

THE JAPANESE WAY OF THINKING AS SEEN THROUGH ITS LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will attempt to shed some light on the Japanese way of thinking as viewed by an American who has lived, studied Japanese, and taught English in Japan for six years. Many Japanese and Western authors have tried to insist for a long time that the Japanese way of thinking is too different from the Western way, and therefore cannot hope to be understood by anyone except a Japanese. For example, when Mr. Yokoi (and Mr. Onoda more recently) came out of the jungle after hiding for so many years, popular magazines wrote that the West could not understand such a way of thinking. However, I feel that the Japanese way of thinking is not so unintelligible, but rather by trying to analyze certain features of culture, we may be better able to mutually understand characteristics of behavior. For deeper comprehension of Japan let us look at some of the essential psychological differences in the culture of Japan.

What do I mean by "ways of thinking?" Nakamura Hajime indicates that ways of thinking "refers to any individual's thinking in which the characteristic features of the thinking habits of the culture to which he belongs are revealed."¹ For example there are ways of thinking about concrete problems, as well as value-judgments, ethics, religion, aesthetics and other such human problems. The way of thinking of a people is just one aspect of a much larger term, the culture of a people. Culture also includes such aspects as society, history, and the writing system, but in this paper I would like to limit myself to the psychology and ways of thinking of the Japanese people. This paper will not treat such factors as the vertical structure of Japanese society or the intense group mentality of Japan, although these are certainly essential concepts for the understanding of Japan. Much has been written about these factors of Japanese culture already.²

The methodology of this paper will be an analysis of the Japanese language in order to discover there psychological factors which make up the Japanese way of thinking. Language may be defined as a representation in sound, writing or gesture of the concept produced in the way of thinking. An analysis of the Japanese language should give us a better understanding of Japan, for as Benjamin Lee Whorf has said: "Whenever agreement

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¹ Nakamura Hajime, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (East-West Center Press: Honolulu, 1971) p. 5.

² c.f. Nakane Chie, *Japanese Society*, Ariga Kizaemon, "Nihon shakai-kozo ni okeru kaisosei no mondai" in *Minzokugaku-kenkyu*, XIV, 4, Tokyo, 1960, pp. 13-22, and Bennett and Ishino, *Paternalism in the Japanese Economy: Anthropological Studies of Oyabun-Kobun Patterns* (U. of Minnesota, 1963).

or assent is arrived at in human affairs, this agreement is reached by linguistic process, or else it is not reached at all." These linguistic processes are sounds, writing and gestures, but I would like to deal with writing and gestures only indirectly.

I will treat the Japanese ways of thinking in *three* distinct sections. The first section will deal with the various theories of the relation between language and culture. Linguists like Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Kenneth Pike, and Roy Andrew Miller have proposed various systems to explain the connection between language and culture, and these will be analyzed along with the work of Doi Takeo on the concept of "amaeru."³

The second part will examine more concretely the Japanese language to discover grammatical points which reflect the Japanese way of thinking. This examination will include such topics as Japanese contrasted with non-Japanese in language, the Japanese use of *directive* language in order to influence the future actions of other people, vagueness and ambiguity in the Japanese language, and the concrete, "living-in-the-present" character of Japanese language. This main part will attempt to show some of the motivations behind the actions of Japanese people (unconscious though these motivations may be), and secondly to show some of the psychological factors which influence the Japanese ways of thinking.

The third part will list some expressions in the Japanese language which have a deep connection with Japanese culture and an affinity to the Japanese psychology.

Finally, as a conclusion I would like to apply my reflections on Japanese ways of thinking to language learning, in order to discover some means to better English teaching for Japanese students. In my own studies of Japanese I was not sufficiently taught the basic psychological differences between the cultures of Japan and America. Now as an educator myself, I find that I must systematize these factors more satisfactorily.

THE JAPANESE WAY OF THINKING

I. The Relation of Language and Culture:

In his article, "Language as an Expression of Japanese Culture,"⁴ Joseph Yamagiwa poses three questions about the relation between the Japanese language and the Japanese culture. These are questions which have bothered modern linguists, and which have now been applied to Japanese, namely, 1) Is the Japanese language more than just a vehicle of communication, 2) Is it possible that the Japanese language has an identity of its own, and hence a capacity to put its imprint on the minds of each generation of Japanese, and 3) Does the Japanese language have some part in creating and perpetuating the Japanese style of culture? In order to attempt to answer these questions, we must look from the Western point of view. For as Doi Takeo says in his treatment of the linguistic term *amaeru*, "Japanese culture did not produce any yardstick to judge itself critically."⁵ The anthropological study of the interrelation of language and culture is still rather new, so all of my conclusions will necessarily be basically theoretical.

