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**What is This?**
Characteristics of Japanese-style communication

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Introduction

A purpose of this paper is to describe some characteristics of Japanese-style communication. Although there are many forms of communication, only daily practical communication such as daily conversations and discussions at meetings are to be dealt with.

The phrase ‘Japanese-style’ is often used without definition, which sometimes causes confusion. Before discussing Japanese-style communication, the meaning of the phrase, Japanese-style, will be examined first.

Following this, *wa* (or keeping harmony with other people) will be discussed. It is a fundamental Japanese value related to communication.

Thirdly, as three major components of communicative situations, the degree of the intimacy between communicators, the mutual relationship in the vertical hierarchy they belong to, and the definition of the situation (public or private) will be examined. These factors greatly affect Japanese communication behaviour.

Finally, as a typical example of how the above-mentioned values and components affect Japanese communication behaviour, silence, ambiguity and smiling will be discussed.

What is Japanese-style?

It is often said that there is no nation that likes to discuss itself as much as the Japanese. Furthermore, many Western Japanologists have discussed Japanese people, regarding Japanese culture as the exact opposite of their own.

Sugimoto and Mouer (1982) criticized this overflow of *Nihon-jin-ron* (or

studies on Japanese people) from two viewpoints: empirical grounds and
the sociology of knowledge.

Sugimoto and Mouer (1982) pointed out, based on empirical data, that
many phenomena which have been supposed to be Japanese-style (for
example, *Nenko joretsu seido* or the pay-scale system based on seniority)
is observed not only in Japan, but also all over the world.

Furthermore, from the viewpoint of the sociology of knowledge, they
claim that many *Nihon-jin-ron* (studies on Japanese people) are distorted
and confusing, because many Japanese do not have enough knowledge
about foreign countries, and many foreign Japanologists are given only
limited information about Japan and Japanese people. In addition, most
of them, whether Japanese or foreigners, have ethnocentric attitudes.

Sugimoto and Mouer insisted on the need for a pluralistic approach: that
is, in order to overcome those distortions, it is important not to treat the
Japanese society as a homogeneous whole, but to recognize the existence
of multiple strata. They suggested that in cross-national comparisons we
should take into consideration the respondents’ vocation, status, sex, age
and academic background as much as their nationality.

Needless to say, we should not say that a certain characteristic is
Japanese-style, based on the comparison between Japanese farmers and
British students. Moreover, even based on the comparison between
Japanese students and British students, we should not say so either if the
status of students in both countries is different. Sugimoto and Mouer are
right in this discussion. It is true that most studies on Japanese-style
communication are not free from the above-mentioned distortion and
confusion. Unfortunately, however, it is extremely difficult to satisfy the
standard of the pluralistic comparison suggested by Sugimoto and Mouer.
There is almost no empirical study which satisfies the standard.

Therefore, we have to live with picking up the characteristics which
many scholars believe as Japanese-style, however insufficient it may be.
The topics to be discussed here were selected, not because they have been
proven uniquely ‘Japanese’ in Sugimoto and Mouer’s sense, but because
many scholars have believed them to be Japanese-style.

**Emphasis on keeping good relations with other people (Wa or
harmony with others)**

Many scholars, who compare the Japanese with Westerners, point out that
the Japanese give the highest priority to *Wa* (or keeping peaceful relations
with others). Benedict (1954) described Western culture as ‘guilt culture’
and Japanese culture as ‘shame culture’. According to Benedict (1954: 223):
True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as pure guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people’s criticism . . . it [shame] is a potent sanction. But it requires an audience or at least a man’s fantasy of an audience.

Doi (1973) discussed the Japanese personality structure and interpersonal relationship based on a Japanese concept, *Amae*. *Amae* mentality is defined as ‘the attempt to deny the fact of separation that is such an inseparable part of human existence and to obliterate the pain of separation’ (Doi, 1973: 75).

In Benedict (1954) and Doi (1973), the characteristic that Japanese call *Wa* is treated rather negatively. They both think that because of this characteristic, the Japanese tend to be over-affected by others and cannot establish identity as an individual. Hamaguchi (1982) viewed it differently. He even argued that the Japanese concept of a human being is different from that in the West.

