SOCG001 – Understanding Societies

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Abstract

This essay is a research into politeness in Japanese society, including its origins and manifestations, with reference from both English and Japanese sources. From a foreigner's perspective, Japan is an extremely efficient country – things run seamlessly with minimal disruption. This is partly due to how efficient communications are on a daily basis because of public mannerisms. However, efficiency can also cause day-to-day social interactions to become clinical, come across as robotic or even fake, lacking in the human aspect. This led me to be curious about the extent of politeness in Japanese society in both public and private spheres from a Japanese person's perspective. In addition, I wanted to better understand the differences between Japanese and Singaporean society – as ageing and developed Asian economies, we share numerous social problems. Through this essay, I highlight various keywords and models that are used to illustrate social relations between people of different social groups in Japan. I also cover how politeness manifests in Japanese society and some effects of excessive politeness within Japanese society.

Politeness in Japanese Society

Introduction

Japan, being one of the most popular vacation spots in the entire world, has prided itself on being a society that is extremely organised, efficient and polite among other things. If you ask people on the street about their impression of Japanese people, most would tell you that the Japanese are extremely polite people. Given how prominent the stereotypes of Japanese society are, how exactly do Japanese people develop this sense of politeness and how did this sense of manners and politeness come about?

The Roots of Morality in Japan

Akin to China and Singapore, Japan as an Asian nation also places emphasis on moral values and the inculcation of them from young. The Japanese moral compass has roots in Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Going back to the Edo period (1600-1868), the Japanese conception of moral values was heavily based on the Buddhist idea of 修身齐家治国平天下, which translates to first achieving self-development, in turn leading to good family relations, good governance and overall peace (Watanabe, 2020). In August 1872, the Japanese Ministry of Education introduced a standardised education system based off the French, integrating Western development with Taoist ideas of selflessness. A statement released by the minister highlighted the aim of education as producing morally upright individuals while broadening minds and growing talents – according to historical text from the Ministry of Education "身を脩(おさ)め智を開き才芸を長(ちょう)ずるによるなり". This laid the foundation for moral education in Japan (Mizuta, 2002).

Education in Japan today revolves around the concept of *Manabi* (学び) or learning. *Manabi* comes from a lens that is empathetic in nature, and focuses on the development and consideration of people around them. This ideal is represented by the word *Minna* (みんな) which means everyone (Masamichi et al., 2022). Japanese children are able to pick up these ideals through socialisation in schools. Activities that encourage bonding and unity – like sports festivals and the cleaning of common areas – give children the learning opportunity to grasp the idea of a collective group and a greater good (Masamichi et al., 2022).

Currently, Japanese children have dedicated periods in their timetables to clean common areas in their school on a daily to weekly basis. Because children are encouraged to work together in such activities, they learn how to be considerate to other people by minimising the inconvenience that they cause to others.

Japanese 1st grade students cleaning a school corridor (岐阜市立柳津小学校, 2021)

With such a structured school environment that also serves as an ideological state apparatus, most if not all Japanese children would be able to pick up the necessary social skills required to survive in larger society when they graduate. In addition, the integration of moral education into the Japanese education system causes politeness in Japan to be seen as the norm – Japanese research papers on politeness in Japan look at this from a linguistics point of view. This is in stark contrast to the respect that foreigners have for the level of consideration that the Japanese have, with many recounts and experiences reflecting so.

The Japanese Notion of Face and Self

As mentioned above, the Japanese education system is structured, and this semblance of structure and hierarchy continues even up till the workforce with fixed break timings for example. This ties in with the impression that Japanese society is extremely efficient. From a structural functionalist point of view, in order to keep society running efficiently, there becomes a need to minimise the inconvenience that you cause to other people. This can be seen as a form of independence or self-sufficiency – though this means that the Japanese tend to put up a public front or "face" while concealing their actual thoughts or intentions.