³ Doi Takeo, *The Anatomy of Dependence* (Kodansha: Tokyo, 1973)

⁴ In Hall and Beardsley, *Twelve Doors to Japan* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1965) pp. 187-191.

⁵ Doi Takeo, "Amae: A Key Concept for Understanding Japanese Personality Structure" in Smith and Beardsley, *Japanese Culture* (Aldine: Chicago, 1962) p. 138.

The questions of whether the Japanese language creates the Japanese style of culture or whether the culture of Japan produces the structures of the language, have produced some attempted solutions. Let us take a brief look at some of these explanatory theories of language and culture.

The Greeks, as we know, believed that language was in a direct vertical and controlling relationship with social behavior. By giving something a name, a person controlled some aspect of behavior. If a name for a thing was properly selected, then the thing itself as well as its nature was determined. This can be seen to be a very rationalistic approach, and for that reason perhaps it does not fit the Japanese language so well. However, it is not a bad theory, since it provides answers as to "how" and "why" things work.⁶

A second theory of the relationship between language and culture was developed by Benjamin Lee Whorf.⁷ This has been termed the *congruency system*, because congruencies are found between language and the values, ideals, behavior and customary practices of the society which uses that language. Compared to the Greek vertical approach, this is seen as a horizontal theory, for it posits a harmony and correspondence between language and human behavior. As Whorf himself has written: "Which was first, the language patterns or the cultural norms? In the main they have grown up together, constantly influencing each other."⁸

The theory of language and culture which I find most comprehensive is that proposed by Kenneth Pike in his three volume work, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*.⁹ As the title suggests, it is referred to as the *Unified Theory*, because it embraces the totality of human behavior. In Pike's system, language becomes a special (though always central) part of the much bigger phenomenon of *human behavior*. In the larger field of human behavior there are three different yet communicating areas co-existing, namely 1) name and word, 2) act and behavior pattern, and 3) status and role (as presented in the social structure developed by Linton). Language and culture are simply the verbal and non-verbal elements in a larger unified complex called human behavior.

As has been pointed out in this theory of Pike, language exists on the one hand and so does the "thing". There no longer remains a direct relationship between the word and thing as in the Greek concept, nor is there a congruent relation as posited by Whorf. Language and culture are thus shown to be not discontinuous, but merely a part of human behavior.

The great advantage to this system lies in the task assigned to the linguist. The job of the linguistic scientist becomes similar to that of the social scientist, i.e. to describe that particular field of human behavior which he has selected for his concentration. In my study, this area will be the language and the psychological patterns of the ways of thinking of the Japanese people. It is not completely necessary to answer the question of which came first (language or cultural norms), but it is very necessary to describe various language features, in order to see reflected there the ways of thinking of Japan. Therefore, using

⁶ R.A. Miller, "Levels of Speech and the Japanese Linguistic Response to Modernization" in Shively, *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture* (Princeton, 1971) pp. 671-520.

⁷ B. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality* (Cambridge, 1956).

⁸ *ibid.* p. 156.

⁹ K. Pike, (Glendale, California, 1954) 3 volumes.

this descriptive, unified theory of language and culture, I would like next to delve into some of the more interesting aspects of the Japanese language.

II. Linguistic examples of the Japanese Way of Thinking:

When one looks at the Japanese character, a certain group or insular mentality is immediately observable. Also one can find a delicate and indirect use of gesture and manner of acting. Along with this can be mentioned the Japanese concentration on the present moment. All of these characteristic features of the Japanese way of thinking can be found also in the Japanese language. In this section I will deal with a few aspects of Japanese language which reflect the above-mentioned features of Japan.

1. Japanese as against non-Japanese in language:

When Roy Andrew Miller deals with the linguistic response to modernization¹⁰ he analyzes the Japanese use of polite language (*keigo*), involving binary sets of contrasting elements. Under these contrasting elements, we can find examples of the following sets: 1) "we against non-we" (e.g. "we"-*haiken suru* meaning 'to see', "non-we"-*goran ni naru*); 2) "commendatory as against pejorative" (e.g. the commendatory word for 'teacher' is *sensei* while the pejorative term is *kyoshi*); 3) "living as against the dead" (e.g. various names for living people as against their *kaimyo*, monastic names given to the dead); 4) "secret as against overt" (e.g. a man's given name, like Saburo, would be used only in exceptional cases, which is contrasted with his "overt" name used in larger groups, like *shacho*, *otosan*, *ojisan*, *anata*, and so forth); 5) high social status as against low social status (e.g. the language of a young yakuza would be different from that of salaryman); 6) male as against female (e.g. when referring to something delicious a woman would say *oishii* while a man would use the word *umai*); and important social role as against unimportant (e.g. the term *haiyu* for T.V. and movie actors as contrasted with the term *yakusha* for the legitimate theater or the stage). In English, we would use the same word to refer to certain people or conditions, while the Japanese language carefully distinguishes elements by employing separate words.