In the West, an individual is the minimum unit of the society that cannot be divided any more. Each individual, who is independent and has already established his or her identity, interacts with others by expressing his or her own view, and constitutes the society. Hamaguchi pointed out that self-centredness, self-reliance and interpersonal relations as means are the features of Western individualism.

On the other hand, the Japanese concept of a human being is not an individual but a ‘contextual’ (*Kanjin*: a person-in-human-nexus). That is, the minimum unit of the Japanese society is not an individual but an interpersonal relation and Japanese communication behaviour changes drastically in accordance with the person they are interacting with or the situation where the interaction takes place. Hamaguchi maintained that mutual dependence, mutual reliance and interpersonal relations are integral features of this Japanese concept of a human being. There are some empirical data which support the Japanese emphasis.

For example, C. Hayashi (1988) pointed out that ‘the preference for warm-hearted bosses’ is one of a few attitudes that have been the majority’s opinion in Japan for thirty years, based on ‘Japanese National Character Surveys’. The surveys have been conducted every five years since 1953 by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics. All the seven surveys (1953–83) showed that at least 79 percent of Japanese preferred the bosses who sometimes force them to work hard beyond the rules, but take good care of them even outside work.

Gordon and Kikuchi (1975) measured the values concerning interpersonal relations among Japanese and American university and high school students. The results showed that regardless of sex or school level, the American students valued recognition (being respected, admired and considered an important person by other people) more than the Japanese.
On the other hand, the value of harmony (acting properly in order to be accepted by other people) is more dominant among the Japanese students. Cousins (1989) conducted a questionnaire survey using Japanese and American university students as respondents. The survey consisted of two sessions: TST and contextualized free-response. In the TST session, respondents were asked to respond twenty times to the single question, ‘Who am I?’ The TST isolated self from the social nexus. On the other hand, in the ‘contextualized’ free-response questionnaire session, respondents were asked to describe themselves in the following situations: at home, at school or with close friends: within the social nexus.

He found that in the TST session American students referred more frequently to purely psychological attributes (e.g. ‘I am easy-going’) than did Japanese students, while in the ‘contextualized’ questionnaire session there were a greater number of pure attributes (e.g. ‘I am diligent’) among Japanese students than American students. While American students had more concrete images of themselves without any social context, Japanese students tended to be more conscious of themselves in particular social contexts. The results support Hamaguchi’s (1982) idea that the Japanese concept of a human being is ‘contextual’.

**Classification of communication participants**

The style and content of communication are strongly affected by the situations where the communication takes place. This is true not only in Japan, but also in any other societies. One of the most important components that constitute communicative situations is relationship between communicators.

‘**We**’ and ‘**they**’: **in-group and out-group**

Many scholars have pointed out that Japanese communication style changes drastically, depending on whether or not the communicators are affiliated to the same group, or how close they are to each other.

Nakane (1970) divided social groups into two categories: one is based on an individual’s common attributes, the other on situational positions in a given frame. The term ‘frame’ is used to denote ‘a locality, an institution, or a particular relationship which binds a set of individuals into one group’ (Nakane, 1970: 1). According to Nakane, Japanese groups are typical of the latter.

Nakane (1970) states that groups based on a frame, in order to strengthen the frame further, tend to make people with different attributes ‘feel that they are the member of the same group, and that this feeling is
justified by stressing the group consciousness of “us” against “them”, i.e. the external, and by fostering a feeling of rivalry against other similar groups’ (Nakane, 1970: 10). Sometimes, ‘the consciousness of “them” and “us” is strengthened and aggravated to the point that extreme contrasts in human relations can develop in the same society, and anyone outside “our” people ceases to be considered human’ (Nakane, 1970: 21).

Iwata (1980) expressed the same idea by pointing out ‘the drastic attitude change caused by the degree of intimacy’. Iwata wrote:

It has been pointed out by many foreign observers that a Japanese, who is very kind to acquaintances, behaves in a rude, rather rough manner to strangers. . . . The behaviour (that is unbelievably selfish and rude) is not done only by the ‘rogues of the societies’. It is done by ordinary good citizens, sometimes extremely refined upper-class people.