One pair of words which the Japanese use to distinguish their public "face" and personal voice is through the words *Tatemae* (建前) and *Honne* (本音) respectively. *Tatemae* refers to a public front that has behaviours and opinions that align with the social norms and behaviours of a larger social group, while *Honne* refers to more personal behaviours and thoughts that are not as commonly expressed in public (Trinidad, G. J. D., 2014). The purpose of *Tatemae* is to prevent

conflict due to differences in opinion out of consideration to other parties (Yoshida & Yonezawa, 2024).

Along with "face", *Tatemae* and *Honne*, the social relations of Japanese people can also be described using the words *Uchi* (内) and *Soto* (外), which mean inner and outer respectively. The idea of *Uchi* and *Soto* is that social interactions with people closer to you fall into your inner circle, hence conversations would consist of more *Honne* over *Tatemae*, while people who are less acquainted with you fall into *Soto* and conversations would consist of more *Tatemae* over *Honne*. Miyake, 1994 proposed a framework to compare the interpersonal relationships of a Japanese person to that of an American or British individual. This framework comprised of *Uchi, Soto and Yoso* (よそ, meaning outsider). Her diagram showed that the Japanese people have a smaller circle of people that they would classify as close enough to drop formalities as compared to the Americans or the British. To the Japanese, these people would be their family, while this could include friends for the Americans and the British (Miyake, 1994). This shows that the Japanese place heavy weightage on keeping their own face, even towards their friends.
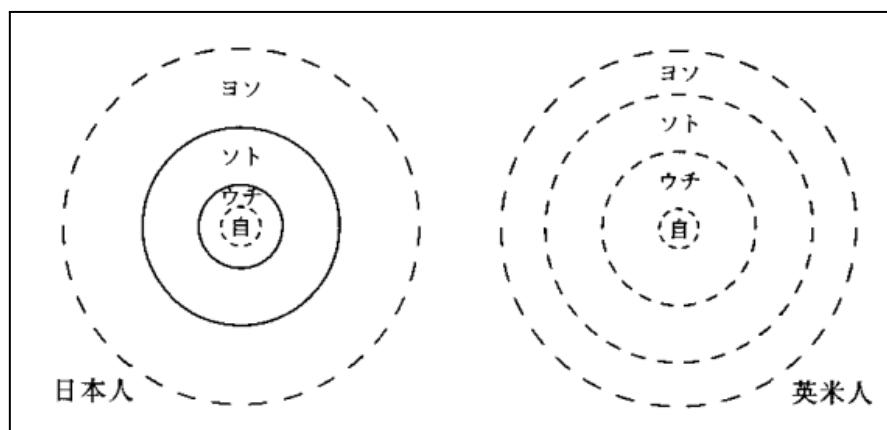
Circular framework illustrating *Uchi, Soto* and *Yoso*, left being Japanese people and right being American/British people (Miyake, 1994)

In ethnographic research done by Bachnik in 1992, she stayed with a Japanese family she knew for 15 years, and observed the differences in attitude when there were family guests as compared to when it was just the family and her. Without guests, attention was turned inwards and most conversation was based around catching up with the family – mostly *Honne*. On the other hand, when family guests appeared, attention turned towards the guests to make them feel at home, and conversations became shallower to easily integrate guests into them (Bachnik, J. M., 1992), a display of *Soto* and *Tatemae*. This shows that the Japanese are very aware of their social situations and adjust their behaviour to accommodate different people as they place more importance on building good social relations as compared to individualism (Matsumoto, 1988). This form of courtesy is less tangible, but allows people who are less acquainted to feel included and welcomed in conversations even if it is just a front.

Language, Hierarchy and Social Cues

Politeness is also inherently embedded in their language in the form of *Keigo* (敬語), or formal speech. *Keigo* is an umbrella term and comes in three main types: *Sonkeigo* (尊敬語), *Kenjougo* (謙譲語), and *Teineigo* (丁寧語). In summary, *Keigo* essentially replaces words with neutral or informal connotations and tone, with sometimes different and often longer forms of the same word in order to express humbleness or politeness.

