

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STEREOTYPING COMMUNICATIVE STYLES IN AND OUT OF THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE CLASSROOM: JAPANESE INDIRECTNESS, AMBIGUITY AND VAGUENESS

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1. Introduction

Quite often, in conversation with trainee teachers of Japanese, most of whom are native speakers of the language, I have heard statements about the Japanese language, to the effect that “Japanese is ambiguous” (*‘aimai’*) or that Japanese “don’t say things clearly” (*‘hakkiri iwanai’*). For a language with an exceptionally rich repertoire of devices specialized in marking the speaker’s stance vis-à-vis the proposition or other speech participants (see for example Narrog 2007 on modal markers), statements such as these can appear contradictory. And yet, they are far from unusual. In a study of seventy native speakers of Japanese, Haugh (1998: 40) found that up to 77% of them agreed/strongly agreed with the statement “spoken Japanese is vague”, while only 10% disagreed. Moreover, this view is sustained by native and non-native users alike, and perpetuated not only in popular books about Japan and the Japanese people, but also in many pedagogical grammars, textbooks, and classroom instruction. This paper sets out to deconstruct this discourse and tease apart the truth from the stereotype.

Stereotypes, the result of our ability to ‘typify’ linguistic usages, gestures, clothing, looks (i.e. different semiotic systems), are of course crucial to our ability to learn and function in the world. They allow us to reduce the infinite variations of people, linguistic forms or other entities to a few, manageable, categories. But when, as in language classrooms, we

aim at developing intercultural awareness or a linguistic competence that goes beyond the recognition of basic formulae and patterns and aspires to facilitate the learner's appreciation of subtle nuances, stereotypes stand in the way. Effective communication (and learning) crucially depends on the ability to maintain a degree of flexibility whereby novel situations are not invariably reduced to the already known. Overgeneralizations can 'frame' the character of a language or a culture, and produce fixed and often crude images which are then hard to shred, hindering, for example, our sensitivity to variability within a culture. Moreover, stereotypes are not neutral representations: they come hand in hand with evaluative judgements that often go undetected but play a huge role in our understanding of what actually goes on during interaction. Such evaluations forestall our understanding of the underlying values that arguably direct certain behaviour, by reflecting more the mindset of the evaluator than the values held by the person evaluated.

Attempts to challenge and deconstruct stereotypes (as can be seen, for example, in the well researched area of gendered language) often aim to highlight the lack of evidence for their existence. But stereotypes do not emerge in a vacuum, and it is somewhat condescending, in my view, not to acknowledge the pervasiveness of such conceptions and explore the modalities of their genesis. The perception of 'indirectness', 'ambiguity' or 'vagueness' on the part of native and non-native users and commentators must be recognized, although accompanied by a great deal of qualification.

This paper assumes that statements about a 'typical' Japanese style are psychologically real for many users of the language, i.e. they are the result of genuine perceptions about the way in which communication in Japanese is conducted. It attempts to tease out the factors that may lead to such perceptions, and discuss ways in which we can talk about the Japanese language or the Japanese people in a classroom. I intend to do this by reflecting upon my own experience and perceptions in communication with Japanese speakers, and by exposing, to the best of my diagnostic capacities, the spontaneous responses and analytical reasoning I have made use of in making sense of these interactions. I will be therefore base my discussion on my own feelings and thoughts in two different capacities: as a participant in a communicative event conducted in Japanese, and as a researcher involved in a post-hoc reading of the data.

I begin by presenting some received characterizations of the Japanese style as they are reported in linguistic and ethnographic literature (section 2), and then analyze the notion of 'indirectness' in linguistic and behavioural terms (section 3). After that I discuss the dynamics of a

communicative encounter (section 4), and suggest ways in which impressions and evaluations are formed, on the basis of the evidence available to participants (section 5). Here I attempt to provide an account of evaluative judgements in cognitive terms, by formalizing the interpretive processes involved in terms of inferences drawn from linguistic signs, through the lenses of specific interactional frames, and the socio-cognitive categories of values held by participants. I will whenever possible highlight the relevance of the analysis proposed here to pedagogical issues, and conclude with recommendations for language teachers.