Iwata (1980) divided the degree of intimacy concerning interpersonal relations into the following three categories: (a) Muen no kankei (no relationship); (b) Najimi no kankei (relationship of acquaintances); and (c) Ki no okenai kankei (very intimate relationship).

Muen no kankei corresponds to ‘Them’ in Nakane (1970)’s term. In Muen no kankei, Japanese interact with others in an indifferent manner not in a distrustful one, and they often behave quite impolitely. According to Iwata (1980), what characterizes these interpersonal relations is the ‘lack of mutual moral expectation’.

However, interpersonal relations of Japanese people change drastically once they get to know each other’s names, positions and personality. Their relations move up to those of Najimi no kankei, or ‘Us’ in Nakane (1970)’s term.

In this Najimi no kankei (relationship of acquaintance), a kind of moral expectation and a sense of trust develop in the communicator’s mind. In most cases, these expectations are not betrayed because Japanese in this level of relationship try to meet the other’s expectations even against their own interests.

‘Emphasis on keeping peaceful relations with others (Wa)’ mentioned previously mainly applies in communication of this level of relationship. In other words, in this Najimi relationship, ‘maintaining mutual favor is regarded as important, and people tend to behave harmoniously. . . . Therefore, the customs of showing one’s good will mutually, like exchanges of midyear and year-end gifts, small presents, and new year’s greeting postcards, will not disappear’ (Iwata, 1980: 118).

When intimacy between communicators increases further, the relationship between them develops into Ki no okenai kankei, and the manners of relationship change drastically again, which Nakane (1970) did not mention. In this relationship, communicators’ mutual behaviour is so well established that they do not need to make efforts to maintain it. They can
count on each other's favour. The favour is invulnerable. In this relationship, people tend to become more demanding, and may confide private affairs to each other.

Yoneyama (1971), like Nakane (1970), stated that the distinction between 'Us' and 'Them' has a great importance in Japanese daily life. However, the criterion Yoneyama adopted to distinguish between 'Us' and 'Them' is different from that of Nakane. According to Yoneyama (1971), 'We' means Mikata (allies) or Nakama (fellows): those who belong to the same group. 'They' means Teki (one's enemies) or Tanin (others). Yoneyama (1971: 58) states, 'a person feels relaxed when he or she is with his or her Nakama or Mikata. On the other hand, a person must be very cautious when he or she is with Tanin or Teki'. Furthermore, 'the world, in which the Japanese ordinarily live, is the one with Nakama' (Yoneyama, 1971: 58). That is, Japanese consider their relationship with Nakama the most important. This is a major reason why Japanese are often labelled 'group-oriented'.

According to Yoneyama (1971: 64), 'Concrete and close bonds and detailed mutual obligations exist in the relationships with Nakama, On and Giri, which Benedict (1954) described as 'Japanese obligations and their reciprocals', is observed especially in the relationship with Nakama.

Let us examine here the differences among Nakane, Iwata and Yoneyama in their terminologies. Yoneyama's 'We' and 'They' (or Nakama and Tanin) are both included in Nakane's 'Us' and Iwata's Najimi no kankei (familiar relationship). In other words, Yoneyama's discussion connotes that within Nakane's 'Us' or within Iwata's Najimi no kankei, communication patterns are not homogeneous. The differences again depend on the degree of intimacy.

To sum up, the interpersonal relations of Japanese people can be divided into four categories according to the degree of intimacy. The way of communication differs greatly from one category to another. The four categories are: (a) Muen no kankei (no relationship); (b) Najimi no kankei but Tanin no kankei (familiar relationship but not that of fellows nor allies); (c) relationship of Nakama or Mikata (relationship of fellows, or allies); and (d) Ki no okenai kankei (very intimate relationship).

Japanese are often criticized for being xenophobic by both Japanese and foreign intellectuals. This is partly because of above-mentioned differences of communication style based on the degree of intimacy between communicators.

It is easy for foreigners living in Japan to form Najimi relationships with Japanese. In the relationship of Najimi but Tanin, foreigners can easily learn how to communicate with Japanese because on that level of relationship, dependence on the communicative situation is smaller, the need for consideration for hierarchy or On and Giri is rather small, and communication patterns are formalized: the communication patterns are somewhat universal or international.
On the other hand, in order to be accepted as Nakama, foreigners must learn how to respond in complicated communication situations, involving hierarchical orders, On and Giri mentioned earlier. Therefore, it is difficult to develop the Najimi relationship into the Nakama relationship.