In this connection I would like to analyze more in detail one binary set of contrasting elements with a *keigo* isogloss, namely Japanese as against non-Japanese. The reason I want to describe this more in detail is because it shows the Japanese way of thinking toward *tanin*. This literally means "other people," but has come to mean someone who has no connection with oneself, as Dr. Doi indicates.¹¹ The Japanese strength of the Meiji Period perhaps lay in the fact that they created a unified group, "Japan", contrasted with the foreign, "tanin". And this contrast still retains some vestiges in the language, since Japanese and non-Japanese are carefully distinguished in many cases.

For example, Japanese ships have names which end with the suffix *-maru*, but foreign ships are found to end in *-go*. Non-Japanese islands must end in the suffix *-to* or *-do*, for example, Guam-to or Lubang-to, while the ending *-shima* or *-jima* is reserved for Japanese islands, like Oshima and Nijijima. The Japanese emperor is uniquely referred to as *Tenno* by the people; other countries may have an emperor, but he is referred to as a *kotei*.

An interesting example from religion is the way to refer to a bishop. In Rome the

¹⁰ Roy Andrew Miller in *Shively*, pp. 601-665.

¹¹ Doi Takeo, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, p. 36.

Bishop of Tokyo is called Petrus Shirayanagi, while in Tokyo he is Shirayanagi Seiichi. It is said that a Japanese Christian Church, *Seikokai*, which is historically descended from the Anglican and Episcopalian Churches, cannot be referred to as *kantokukyoha*, which is the translation for the Western word, Episcopalian.

One more case of Japanese and non-Japanese contrasting elements is the language which non-Japanese are expected to speak in newspapers, books, comics, as well as on television or in the movies in dubbed sound tracks or sub-titles. In cartoons and books, a foreigner's speech is written in katakana, and the structure of that speech is foreign, though basically not incorrect. However, though it is not incorrect nor unintelligible, it is certainly not the way that a Japanese would say that particular sentence. Of course, in America, we sometimes mimic the speech patterns of foreigners to express humor or to make an imitation more realistic, but I do not believe that we make it a general rule as do the Japanese. Even those who have lived in Japan for a long period of time and have mastered the Japanese language are represented as speaking in katakana or with slightly twisted grammar.

In movies, this grammar used by foreigners is often rather forced. For example, names are put at the end of a sentence and pronouns not normally expressed are often included. A simple example that I have seen recently was *Watakushi wa anata ga honto ni suki desu, Tomu*, (I like you very much, Tom), which would probably never be said in such a way by a Japanese.

One tendency of television is the use of a foreigner who cannot especially speak Japanese in commercials. Last summer a Canadian friend came to Japan to study economics. He could not speak Japanese when he came nor when he left Japan. He can be seen on television often advertizing a certain product, speaking, quite naturally, a rather strange Japanese. There are women who advertize paper products, old men who want us to buy cars, and others selling cigarettes, and so forth. They do not seem to have studied Japanese to any appreciable degree. Japanese whom I have asked about this mention that they have never really noticed, because they do not expect foreigners to be able to master the intricacies of the Japanese tongue. Certainly television and magazines support this view.

Relevant to this contrasting element of Japanese as against non-Japanese is the use of foreign words in Japan. Many words are being imported into Japan, but their meaning has gradually changed, until the same word spoken between a Japanese and a non-Japanese causes misunderstanding. We can see words like *arubaito* (Arbeit), *non-poli* (non-political), or *rinchi* (lynch), which have come to represent Japanese phenomena quite different from that represented by the original word. *Arubaito* means a part-time job, *non-poli* refers to a student who does not take part in school demonstrations, and *rinchi* is a kind of brow-beating within a certain group in order to get a person to admit to a crime (usually ideological). In general, foreign words taken into the Japanese language refer to a very specific situation often not found in foreign countries.