2. Characterizations of the ‘Japanese’¹ communicative style

Japanese is overwhelmingly characterized as a language with a distinct preference for ‘indirectness’ (see Lebra 1976; Miller 1994; Kubota 1999 for reviews and critiques). The following excerpt from Patricia Clancy (1986)’s work on the acquisition of Japanese style is a paradigmatic illustration of how Japanese is often characterized in lay, as well as academic, discourse.

It is widely recognized that the communicative style of the Japanese is intuitive and indirect, especially compared with that of Americans. As Azuma et al (1980) have said, a verbal expression among the Japanese is “context dependent, indirect, rich in connotation and evasive in denotation”. The basis of this style is a set of cultural values that emphasize *omoiyari*, ‘empathy’ over explicit verbal communication. (1980: 213).

Clancy goes on to mention that ‘verbosity’ has traditionally been looked down in Japan (*iwanu ga hana* = ‘silence is better than speech’), especially in men speech; that ‘talkativeness’ is equated with insincerity

¹ The data presented in this paper is Tokyo Japanese, arguably the standard variety (but see: Long 1999), which is said to form the basis for language instruction. Most of the commentary I report here, including Clancy’s, similarly refer to this variety, although the empirical question remains of whether other varieties of Japanese are also evaluated in a similar way by speakers of other languages. Some of my Japanese informants, for example, talk of the Osaka variety as being considerably more direct and often blunt. This exemplifies the point made in this paper about the need for much more delicate analyses—and descriptions in the classroom—of what counts as “Japanese”.

and superficiality (1986: 214). When verbal communication does occur, “[...] it will often be inexplicit and indirect”. With regards to its linguistic features, she quotes research by Doi that points out that “[...] the structure of the Japanese language fosters ambiguity in various ways: the language is pro-drop, admits the pragmatic elision of elements retrievable contextually, and allows the omission of the final part of a sentence, which in Japanese corresponds to the main predicate (SOV). All of this conveys the impression that the Japanese are “reserved, cautious, and evasive” (1986: 214). Clancy goes on to comment on the underlying values arguably triggering this style; besides ‘empathy’ mentioned earlier, she refers to the strive toward “social harmony” (which requires the avoidance of “overt expression of conflict”), and the notional distinction between *honno* (real feelings) vs. *tatema* (socially accepted principles). This entails that Japanese speakers are indeed capable of harbouring individual opinions, feelings and thoughts, but that these are underplayed whenever they have the potential to generate friction during social interaction, giving rise to a more anonymous, ‘safe’, style. Consequently, verbal interaction is no more than a ‘mind-reading game’ (*sasshi*, bp): “In interpreting the response to a direct request, therefore, one must be ready to guess what the speaker probably means, even in spite of what may actually be said” (1986: 216).

Moreover, with regards to the social domain generating all this, she maintains that:

Clearly, the Japanese style of communication can work only in a rather homogenous society in which people actually can anticipate each other’s needs, wants and reactions. Japanese society is, in fact, extremely homogenous [...] in Japan, where interpersonal communication relies so heavily upon intuition and empathy, conformity to group norms can be seen as an essential aspect of communicative style [...] one striking aspect of the language that is related to conformity is the existence of a great number of fixed verbal formulas [...] speakers need only indicate, by means of the right formula, that they are experiencing the right kind of reaction, without expressing any more personal, individualized response. An important goal of socialization in Japan is to promote the unanimity in feeling that will support the norms of verbal agreement and empathy. (1986: 216)

Finally, she characterizes the contrast between American and Japanese styles by the different emphasis on participant responsibility. While American *speakers* are invested with the responsibility to express their feelings and thoughts clearly and explicitly in their words (hence the popularity of assertiveness training) it is Japanese *listeners* who have to do

the job, as they must figure out what the speaker means “regardless of the words used”.