**Hierarchy consciousness**

An important characteristic of Japanese interpersonal relations is hierarchy consciousness. Every society has its hierarchical system concerning authority and responsibility. The Japanese hierarchical system is more complicated and varied than Western counterparts. It greatly affects people's thought and behaviour (especially on the level of Nakama relationships). According to Nakane (1970: 24, 26):

If we postulate a social group embracing members with various different attributes, the method of tying together the constituent members will be based on the vertical relation.

The vertical relation which we predicted in theory from the ideals of social group formation in Japan becomes the actuating principle in creating cohesion among group members. Because of the overwhelming ascendancy of this vertical orientation, even a set of individuals sharing identical qualifications tends to create a difference among these individuals.

Major factors determining the rank of a particular person in a vertical hierarchy are: (1) age: the older one is regarded as the superior; (2) position: one with a higher position in a particular group is regarded as the superior; (3) experience: one with more experience in a particular group is regarded as the superior; and (4) wisdom and knowledge: one with deeper wisdom and knowledge is regarded as the superior. These four items naturally overlap among each other.

This hierarchical system affects communication behaviour in the following ways:

1. people often make strong self-claims or self-expressions toward those in equivalent or lower ranks. But people seldom do so toward superiors;
2. people usually do not strongly oppose a superior's opinions, or disobey his or her orders even when they think that the superior is wrong. This is because they think disobedience is impolite as well as disadvantageous, and also because they trust and rely on the superior's rich experiences;
3. when people talk to their superiors, they use Keigo (honorifics), a language different from that which they use to communicate with those in equivalent or lower ranks.

In the Japanese language there are many self-reference and address
terms including pronouns, names, or names of positions. According to Suzuki (1984: 131–3), there are strict rules concerning how they should be used. Those rules are:

1. under normal circumstances, one cannot call a superior by personal pronouns such as Anata (you). On the other hand, one in a higher rank can use personal pronouns to a subordinate;
2. it is normal to address someone of a high social position by the name of the position, such as Sensei (teacher), or Kacho (section chief). But the reverse is not true;
3. a superior can call a subordinate by his or her surname e.g. Mr A or Ms B. But when one uses a superior’s surname, one must normally attach the superior’s occupational title after it e.g. President A or Director B;
4. when speaking to a superior, the speaker can refer to himself or herself by his or her surname alone, but the reverse never occurs;
5. when speaking to a subordinate, the speaker can call himself or herself by the word representing his or her own social position, but the reverse never occurs.

Then, which is more fundamental in Japan, the degree of intimacy or the hierarchy? The degree of intimacy is probably the more fundamental component. As mentioned earlier, Japanese communication behaviour is strongly affected by hierarchy consciousness, especially in the Nakama relationship.

At both ends of the intimacy scale, that is, in Muen no kankei (no relationship) and in Ki no okenai kankei (very intimate relationship), the hierarchy has almost nothing to do with Japanese communication behaviour.

Moreover, those people who are in the relationship of Najimi but Tanin tend to treat each other as if the other party was their superior, whatever their actual positions in the hierarchy may be. In short, each communicator does not assert himself or herself strongly, does not strongly oppose his or her communicating partner, and uses honorifics. When Yoneyama (1971: 58) mentioned ‘a person must be very cautious when he or she is with Tanin or Teki’, he meant this.

Ooyake (public) and Watakushi (private), Honne and Tatemae, Nemawashi, Yoriai communication, and Nijikai

As far as Japanese-style communication is concerned, whether communicators regard the setting of communication as the place of Ooyake or that of Watakushi is as important as the relationship between them. Ooyake means being public, formal and ceremonial, and Watakushi means being private, informal and non-ceremonial. According to Yoneyama (1971: 66):
When Japanese refer to their private affairs in their public speeches, they often start by saying, 'I am sorry to refer to my private affairs, but...'. Personal feeling, impression, and affection are regarded as private affairs; sometimes even personal opinions are. Usually they are supposed not to be brought up in a public speech: not to be mixed up with public affairs. The distinction between public obligation and private concerns must be clear, which is an important assumption in Japanese social relations.