The Japanese as against non-Japanese in language brings out clearly the *uchi* as against *soto* element in the Japanese way of thinking. As a country Japan is a group (*uchi*-within the group), and things non-Japanese are outside the group (*soto*). This is reflected in the way non-Japanese are expected to speak, and in the way their language is written. The language used to refer to foreign things is also occasionally different from the language referring to Japanese things. This is not to say that things Japanese are better or worse

than foreign things, but only that non-Japanese elements do not fit into the Japanese group and are considered different from Japanese elements.

2. Japanese use of directive language:

In his book, *Language in Thought and Action*,¹² S.I. Hayakawa indicates two uses of language, namely the directive and affective uses. In this section I would like to discuss the directive use of Japanese language. Directive language in general may be defined as language which attempts to control, direct, or influence the future actions of fellow human beings.¹³ As an interpretation, I would like to offer the thesis that in the case of Japan, the term "directive language" is not entirely accurate. Japanese influence others not so much by "direct" language as by "indirect" and subtle language. Let us examine the way Japanese use language to get other people to act.

One of the main characteristics of directive language is the use of future tense in order to promise or influence something. However, as will be shown in a later section, Japanese language does not have a distinctive future tense. To take another simple example, *tegami wo kakimasu* may mean either "I write letters," or "I will write a letter." Japanese live in the present and are primarily concerned with present occurrences. Therefore there is little reliance on the future.

Since in the West, directive language deals with the future and with promises, if promises are not fulfilled, we find disappointment and disillusionment. From this disappointment springs distrust in another person. Politicians are especially susceptible to this distrust, because, of necessity, they must use directive language since they are public figures—their promises have a certain moral worth, and they are expected to keep their promises. They cannot always fulfill their promises and follow up on their use of directive language. From this we can understand a certain general distrust of politicians.

However, I have found very little disillusionment with politicians, even when bribery or lying is attributed to public officials in Japan. Actually in election times, a political platform contains very little directive language and promises for the future. Rather the platform of a party is more of a negative reaction to the past policies of other parties. There is comparatively little positive reform promised, and therefore there is little disillusionment in the performance of an elected official. The techniques to influence people in the Japanese political sphere are much more "indirect" techniques: for example, white gloves to indicate a certain cleanliness and honesty, as well as the fact that most politicians are old in order to indicate a certain gravity and wisdom. Of course, the loudspeaker trucks cannot be called "indirect", but they are certainly more indirect than people coming to your home and speaking directly.

Another field of indirect language in Japan is that of advertising. There are very little hard facts or "hard sell" in the advertising techniques in Japan, nor are many concrete promises to be found. Rather products are associated with nice feelings or pleasant emotions. Occasionally products are even proven to be harmful or useless, yet there seems to be little disappointment with the advertising industry.

I feel that the Japanese consumer more than anything else wants to preserve "harmony"

¹² S.I. Hayakawa, (Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich: San Francisco, 1972) Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 89.

within everyday life. Any sort of complaint causes friction and embarrassment for all parties. Any sort of direct confrontation or use of direct language would cause trouble to others. If there is any concrete difficulty, one party quickly apologizes and all ruffled feelings are calmed.

This helps to explain the reaction of the people to the recent inflationary price spiral in Japan. Whereas people in other countries complained and formed consumer groups, Japanese reaction was relatively quiet and complaint was ineffectual. Recently a friend of mine who works for a large oil company confided to me that there was little real reason to hike the prices of gasoline, but since there was no resistance from the public, he mentioned, "Why not raise prices and make a good profit?"

Does this mean that nothing is being done to influence others, and that there is no progress or reaction against a bad situation? I do not believe so, since there is a subtle and indirect way to get things done. This will be seen in the next section dealing with vagueness and ambiguity, and in another section where the Japanese "living in the present" is discussed.

A point which is very difficult for non-Japanese to understand is the *answer* to promises or obligations in Japan. Since language is basically indirect, answers will be basically indirect, and obligations and promises will be of a different order from the direct and forceful way of, for example, America. An example of this is an American trading firm which has an office in Japan. The American president of the company often bemoans the fact that Japanese shipping companies will reply "yes" to queries about whether they can transport a shipment on time. However, the Japanese manager takes into consideration many other factors besides the simple answer (tone of voice, smile) and arranges the schedule accordingly, expecting certain delays. The shipping company mentioned afterwards that, "We thought that you wanted us to answer *yes, it will be on time* when you asked us. We simply wanted to give the answer you expected."

A similar instance took place in a publishing firm, where deadlines for printing are essential for business. At times a deadline comes and goes without the work being finished on time. The customer naturally telephones and asks why the work has not been completed as scheduled. The manager answers politely that everyone has been busy working overtime on another project, or there is a shortage of paper, and that the work will be completed tomorrow. The customer listens to these polite excuses, and understands that the real reason lies elsewhere, and waits patiently until the work may be completed in a week or later. The effect of the apology is very important because it shows sincerity.