Other accounts of Japanese indirectness link it to the collectivistic nature of Japanese society, or cultural inclinations such as the reliance on tacit communication, the expectation of mutual understanding without the need for open expressions of personal needs and ideas, hierarchy consciousness, a desire for harmony (for a review, see Miyamoto-Tanaka and Bell 1996), and a number of cultural ‘key-words’ such as *haragei* (lit. “belly art”, or ‘heart-to-heart communication’, a propensity for non-verbal communication), *ishin denshin* (lit. “from mind to mind”, or telepathic communication), *sasshi* (“surmise”, “guess”), etc.² Like Clancy’s last excerpt, many of these accounts (most of which are not surprisingly derived from contrastive studies with American English) iconize this style as the product of a homogeneous society, an assumption whose uncritical and ideological nature has been critiqued by Befu (2001), or Kubota (2003), among others.

Anyone with a certain degree of familiarity with Japan or the Japanese language will find some aspects of this commentary undoubtedly true—but some other excessively stereotypical and overgeneralizing. This paper objects to a few major points.

First of all, a model of communication that dichotomizes speaker vs. listener responsibility in exchanging information (see also Okazaki 1993 on such a view) is highly questionable (a reflexive, dialogic, interactionist view of language points to the collaborative, co-constructive and intersubjective nature of discourse structure and meaning representation; see also Clark [1996: 3]: “language use is a form of *joint action*”³). We could assume however, that this is only another way to say that an indirect style leaves more possibilities open for interpretation than a direct style.

² It is worth noting that research on writing styles (a different kind of participation framework from that of face-to-face interaction) points to similar perceptions with regards to written styles. Students in a study by Kubota in 1992 (quoted in Connor 1996: 44) judge Japanese and English texts as follows: “Japanese text is indirect, ambiguous, roundabout, illogical, digressive, has the main idea at the end, and contains a long introductory remark and long, complex sentences; English is direct, clear, logical, has the main idea stated at the beginning, and has unity in the paragraph and little digression”. The issue of their generalizability from specific genres or specific examples to overall cultural traits is a highly debated topic (Kubota 1997).

³ “Joint actions” and “joint intentions”, are not just ‘my actions/intentions plus your actions/intentions’ but ‘our actions/intentions’ and ‘my *role* in this is such-and-such’ and ‘your *role* in this is such-and-such’ (Jackendoff 2007: 172, my italics).

Secondly, claiming that linguistic features (e.g. the pro-drop nature of the language) have an unmediated impact on the representation of social personae (the consequent perceived evasiveness of Japanese people) suggests a rather deterministic view of language as an independently motivated (and somewhat tyrannical) agent. It presupposes a unilateral effect of language upon culture while neglecting observations on the effects of culture on language. This also entails an unjustified focus on meanings that are explicitly marked and a neglect of inferential mechanisms, conventionalized patterns of elliptical communication, and the fact that meanings are ‘scattered’ in discourse over multiple morpho-syntactic devices.

But generalizations such as we have seen in the passage above are problematic in other, important, ways. One is their extreme essentialization: needless to say, both direct and indirect styles are possible, and attested, in Japanese, depending on the situation, interactional goals, genres (Trent 1997: 423, Matsumoto and Okamoto 2003: 31), etc., and both can, depending on the circumstance, be perceived as ‘marked’ (contrary-to-expectation) behaviour. The indirect style attributed to Japanese speakers as a whole is indeed a recognizable style, but one of many, and its essentialist reduction to *the* Japanese style (see e.g. Hirokawa 1987; Okabe 1987; Tsujimura 1987) has been attributed to an orientalist discourse subscribed to by Japanese and non-Japanese researchers alike (Kubota 1999, 2003), as well as folk discourse on culture (Haugh 1998; see also Miller 1982: 84 ff. on the contradictions of the stereotypes).

A concomitant issue is the failure, in most accounts, to deconstruct the notion of indirectness, and to recognize the seamless shift from a description of textual features to evaluative, judgmental comments on the quality of talk, that inevitably involves particular standpoints, failing to account for which results in the adoption of biased and ethnocentric positions. The evaluative statement that the preferred communicative style in Japanese is indirect is a relative matter—relative, that is, to the position of the source of the judgement, and the object of comparison. It is clear that in the absence of a comparative measure (be that a different style or a different expectation), indirect talk is just talk (Channell 1994: 4 on ‘vague language’ going unnoticed most of the time). So, along with questions about Japanese language and culture, one should ask questions about the language and culture of the person producing such evaluation, and about the interactional goals allegedly frustrated by indirectness.