This distinction between the public and the private is deeply related to what is often pointed out as the characteristics of Japanese-style communication in the realm of business, such as Honne (real feelings or intentions) and Tatamae (principles or official stance), Nemawashi (groundwork laid unobtrusively in advance or behind-the-scenes negotiations aimed at reaching a consensus), and Nijikai (continuation of the party at another place). They are especially important in the Japanese-style organizational decision-making process.

As Shuji Hayashi (1988) pointed out, in Japanese verbal communication the bifurcation of 'ideal' (Tatamae: principles or official stance) and 'actual' (Honne: real feelings or intentions) is particularly common, although an English proverb, 'To say is one thing, to practise is another', illustrates that the gap between them is universal.

In 'public places', such as formal meetings where decisions must be made, Tatamae, not Honne, is dominant. This tendency is stronger at meetings of those who are in the relationship of Najimi but Tanin. In other words, the agenda will proceed by exchanging Tatamae only. If so, how can people's personal opinions be reflected in final decisions? And how are adjustments among different opinions made?

Each individual's opinion is usually adjusted informally in a kind of ground-work before the formal meeting. This process is called Nemawashi. Nakano (1982) described Yorai (a traditional community meeting for decision-making) communication, and mentioned that contemporary Japanese communication for decision-making is basically the same as the Yorai communication. This applies especially to the Nemawashi process.

Throughout the Nemawashi process, each individual is rarely forced to change his or her opinion by someone. He or she is only informed of others' opinions. If there are some serious discrepancies between his or her own opinion and that of the others, he or she feels obliged to make some adjustments in his or her opinions. In this process, intrapersonal communication takes place, and some conflicts are resolved in his or her mind.

In the West, substantial discussions take place at formal meetings, which sometimes end up with a serious confrontation. In Japan such discussions occur mainly in each individual's mind in this informal process of Nemawashi. Thus, when consensus is reached, all concerned feel that their opinions are equally reflected in the final decision.

Shuji Hayashi (1988) reported a survey using Japanese and Korean
businessmen as respondents. The results showed that Japanese businessmen were more in favour of the informal decision-making process (i.e. *Nemawashi*) than Korean businessmen.

After formal meetings, an opportunity to speak out each individual's *Honne* (real feelings or intentions) is often prepared. It is called *Nijikai* (the second party) and usually held at bars or restaurants. There, people can express their true feelings more candidly. Shuji Hayashi (1988: 132) commented on the characteristics and functions of *Nijikai*:

A follow-up party is necessary because at the first affair, official rank distinctions obtain. The second stage is informal; fewer people are present, and all barriers of position or rank are discarded. In this relaxed atmosphere real communication takes place; everyone gets a bit drunk and talks freely. Statements that would never be uttered under normal circumstances are blurted out. Japanese society allows candour in a relaxed setting.

In short, *Nijikai* is the place for private communication in which people can tell their *Honne* (real feelings or intentions) frankly. Those *Honne* may be taken into consideration perhaps in the next decision-making. Moreover, by going together to *Nijikai*, people often think that they have become *Nakama*. In other words, *Nijikai* sometimes functions as a kind of initiation rite.

**Silence, shyness, ambiguity and the smile**

So far *Wa* (harmony) has been referred to as a 'key' value in Japanese communication. It was also discussed how the Japanese communication style was affected by the relationship among communicators and the communicative settings. Furthermore, many observers have commonly described a series of characteristics in the Japanese communication style: silence, shyness, ambiguousness and the smile. At formal meetings or in daily conversations, Japanese people are said to be passive, silent, ambiguous and always smiling. The reasons why Japanese behave in this way differ from one communicative situation to another. This series of characteristics is deeply related to the values and the situational factors discussed so far.

Many observers pointed out that the Japanese tend to depend heavily on non-verbal communication and mutual assumptions about communicative situations. Hall (1976) divided communication culture into two types: the high-context culture and the low-context culture. The high-context culture refers to the communication culture in which more information is either in the physical context (such as non-linguistic gestures and facial expressions) or internalized in the communicators (such as values and creeds), while less information is in the coded, explicit,
transmitted part of the message. The low-context culture is the opposite. Hall regarded Japanese culture as a typical example of the former, and American culture as a typical example of the latter.