In day-to-day conversations, the use of the phrase '*douzo yoroshiku onegaishimasu*' which means 'please treat/take care of me well' implies that the speaker is taking a lower and more humble position in an attempt to show respect to the listener and save face. In return, the listener is expected to reply with 'No, it is

you who should take care of me', to humbly imply the opposite. According to Matsumoto, 1988, from a linguistics point of view such phrases indicate deference and are "relation-acknowledging devices" that makes the listener seem to be of a higher position (Matsumoto, 1988). Even small changes in word choice when you are apologising can lead to differences in perception of sincerity – the neutral '*gomennasai*' can be seen as rude as compared to the formal '*moushiwake arimasen*' in a formal occasion. This is because word choice in Japanese can convey not just politeness, but also the threat of losing face (Diegoli, 2023).

This form of speech is most prominent in Japan's booming service industry, as well as in workplaces – social hierarchy in the Japanese workplace also plays a factor in politeness in Japan. In the workplace, this tends to be of a vertical nature with clear distinctions between superior and subordinate (Matsumoto, 1988), which can perpetuate the necessity felt by employees of lower ranking or position to be polite in social cues to their higher ups. This can expand to include small actions like placing your cup lower and tilting it towards your superior when giving a toast.

Excessive Politeness in the Public Sphere

However, being excessively polite can have its drawbacks. With so many intricacies to take note of in their language and behaviour, employees in the service industry as well as in conglomerates have to go through rigorous training to ensure that they display the correct body language, approach clients with the correct attitude and use the appropriate formal terms (Dickel Dunn, 2013). These additional courses and the hierarchical structure of companies add to the stress and fast-paced lifestyle in Japanese cities.

Etiquette demonstration on how to give and receive business cards (Polleri, 2017)

Because of how structured and systematic Japanese society is, various jobs in the service industry like waiters, hotel staff or convenience store employees can also come across as robotic or cold and unhuman-like. One example of this was in the adoption of honorifics when addressing patients in healthcare organisations in the late 1990s. In that period, it was believed that the usage of the honorific '-*sama*' over the neutral '-*san*' to address patients in medical institutions would be a polite gesture that could maximise patient satisfaction. The honorific was put into use in most institutions in 2001 after new healthcare guidelines were released, but debate about its appropriateness led to its gradual rollback from 2004 onwards. Both patients and medical professionals saw the honorific as too polite because the relationship between patient and doctor was interpreted as a partnership rather than a superior-subordinate one (Imatome et al., 2015).

Excessive Politeness in the Private Sphere

Excessive politeness could also harm Japanese people's social relationships between people that they are close with. This form of excessive politeness has a term for itself – *tanin-gyougi* (他人行儀) – which roughly translates to treating friends

or family as if they were outsiders. In a linguistics study conducted by Ebata from 1994 to 2000, he found that the Japanese were conscious even in small things like family members before leaving the house. Households in rural areas tended to be more closely bonded with jobs mainly in agriculture. This led to families seeing each other more often and hence using informal greetings, or sometimes no greeting at all. On the other hand, households in metropolitan areas were found to use more formal greetings as there were longer commutes to work and longer hours of not seeing each other (Ebata, 2001), which implies slightly more distance between family members. This is not to say that families which use honorifics with each other are not close with each other – they are just not as closely knit as compared to families who do not use honorifics.

As a whole, these examples show that there is a fine balance between politeness that is appropriate versus excessive politeness that has to be maintained to build relationships in Japanese society. Using words that are too polite can cause other people to feel like the speaker has cast them aside and categorised them as a stranger, which can hurt interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

Politeness is an inherent part of Japanese society – it is a virtue that is inculcated in their young through compulsory schooling and has deep roots in Eastern philosophy and religion. Politeness permeates throughout their culture as various forms of material culture and non-material culture, from a business card to their social structure and language. In order to survive in Japan, it becomes imperative to learn how to be considerate to others, especially when Japan is a society that prioritises homogenisation over individuality. With so much nuance in

speech and action, delivering your message in a humble and inoffensive way becomes an art that is less appreciated – something that we can take home and learn to apply in our daily life.

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