Indirectness is very much linked with the feelings of the party being communicated with. For example, if we look at the answer to questions of the type: "Aren't you going to go to work today?", *Kyo kaisha ni ikimashenka?* we can see how the feelings of the listener are taken into consideration. Since the speaker expects the answer "Yes," the person who answers will reply, "Yes, I'm not going." We in America answer more logically to the question itself and reply, "No, I'm not."

Directive language is supplemented by non-verbal language as well. Therefore we can expect "indirect" language in Japan to use a more delicate gesture and body-language to influence others. In Japan, gestures tend to be stylized and easily predictable. Singers memorize and use the same gestures to indicate a certain emotion, and they repeat the gestures as long as they sing the same song. They even wear the same costume. Japanese

“jidai eiga” (historical dramas) both on television and in movies are predictable and have set patterns.

Gestures reflect the basic lack of spontaneity of the Japanese in their actions. Nothing confuses a Japanese more in drama practice at school, than when I say to them, “Just act naturally.” The students must be taught basic gestures, and then they practice and practice until it seems natural. Of course the gestures which I speak about are Western, large and overt gestures.

The typical Japanese gesture is indirect and delicate. I have often been scolded by inebriated people in the train for talking too loudly (when I thought I was speaking naturally in English), or in class I have been laughed at for using large gestures which are quite natural for Americans. Japanese ways of thinking expressed in gestures are delicately presented. Students have often presented me with comic books for my study of Japanese, and some of the stories are rather long with no dialog (which does not help improve my Japanese too much.) These stories with pictures resembling the frames of a movie were originally incomprehensible to me. When I asked a Japanese to explain to me the plot, he explained every picture in terms of hatred, pain, love, revenge, and jealousy. All of these human emotions were drawn with only a simple turn of the mouth or a partially closed eye describing the heart of a person.

From this observation, the conclusion was that Japanese are much more aware of the subtle changes in the world around them, both in people and in nature. They are accustomed to understand how a person feels from only small hints (a little in the manner of Sherlock Holmes). Both in gestures and in language, there is no attempt to dominate others; rather there is an expectation and emotional understanding of what a person wants to say. A person only has to say *Are desu yo* (“That is it”) for others to understand what the person wants to say. Rather than spontaneity, harmony is preserved by doing expected actions more than unexpected things. Direct language of the West is too forceful and presents too much of the individual. For the Japanese everyone has a role and his language must fit that role.

3. *Vagueness and ambiguity:*

Closely connected with “Indirect” language is the vagueness of the Japanese language. Since people do not want to cause dissension in this homogeneous society, there is a built-in ambiguity which softens relationships and preserves dependence. As reflected in the theory of Prof. Doi, the tendency to *amaeru* prevents members from being divided from the group.¹⁴

I would like particularly to treat the *negative* in the Japanese language, because it is distinctive in its use in making a sentence softer and less pointed. For example, the idea of “must” in English is expressed by a double negative in Japanese: “It is not becoming for you not to go,” or “It is not good for you not to study hard for the exam,” which are much too indirect and cumbersome for English speakers. Not too long ago a baseball team was sold to a new owner, but at the appointed time for the transaction, the present owner did not appear to sell the team. In his place, a third party was present. The purchaser asked this third party, “Do you want to sell the team, or not?” The answer was:

¹⁴ Doi Takeo, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, pp. 8-9.

"I cannot say that there is *no* reason for *not* selling the team." This answer meant that the owner had reconsidered selling the team, but through a representative, he politely and ambiguously answered. The negative is also found in the often heard phrase, *ii ja arimasenka* (It's all right, isn't it?) in order to soften one's own opinion, and give the impression of asking another's opinion.

The negative in the West is used in Law as the strongest and most inclusive term. The so-called "Lex Negativa" applies to all things, while positive laws are only specific. Therefore, the negative is a strong expression in the West, and implies a kind of absolute quality. However, in Japan, the negative's basic function is one of lending ambiguity and vagueness to a statement. It is hard to imagine that two words like "Yes" and "No" can cause so much difficulty in nuance and understanding.