Indirectness is of course intrinsically neither good nor bad, but contextually—when social activities and social identities are at stake—it

can have a positive or negative evaluation (Holtgraves 1997: 634⁴), respectively: ‘rapport’ (because it opens space for others to fill, Tannen 2005: 25⁵), or ‘manipulation’ (because the inferred meaning can be withdrawn at a later stage), evasiveness, vagueness, etc.

A few challenges to the axiom of Japanese indirectness have come from quantitative studies. Gudykunst et al. (1996) claim that self-construal and personal values are better predictors than nationality in predicting low- or high-context communication styles. Neuliep and Hazelton (1985) investigate Japanese and American compliance-gaining (persuasive) strategies, and find that depending on the situation, Japanese were as likely or significantly more likely to prefer direct requesting strategies than Americans. The three preferred Japanese strategies in fact seemed to be ‘explanation’, ‘direct request’ and, crucially, ‘deceit’ (an unexpected result for the authors, but that, as we will see, makes good sense for the present study). Miyamoto-Tanaka and Bell (1996), in a cross-cultural test of Bavelas et al.’s situational theory of equivocation (see below in section 3), note that Japanese students did not produce more equivocal messages than their American counterparts, and that the communication in which the sender and receiver were not identified (as in common pragmatic omissions in Japanese) were not perceived as ambiguous by task judges. Interestingly, Miller (1994: 46) points out that in intercultural encounters, Japanese and American participants may have post-facto characterized the interactions in stereotypic ways even where such consistent tendencies could not be observed by the researcher. Her observations suggest that ‘objective’ measurements (e.g. of specific linguistic forms alleged to be vehicles of indirectness) that neglect participants’ interactional goals may miss an important component of what causes a message to be *perceived* as indirect.

In spite of such counterevidence and in the absence of studies focused on participants’ perceptions and evaluations of indirectness, with the bulk of ethnographic commentaries as well popular literature on Japanese culture so overwhelmingly and solidly supporting such stereotypes, it is easy to see how language teachers and teaching materials are compelled to perpetuate the same message (see Kubota 1999; Matsumoto and Okamoto 2003, for calls to raise teachers’ awareness). Language-classroom instruction, which must accommodate the need to provide guidelines for

⁴ The same of course applies to directness: ‘very direct’ is ‘pushy’ but also ‘competent’ and ‘powerful’.

⁵ “By leaving maximal information for the hearer to fill in, a speaker is creating involvement by requiring the hearer to participate in sense making” (Tannen 2005: 25).

conduct in a foreign culture economically, under huge constraints of time and space, is inherently subject to the seductive allure of simplifying statements (a point made very forcefully by critical discourse analysts). But lest we are happy to unwillingly support some kind of moral education, we have a duty to unpack the stereotypes.

In this paper I attempt to describe a case of perceived indirectness and evasiveness, and I try to tease out the factors that contribute to such a judgement. I will try to demonstrate that perceptions of indirectness do indeed rest on some observable features of the message that can ‘objectively’ be described as indirect, but that an overall judgement of indirectness can only result from participants’ different understanding of the nature and goal of the activity under way, and the differentially salient interactional values that these activities subsume (even when participants seem to be going through the motions of an activity without any obvious interactional hiccup).

3. The purposes of indirectness

In actual intercultural encounters (as well as in educational and language teaching contexts), charges of indirectness and vagueness against the Japanese language or the Japanese people reveal some sort of communicative problem for which the ‘Japanese style’ is supposed to be responsible. Although a scientific analysis attempts to use this term in an impartial, descriptive way, it too can fail to highlight the argumentative positioning that this evaluation entails, and to address questions such as “what does that indirectness do for a (Japanese) speaker”, “for whom is Japanese indirect or ambiguous”, “what are the purposes it crosses”, etc.

