

2015 Language and Culture Relationships: Japanese as a Second Language

Shoji Mitarai & Norie Moriyoshi

Preface

Almost three decades have passed since the work “Language and Culture Relationships” was out. But those who study Japanese as a second language demand that an updated revision would be necessary and others also asked the authors to bring the previous work up to date. Then it became evident that a few alternations and the addition of materials on the past nearly thirty years would be appropriate. The Japanese language, basic core values, and the Japanese themselves have not changed dramatically, but some changes have been made in so-called “social fibers” and social systems in this day and age of globalization. In writing about Japan in its relation to society, culture and language, we are fully aware of the fact that non-Japanese perhaps know a good deal more than they did three decades ago and their concepts of Japan are likely to be different. This is why the authors decided to embark on a new edition or version with new additional research findings tailored for non-Japanese who are learning Japanese at present or who are beginning to learn Japanese in Japan and abroad.

Discussion: *Some Aspects of the Japanese Language, Society, & Culture*

They say that since the Second World War, the teaching of the Japanese language has undergone tremendous changes not only in the United States, Canada, England, Australia, and other English speaking countries, with main emphasis now placed on oral communicative Japanese as the base for learning

the Japanese language and other languages as well. This new emphasis came out of new and improved methods of teaching a spoken language and Japanese—which is based on descriptive linguistic analysis of the target language and from a notion and realization that there is among learners an immediate need for oral or spoken language proficiency. It was linked with these considerations that many Japanese text books tailored for those learners were published.

But given the deepening of economic, political, and cultural relationships between Japan and other nations since the 1970s more and more international students and people from abroad and from all works of life have an opportunity to come into contact with the Japanese. It also makes it possible for non-Japanese to encounter and communicate with the Japanese more frequently than ever before. But at the same time they are likely to experience cross-cultural communication difficulties. What strikes or amazes people coming to Japan is the universal use and practice of exchanging name cards “*meishi*” in a prescribed manner whenever the very first stage of the introductions take place. The practice of exchanging them particularly takes non-Japanese by surprise because the use of name cards in the United States, for example, is confined only to business purposes. Mente (1981), in this connection, once pointed out 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 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).

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 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 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” (Barna, 1997).

Linguists normally observe that there are basically three different levels of the Japanese language. Niwa & Matsuda (1969) pointed 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). 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 elements, so to speak: the position, closeness, and proximity of individuals being involved and communicated to, including third persons referred to; and what Nakane (1970) 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 (1980) put 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 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 (p.124-125).

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. It is based on a characteristic of Japanese that the relationship of one's interlocutor needs to be expressed explicitly so as to shape one's perception to others in relation to self (Brown, 2000). 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-Altaiic 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, Japanese employ three verb forms, which are conjugated slightly differently, depending upon the ending of the infinitive or dictionary form. The three verb forms according to their conjugations are: U-verbs (Go-dan katsu yoo*), Ru-verbs (Shimo ichi-dan katsu yoo and Kami ichi-dan katsu yoo) and irregular verbs. U-verbs end in sounds beside "-ru", such as "-u" or "-tsu" and verbs end in "-ru" whose final vowel before "-ru" is "a", "u", or "o." Ru-verbs end in "-ru" whose final vowel before "-ru" is "i" or "e." Irregular verbs are "suru (do)" and "kuru (come)" (Ogata et al., 2009, p.173).

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
U-verb	Ru-verb	U-verb	Ru-verb	
-u / -ku / -gu / -su / -tsu / -nu / -bu / -mu / -ru (-aru / -uru / -oru)	-iru / -eru	-imasu	-masu	Non-past
-anai	-nai	-imasen	-masen	Negative
-tta / -nda/-ita/ -ida /-shita	-ta	-imasita	-mashita	Past (Perfective)
-anakatta	-nakatta	-imasen deshita	-masen deshita	Negative
-oo* ¹	-yoo	-imashoo	-mashoo	Tentative

Some other examples of two commonly used words, “miru (see)” (Ru-verb) and “iku(go)” (U-verb) , are:

	Informal	Semi-formal
see, will see	miru	mimasu
do not (will not) see	minai	mimasen
saw	mita	mimashita
did not see	minakatta	mimasendeshita
let us see (something)	(nanika) miyoo	(nanika) mimashoo
go, will go	iku	ikimasu
do not(will not)go	ikanai	ikimasen
went	itta	ikimashita
did not go	ikanakatta	ikimasen deshita
let us go (somewhere)	(dokokani) ikoo	(dokokani) ikimashoo

*1 “oo” means an extension of the single “o” sound.

