. (semi-formal)

He gave me book.—Kare ga hon o kudasatta. (formal)

I gave the meat to the dog.—Inu ni niku o yarimashita. (informal.  
“Yaru” is used only with children and pets)

I received (got) a letter from my friend.—Tomodachi kara tegami o moratta.

Mr. Itoh gave my son a present.—Itoo-san ga musuko ni okurimono o kudasatta.

Let us turn our attention to the address title suffix. The address title suffix “-san,” or “-sama” which is more formal, corresponds to the “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” “Miss” or “Ms.” found in English, but may be used with either surname or given name. What intrigues learners of Japanese is the fact that it is very often omitted with the names of inferiors, and never used with the names of members of one’s family or oneself. Men may also use the title suffix “-kun” in reference to inferiors, including younger persons, on an informal (and casual) basis, or with members of a close friend or a close school group. Nakane enlarges on the use of “-san” and “-kun” in “Japanese Society” as follows:

San is used for sempai (one’s seniors), kun for kōhai (one’s juniors)\* and the name without suffix is reserved for doryo (colleagues). Even among doryo, san is used towards those with whom one is not sufficiently familiar, while kun is used between those closer than those addressed by san, former class-mates... (p. 27, 3).

There are also two informal pronouns, “boku (I)” and “kimi (You),” the use of which shows relative closeness, proximity, and informality; as with “-kun,” they are not normally and commonly used by women or girls. Another informal usage which confuses people learning Japanese is the

---

\* In Condon’s opinion, the Japanese are very conscious of who is “sempai” and who is “kohai,” which speaking in English doesn’t require. These pronouns may create some problems when native speakers of English, who place great value on symmetrical interpersonal relationships, initiate study of Japanese (p. 28, 8).

Language and Culture Relationships:  
Some Aspects of Japanese, Society, Culture  
and Interpersonal-Intercultural Communication.

affectionate suffix called “-chan,” used with the titles of members of one’s family, and with names of children and pets, where it acts as a diminutive. When it comes to family members (members of one’s own family), simple and often humble forms are used. Yet in direct address, or referring to members of another’s family, an honorific form is used.

	father	mother	elder brother	elder sister
humble –	chichi	haha	ani	ane
honorific –	otoosan	okaasan	oniisan	oneesan

What is interesting to add is that as there is no honorific form for younger brother “Otooto” or one’s younger sister “Imooto,” “-san” is suffixed in the second or third person.

Finally, with regard to the use of the first name in Japanese, it should be noted that the use of the first name in Japan is mainly limited to children. Among adults, the first name is only used in relation to those who maintained very close relations in childhood. An individual is addressed by the first name by his or her parents, siblings, close relatives, and childhood acquaintances or friends in interpersonal communication.

In this paper, the author has examined formality differences and the concept of status which are bound into the Japanese language. It was found that the levels of formality and status differentiations, which are rooted deep in Japanese socio-cultural systems and values, still strongly and unconsciously affect the style of interpersonal communication. In other words, on the surface, Japan appears a very modern industrialized and democratic nation. However, as it has been observed in this paper, many of the cultural vestiges inherited from feudalism still exert an influence on the Japanese mind, perception, and communicative pattern.

*Notes*

1. Barna, LaRay., "A Lecture Note on Intercultural Communication (SP. 507, November 11, 1973 at Portland State University, Portland, OR.)."
2. Christopher, Robert., "The Japanese Mind," (N.Y. Farcett Columbine Pub., 1983).
3. Condon, John., "Cultural Barriers," (Tokyo: Nan'Un-Do. 1979).
4. Mente, Boye D., "Japanese Manners & Ethics in Business," (Phoenix: Phoenix Book, 1981).
5. Niwa, Tamako & Matsuda, Mayako., "Basic Japanese For College Students," (Seattle & London: the Univ. of Washington Press, 1970).
6. Nakane, Chie., "Japanese Society," (Berkeley & L.A. The Univ. of California Press, 1970).
7. Nakane, Chie., The Social System Reflected in Interpersonal Communication in "Intercultural Encounters with Japan" edited by Condon, John & Saito, Mitsuko (Tokyo: The Simul Press, 1983).
8. Suzuki, Takao., "Kotoba To Shakai," (Tokyo: Chuuo Koron Pub., 1975).
9. Tanabe, Yohji., An interview conducted with Professor Yohji Tanabe at Oregon Japan Study Center on Nov. 8, 1979. Professor Tanabe at present is a managing director of JACET and has heavily been involved in the Japanese language program at the International Division of Waseda University. He has many years' experience in teaching Japanese and linguistics at institutions of higher learning in America.
10. Tanabe, Yohji., "Eigo Rashisa to Nihon'go Rashisa," (Tokyo: The Gloview Press, 1983).
11. The Daily Yomiuri (Tokyo: July 6, 1987).

The author should like to acknowledge his gratitude to his friends, colleagues, and students of Japanese (on both sides of the Pacific) who provided the spirit of cooperation and new insights that were invaluable in the preparation of this article. Special thanks should also go to Prof. Thomas Guerin and Prof. Keisuke Kurata. They not only went over the manuscript before the final revision but gave the author pertinent suggestions and a source of encouragement.