Indirectness is not just lack of something: lack of clarity, transparency, or in the worse case (but this too is attested, see Befu 2001: 37), lack of logic. Something does get communicated by the use of an indirect means, and my claim will be that this is an *ideology*, i.e. a particular constellation of moral values and norms of (verbal) behaviour. When the same constellation of values is seen to be at work on a large scale we may indeed talk of a cultural tendency, but this is subject to quantitative testing. Here, I will not make any claims about the cultural scope of this style, but will treat it as a widespread style that is certainly widely recognized and actively used by many individuals (in Japan as elsewhere, although I will focus on the devices signalling indirectness in Japanese); I will attempt to describe the ideology it subtends, and speculate about the type of interactional role and social situations likely to trigger it, but will not be able to qualify its statistical frequency.

Indirectness has traditionally been linked to politeness or facework (Lakoff 1973; Searle 1975; Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]; Minami 1987), and therefore to power differential between interlocutors, including relational variables that are assumed to mirror or be subsumed by power differential, such as gender of interlocutors, or institutional roles. But some of these, and other studies, have also pointed out that indirectness is not, or not only, a function of politeness: Kamio (1990, 2002)'s functional analysis relates it to the cognitive notion of 'information territories'; for Caffi (2007) it is a kind of 'mitigation', a device to express uncertainty, caution, consideration, i.e. a way to "[...] attune to others" that, beyond mere considerations of politeness, aims at "avoiding unnecessary risks, responsibilities and conflicts" (2007: 3). While facilitating a 'smooth' management of the interaction, it has a payoff for the user as well: it "[...] reduces the risks that the participants may incur on various levels, for instance, the risk of self-contradiction (at a discourse level), the risk of refusal, conflict, or losing face (at a social level) etc." (2007: 40). However, she also notes the paradox whereby mitigation "presents the speaker as tactful, considerate, obliging, but at the same time calculating, distant, non-immediate". For Bavelas et al. (1990), indirectness (a trait of the more general notion of 'equivocation') is one of the signals of a speaker's attempt at resolving an interactional tension. They claim that equivocation is an attractive communicative choice when telling an outright lie is troubling, but telling the truth is at odd with self-interest or risks hurting the receiver, or when one must communicate to two groups holding different viewpoints (1996: 224). Hence equivocation seems to be a strategy functional to social alignment and (self-)face-maintenance. For Stubbs (1986) it is related to Goffman's notion of 'footing', and to more general notions of 'commitment and detachment' in speaker stance; the significance he attributes to these notions leads him to even ask whether we can think of indirectness merely as a question of 'style' if "[...] being explicit changes the meaning" (1986: 6), a point also made by Channell (1994: 13) in her discussion of the social purposes of 'vague' language.

In the following discussion I will refer back to these studies and show in what way these functions are evidenced in interpretive processes in interaction.

4. A conversational excerpt

In this section I present some data from an interview recorded in the autumn of 2005. For reasons of space I will describe only a couple of selected passages and concentrate on one brief excerpt, in particular on the contribution of one of the two participants, by the fictitious name of Ken, which exemplifies some relevant issues. The description will be followed by an analysis of the conversation, and a discussion of the interactional frames that Ken and myself arguably were operating in, and finally will suggest some ways in which we can conceptualize the cognitive representations of social values which the participants may have attributed to each other.

I wish to note that, in the discussion that follows, I understand context not (only) as a set of fixed demographic variables (e.g. male/female; teacher/student) but as the emergent personal stances that participants are intent at projecting, and the variable evaluation of which can result in mismatches and negative evaluative comments. These projected stances entail different opportunities or responsibility for social actions, different degrees of authority over subject matters, and consequently different discursive identities.

4.1. Background

Setting: an ethnographic interview, in which I am interviewing two native Japanese speakers (a male, Ken, and a female, Aya), both students of applied linguistics. I have met both a few weeks earlier, through an introduction by a Japanese colleague, who is their teacher. They know I am an Italian researcher of linguistic politeness based in London, and that I am collecting data about the social evaluation of certain problematic behaviours, including, but not only, intercultural (mis)communication⁶. Ken is slightly older than Aya, but they are classmates, and I have also met them at several seminars. I have asked their collaboration for a pilot interview, in their double capacity of native Japanese speakers and linguists. The interview is conducted over lunch in the university restaurant.