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 (*kenjōgo*) is used for the first person and the honorific form (*sonkeigo*) is used for the second and third person. The need for respect or humility changes depending on addressee.

The humble form is produced by adding the honorific prefix “o” and the suffix “i” like “o- shimasu (to do something for you).” The standard honorific form is produced by prefixing the same “o” and adding the suffix “i” like “o-ni narimasu (from “*naru*” meaning “to become” literally).” Only “shimasu” and “narimasu” are conjugated to indicate tense by using other semi-formal endings (Niwa & Matsuda, 1969). 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 (She / 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 (He / They) sent it to you. —*Ookuri ni narimashita*. 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,” “*irassharu*” and “*oide ni naru*” which are honorific equivalents of “*kuru*” indicating “to come,” 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 & Matsuda (1969) provides the following example:

(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)

The honorific prefixes such as “o-” and “go-,” are often used in formal contexts. These prefixes are added to second or third person related nouns, and they often eliminate the need to include a person reference: Ogenki desu ka.—How are you? ; Go-zonji desuka.—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 “sashiageru” signifying—I/ we give to someone, and “morau” and “itadaku” indicating—I/we receive or get from someone. 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, —Kimi ga Jisho o kureta. (informal)

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

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

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

I gave the meat to the dog. —Inu ni niku o ageta / yatta.*2 (informal)

I received (got) a letter from my friend. —Tomodachi kara tegami o moraimashita. (semi-formal)

Mr. Itoh gave my son a present. —Itoosan ga musuko ni okurimono o kudasatta. (formal)

Let us turn our attention to the address title suffix. The address title suffix

*2 “Yaru” is used only with children and pets.

“-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 (1970) 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)^{*3} 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, for example (p.27).

In the article, she also adds that “san is the most general form of address, equivalent to Mr. Mrs. and Miss” (Nakane, 1970, p.27).

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 for women or girls. Another informal usage which confuses people learning Japanese is the affectionate suffix called “-chan,” used with the titles of members of one’s family, with close friends — mainly female friends 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.

*3 In Condon’s opinion, the Japanese are very conscious of who is “sempai” and who is “kōhai,” 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 (Suzuki, 1975, p.28).

	Father	Mother	elder brother	elder sister
Humble	Chichi	Haha	ani	Ane
Honorific	Ottoosan	okaasan	oniisan	oneesan
	Otoosama	Okaasama	oniisama	oneesama

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 (Nakane, 1970). 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 authors have 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, will strongly and unconsciously affect the style of interpersonal communication. In other words, in 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 (Christopher, 1983).

Final Remarks

From a language-learning point of view, it may be plausible that language and culture are interwoven each other, so that learning a target culture will be helpful to lead to better understanding of the target language itself. Brown (2000) pointed out that culture and language are closely related. "Culture is an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns of cognition and customs are sometimes explicitly coded in language. Conversational discourse styles, for example, may be a factor of culture (p.198)." He also claimed that "learning a second language implies some degree of learning a second culture (p.182)." Likewise, Ochs (1988) agreed that language and culture are inseparable.

“Given that meanings and functions are to a large extent socioculturally organized, linguistic knowledge is embedded in sociocultural knowledge. On the other hand, understandings of the social organization of everyday life, cultural ideologies, moral values, beliefs, and structures of knowledge and interpretation are to a large extent acquired through the medium of language” (p.14). In fact, considerable attention has been given to cultural learning in language teaching (Paige et al., 2003).

It should also be pointed out that since every language, as cultural anthropologists assert, is a mirror of the culture in which it developed, it is quite natural that the Japanese language reflects the psychology, the thought patterns, the attitudes of the Japanese. As mentioned earlier, the Japanese language—like other languages in the world—is the primary repository and transmitter of Japanese culture.

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Shoji Mitarai (Professor at Sapporo University) 御手洗 昭治 (札幌大学地域共創学群教授)

Norie Moriyoshi (Instructor at Sapporo University) 森吉 紀江 (札幌大学地域共創学群非常勤講師)