> When a Japanese communicates with someone, he or she does not only pay attention to the meaning of the words, but also to all the components of communication in order to understand the true message. Those components include linguistic factors, non-linguistic factors, the atmosphere of the setting where the communication takes place, and social relations between communicators. Japanese pay careful attention to all of them and try to understand the real feelings and intentions.

The more intimate the communicators are, the less they depend on linguistic communication. In other words, the dependence on non-linguistic communication is greater in the following order: (1) _Ki no okenai kankei_ (very intimate relationship); (2) the relationship of _Nakama_; and (3) the relationship of _Najimi_ but not _Nakama_.

Tsujimura (1977) pointed out that a major reason for Japanese reticence is the homogeneity of the Japanese race. According to Tsujimura, Japanese often understand each other without any verbal communication because of their relatively homogeneous culture, and have developed abundant non-linguistic codes.

In the discussions so far, the Japanese are supposed to understand each other fairly well through non-verbal communication even if their verbal interaction is small. Some observers, however, think that Japanese self-disclosure is so small that only a limited degree of mutual understanding occurs.

The observation that the Japanese do not disclose themselves much has been empirically supported. Barnlund (1975) conducted a questionnaire survey, including a self-disclosure scale (developed by Jourard and Lasakow, 1958), using Japanese and American students as respondents. The results showed that the degree of self-disclosure of Japanese students was less than that of Americans. Barnlund concluded that the ratio of the 'public self' as distinguished from the 'private self' is smaller among Japanese than among Americans.

The degree of self-disclosure tends to become smaller as the relationship between communicators becomes less intimate, if the partner is a superior or if the place is public.

The Japanese disclose themselves the least when they have to refuse or decline somebody's request or when they disagree with someone. According to Ueda (1974), in addition to the flat 'no' there are fifteen alternate
expressions which mean ‘no’, such as a vague ‘no’, silence, and counter-question. Ueda found out through a questionnaire survey that older people tended to use indirect expressions more frequently.

Why do the Japanese use ambiguous expressions to refuse or decline? For one thing, it is for utilitarian reasons: that is, to avoid the disadvantage that may be caused by offending someone who is of higher social position. Tsujimura (1977) pointed out that suppression during the long feudal period and controls on speech under the totalitarian system might be responsible for Japanese silence. Moreover, emphasis on Wa may be another important reason.

As mentioned earlier, formal meetings are often merely ceremonial in Japan. Being refused, declined or refuted in public is very embarrassing and something the Japanese hate. Therefore, Japanese people, who regard peaceful relations as very important, refrain from expressing themselves strongly in order not to force others into such an embarrassing situation. This tendency is especially clear in the relationship of Najimi but not Nakama, in which Japanese people especially care for others. Moreover, the higher the person’s position is, the greater the degree of the embarrassment will be. As a result, self-disclosure tends to be smaller especially toward a superior. However, if people cannot express their opinions at all, organizations will not function. As places to express them, informal and private places such as Nijikai are prepared.

Problems left to be solved

So far, the so-called ‘Japanese-style communication’ has been described. However, we are not sure if all that has been described here is really uniquely Japanese. Thus the following problems are left to be solved.

1. To confirm the above-mentioned characteristics of Japanese-style communication by carefully designed empirical research.

2. When empirical research indicates that the so-called Japanese-style communication is not necessarily uniquely Japanese, but also Oriental or even more universal, a new communication theory different from Western-type theories may be constructed. For example, the theory of ‘human beings as contextual’ (Hamaguchi, 1982) — that is, the minimum unit that constitutes the society is not an individual but a personal relation — may have such possibility.

3. Although those characteristics of the so-called Japanese-style communication have not yet been fully proven as uniquely Japanese, many people, both Japanese and foreigners, believe that they are uniquely Japanese. This thought itself is becoming ideological, and affecting Japanese people’s behaviour and the communication among Japanese and foreigners. It is also important to examine this influence process.
References