Another difference is the permissive sentence in Japanese. "Let a person do something" and "make a person do something" are expressed in the same way in Japanese, e.g. *tabesasu* can mean either make someone eat or let someone eat. "Make" for us is a stronger expression, and even gives the feeling of coercion, but in the Japanese language there is no such strong expression. Rather the idea of "getting someone to do something" is so polite in Japanese that it is often used in a formula, such as *ashita yasumasete itadakimasu*. This is said by workers before they take a holiday and it would be translated something like: "I would like you to make (or let) me rest tomorrow." In this way Japanese indirectly ask favors, rather than being forceful.

One more example of vagueness and avoidance of direct expression is the well-known use of *keredomo* and *-ga* as endings for sentences. It may be translated as "but", however it is often used at the end of a sentence merely to leave a statement unfinished. Combined with *deshoo*, it becomes *deshoo ga . . .*, and this allows a person to indicate an adverse or contrary opinion, or express disagreement, without mentioning that disagreement directly: *kyonen kimi wa yoku hatarakimashita ga . . .* ("Last year you worked well, but . . ." does not express the fact that he is not doing his job, yet that person knows his boss is dissatisfied.

A: *Nihon wa sekai ni okeru seiji no sendoosha, desu ne.*

(Japan is a leader in world politics, isn't it?)

B. *Sore wa soo deshoo keredomo . . .*

(That may be true, however . . .)

The above answer would be too brusque and frank if simply expressed in terms of "I do not think so." It smooths relations and preserves the sense of harmony, which is so necessary for communication. A person who does not observe these simple formalities of vague speech is considered rather boorish and overly forceful.

4. *The emphasis on the concrete:*

In a previous section it was seen that the Japanese language has no specific future tense, but only an expression of vagueness to indicate something which has not yet happened. There does not appear to be a great concern with future occurrences and this applies as well to promises and future obligations. The fact that the Japanese way of thinking is rooted in the present time is clearly reflected in the concreteness of Japanese expressions. For example, in English we say, "I am hungry," "He's a proud person," and "He's an intelligent gentleman." Japanese, on the other hand, have the expressions

hara ga hetta (my stomach has dwindled), *hana ga takai* (his nose is lofty), and *atama ga ii* (his head is good). Sounds and smells are also concretely expressed in onomatopoeic words which fill the Japanese language, like *bata-bata*, *ton-ton*, *doki-doki*, and so forth.

Another obvious example of concreteness is the Japanese language's lack of a subjunctive form in conditional sentences. "If he had come, everything would have gone more smoothly" can be expressed in Japanese: *kare ga kitara*, *zembu umaku itta yo*, with no subjunctive form. I have found in my college classes that when I wanted to begin a discussion, I would sometimes make a hypothetical situation and ask: "If you had children, how would you want their education to be the same or different from your own?" or "If you had a million yen, how would you use it?" The students' reply was more often than not, to the effect that they did not have children nor did they have a million yen, a fact which I was quite aware of. There appears to be a lack of imagination, and very few plans for the future. The most difficult composition for them to write is one which deals with what they plan to do with their careers. Students themselves are often bemoaning the fact they have no purpose in their education.

The word "abstract" has different equivalents in Japanese, *chūshōteki*, *kūsōteki*, and even *gōriteki*. All of these terms have the nuance of something impracticable and unreal, like a fantasy. The opposite word, *gutaiteki*, concrete, has a good and ideal meaning. I have found in my experience that Japanese are very concerned with concrete matters. An example is the recent inflationary situation in Japan and other countries. Whereas in France there were demonstrations against an 11% inflation, in Japan (with its 30% inflation recently) there were demonstrations against a lack of toilet paper and soy sauce. Rather than planning for future shortages, on a long term plan, like gasoline or housing, and so forth, people are hoarding daily goods.

Japan seems never to have developed a deep philosophy, like Greek, Egyptian or Latin philosophy, basically because there is no eschatology and concern for the future. Japanese students study Western philosophy more than Japanese thought, but there is little creative reflection, merely response and reaction.

I believe that Japanese live in the present with the concrete world around them with little concern for the future, but more than the present and future tenses, the past tense seems to be the important time. Demonstrations are directed against past occurrences, and the past tense is used where we would use present tense of progressive time, e.g. *basu ga kita*, "The bus is coming," and *ashita iku koto ni natta*, "I'm going to go tomorrow." Rather than plan well, the Japanese way of thinking seems to demand a whole-hearted reaction to what has or is happening. Therefore philosophy is practically impossible, since philosophy is a science of probability which is very concerned with the future.

5. *The use of the English word "my" in Japanese:*

Recently the expressions "my pace", "my home", and "my car" (even referring to possessions of others) have become very popular in the Japanese language. we can hear sentences like "He is not working at *my pace*," or "we do not own *my home* yet." More than the grammatical confusion is the confusion of the meaning of personal belongings implied in these sentences. Why have these English expressions become part of the Japanese language?

In the West, possessive words like “yours” and “mine” lie not in the external world, but in *how we intend to act*. Assertions of ownership and rights are basically directives.¹⁵ They are subjective statements about rights to the effect that “This thing is mine, and you had better not touch it.” First, Japanese have made these expressions concrete, *my car*. Next, to say that ‘this is mine and you had better not touch it’ is too strong a directive for the Japanese, and therefore they use the Western expression rather than the Japanese *uchi no* which does not necessarily imply rights. This English way of speaking is a rather new form, and seems to express the desire of the Japanese people to keep their privacy. *My car* or *my home* indicate something which belongs exclusively to the owner. To express non-ownership, e.g. “my home town” or “my country” a Japanese will use the Japanese words *Uchi no* or *ware ware* (our).

III. Some Expressions Which Reflect the Japanese Way of Thinking:

In this section of this article, I would like to discuss some words and expressions which have an affinity to Japanese culture and which indicate more clearly the Japanese way of thinking.¹⁶

- 1) *Ma ga nukete iru*—*ma* in the Japanese way of thinking has the meaning of “space”, which is a key word for understanding the people of Japan. A person must have his essential “space”. If he has no *ma*, he is a foolish person, so *ma ga nukete iru* means a person has lost his space, and is therefore stupid or ridiculous.
- 2) *Ochitsuita*—even though this word is the past tense of the word meaning “settle” or “be steady”, it indicates a present state. It is a good example of the Japanese *kokoro*, and probably originated in the practice of Zen. It has two basic meanings: 1) to move from an instable situation (usually one of turmoil or worry) to a stable situation, and 2) a stable state with no frivolity or haste. It shows that calmness for a Japanese is stability and perfect composure. The opposite *ochitsuite inai* is often used of bright or unexpected things which surprise a person.
- 3) *suki ga aru* and *suki ga nai*—these expressions are used particularly in Japanese traditional martial arts, e.g. kendo or aikido. It originally meant a narrow opening between things, or an interval. In the context of martial arts it has come to mean a chance to take advantage of a blind point of the opponent, when there is a good opportunity to strike. *Suki ga nai* (the negative form) therefore means unassailable, e.g. good argument.
- 4) *jimi* and *hade*—*Hade* means gaudy, or attracting attention. These two words reflect the Japanese way of thinking well because of the nuance of the two words. *Hade* has a pejorative connotation, while *jimi*, which means simple and not standing out, is a much more desirable characteristic for the Japanese. The attribute of “standing out” or “out-standing” is not particularly a virtue in Japan. A *jimi* person is thrifty, hard working, and never seeking attention. *Jimi* clothes are not colorful, but they fit well and suit the person completely, while *hade* clothes are strange, too bright or modern, and indicate a *kawatta hito*, a curious, odd person who is considered an outsider. In the Japanese context, if a person comes in contact with a *hade*, there is a good chance that he cannot relax, but

¹⁵ Hayakawa, pp. 96-97.

¹⁶ H. Kaneko, *Difficult Words and Expressions for Foreigners in Conversational Japanese* (Center for Japanese Studies: Kamakura, Japan, 1966)

becomes *ochitsuite inai*. Foreigners are considered to prefer “outstanding” things, while the Japanese would much rather prefer simple and conservative things, because he can fit easily into the group without drawing attention to himself.

5) *giri*—much has been written about the terms *giri*, *ninjo* and *on* in terms of Japanese society. *Giri* means the relation of interdependence brought about as a result of receiving a favor. While *ninjo* is a spontaneous feeling familiar to Japanese, *giri* is more of an artificial relationship. This can be seen by the fact that when a person marries into another family, that person is called *giri no kyodai*, or *giri no ototo*, which means in-law. This new relationship, though artificial, is very deep. As a matter of fact, as Nakane Chie says,¹⁷ the new member of the family becomes more deeply involved with that family than an actual son or daughter who has gone away and married into another family. The idea of *ba*, place, is very important here.

6) *Ninjo*—this may be called the feeling or sympathy which arises naturally in the relation between parent and child or between siblings, or even the feeling which people have for animals, which feeling is possessed in accordance with a person’s nature. As such, it might perhaps originally come from the Buddhist concept of charity for all living creatures. Since it is something natural, all people should possess and cultivate this trait.

7) *dai nashi ni suru*—this expression originally comes from the tea-ceremony, in which it meant a method of serving tea informally without a stand or table. The meaning has developed to include any unruly state, or informal state. This indicates that Japanese put more stock in formality and order than in informality and spontaneity. Informality equates with recklessness.

8) *sumimasen*—although this expression has come to be used in many different situations, it is most often used in cases where a person has received something and cannot repay immediately. It is also used in cases of causing trouble or disturbing the other person, but the basic meaning seems to be something like “This situation is not completed (because I cannot give you back what I owe you)”. If a person wants to indicate “I’m sorry for having pushed or hurt you,” the proper expression would be *Shitsurei shimashita* or *gomen-nasai* (although recently *sumimasen* has become more common than before). Therefore, the English translation “Excuse me” is not completely accurate for *sumimasen*, because the basic meaning is concerned with receiving something.

9) *moshi wake arimasen*—This expression is similar to *sumimasen*, but is used in situations of more gravity. It is often heard in the psychological situation where a person has received a present or favor from a person of much higher status, and the receiver feels he has no qualification to have received such a wonderful thing.

10) *tsukinami no*—this expression originally came from the Noh drama, which was held every month regularly. Because it had to be held every month, the quality of the dramas decreased. Therefore, *tsukinami no* has come to mean something trite or stale, something which has lost its fresh nature.

11) *medatsu*—this word meaning conspicuous, prominent or outstanding has a connection with 4) above. For Americans, something prominent attracts attention or is in the limelight, and is therefore a characteristic of the individual and independent person. However, in Japan, where the group is very important, *medatanai* (not prominent) takes

¹⁷ Nakane Chie, *Japanese Society* (Univ. of California Press: Berkeley, 1972) p. 5.

on the meaning of modest and quiet, which is more desired than to stand out. Rather than outshine others, the purpose of study or work is to fit into the pattern well, and not cause any disturbance.

12) *rokaho*—this is a rather rare literary expression which comes from the word *oboro*, which means haziness. The expression *rokaho* indicates a person's feeling on a misty night, when things cannot be perfectly seen. It is a rather melancholy emotion, which is very characteristic of Japanese literature. Rather than describe a scene in great detail, a writer will present a faint sketch, and leave the rest to the reader to fill in for himself. The scene is purposely left vague.

13) *tomawashi ni iu*—This expression, which means to go the long way around or beat around the bush, also has the meaning of hint or suggest. It implies an indirect or round-about way of speaking, which characterizes the Japanese use of "indirect" language in such things as promises and conversations. Roundabout language is used to present a feeling or emotion, and often the conclusion is not even mentioned but left to the observant person to try to figure out.

14) *yohaku no aji*—those non-Japanese who have tasted *tofu*, Japanese bean curd, can understand this expression, which means a delicate taste. The root meaning of *yohaku* is a blank space, and to the careless observer, there may seem to be nothing there, but to the sensitive and careful person, there is a very delicate aroma and taste about the most common objects.

15) *kinsen ni fureru*—this literally means to touch the strings of a *koto* or other musical other musical instrument, and figuratively it means to touch the strings of the heart. In a larger sense, it describes the situation where a person is moved by subtle sounds or subtle and delicate scenes or tastes. It shows very clearly the detailed and discerning character of the Japanese way of thinking, where overt and forceful situations are to be avoided, and the delicate things are to be appreciated. A subtle expression tells more than many words. Of course, this is found to some extent in all cultures, but the Japanese have developed it to a great degree in their arts and in their language.

CONCLUSION

The question of which came first, the social and cultural structure of Japan or the Japanese language, cannot be answered with any clarity, nor any certainty. But I do believe that the Japanese language does have a special function in continuing and preserving the distinctive Japanese way of thinking. In the language we can find reflected the specific characteristics of Japanese culture, i.e. vagueness, concreteness, lack of planning, delicacy, and the group mentality rather than individuality. From my experience, I find a person who learns to speak Japanese must necessarily become more polite, circumspect, and vague, while becoming less forceful, direct and independent. A Japanese child unconsciously learns these facts little by little from elders and teachers. By all means harmony must be preserved, and initiative and independent thinking which causes friction must never be brought into the open.

From my point of view as a teacher of a foreign language in Japan, all of the ways of thinking of a foreign country must be presented to the Japanese student to show that basic

norms and characteristics are different. It is not enough merely to translate words from one language to another, but basic assumptions must also be modified and expanded. Japanese can realize that concepts like *senpai* and *kohai* (senior and junior ranked in status) have little meaning outside of the Japanese social context. Non-Japanese should be careful to express their individuality too directly with the result that there is misunderstanding and friction. Neither culture is unfathomable if communication is kept open.

(April 1974)