⁶ In fact, neither this, nor communicative styles, were the main or only objective of my research. The discussion of the ‘incidents’ mentioned in this paper was an expedient for the study of other linguistic features.

Topic and task: 15 minutes into the interview I propose to discuss some instances of what I will call ‘deflected communication’⁷, several variations of which I declare to have experienced many times in Japan. The common tread in these episodes is a situation with three participants: myself and two other speakers of Japanese, one of whom is my friend and the other someone unknown to both (hospital or hotel personnel), or acquaintances of my friend to whom I have just been introduced. In these situations, the third participant does not address me (or does not reply to me) directly, but speaks to or about me addressing my friend instead (note that I do not have particular communicative problems in ordinary daily conversations in Japanese). I ask both my interviewees how they would evaluate such behaviour had they been in my shoes in those circumstances.

My two interviewees respond in a way that, at the time, I perceive as somewhat hesitant, circumspect, and generally noncommittal. My slight frustration derives from my assumptions about the nature of this interview, which I deliberately conducted informally, over lunch in a restaurant (as opposed to college rooms), and which I intend as a collaborative enterprise in which I am the novice (the outsider) and they the experts - possibly underestimating the fact that I am a much more senior academic, who has been introduced to them by their teacher⁸. I assume they are aware that I need their informed opinion, and although I do not expect them to give me any ‘black and white’ judgements of the behaviours which I have explicitly labelled puzzling and possibly offensive, I feel (with considerable concern for my data collection!) that they are reluctant to volunteer any comments until I explicitly ask them to do so. When they do offer an interpretation, this is generally cast in a ‘generic’ way (i.e. mild judgements such as ‘*chotto hen desu ne*’ = ‘that’s a bit strange’) or light polite laughter (and possibly lacking the colourful array of judgemental commentaries that I suspect Italian informants would be happy to offer), which does not enable me to appreciate their respective evaluations (i.e. their positioning vis-à-vis some norms of behaviour). I therefore try to trigger an explicit evaluation by attempting to analyze the reasons behind such behaviours, and we join the conversation at this point.

⁷ See Lebra 1976:122 for other ritualistic forms of mediated communication in Japan.

⁸ An additional factor affecting this conversation is of course the relationship between Ken (slightly older and senior in school, *sempai*) and Aya (the *kohai*), and their relation to me (native vs. non-native, students vs. teacher), and the possible conceptualization of our respective discourse roles: e.g. (main) addressee vs. side participant, in the course of the interview. Gender too could arguably play a role, but I will not discuss these aspects in great detail here.

4.2. Two excerpts involving evaluations of ‘deflected communication’

Two passages of the conversation are described below. The first begins 14’40’’ and the second 17’30’’ into the conversation (the first five minutes of which I have not recorded). The English translation appears below the text with transcription and glosses⁹.

In the first, we are talking about a nurse in a Tokyo hospital, who—although I feel perfectly capable of sustaining a conversation—responds ‘to’ me and talks ‘to’ me by addressing instead the friend who I brought along.

- 0 INT *dono shinri ga hataraite iru to omoimasu ka [...]*
 which reasoning NOM be at work QT think Q
- 1 *Sono kangofu san ga dooshite watashi no tomodachi dake wo mite ha-*
 That nurse NOM why my friend only OBJ look
- 2 *doo kaishaku shimasu ka.*
 (RCST) how interpret Q
- 3 KEN *sore wo mite desu ka?*
 That OBJ look POL Q
- 4 INT *ee. Nande watashi no me wo sakete tomodachi ni = hanas =*
 Yes. Why my eye OBJ avoid friend speak
- 5 KEN *= tabun =...sono baai dattara tabun.. nihongo no*
 Maybe that case be COND maybe Japanese
- 6 *mondai ja nakute...honto ni, isshokenmei hanashite iru kedo,*
 problem not truly endeavor speak but
- 7 *komyunikeshon wa.. dekite nai n dattara.. shikataganai ka na*
 communication NOM succeed NEG N be COND no way Q FP
- 8 *toiu no wa aru ka mo shirenai desu kedo, komyunikeshon wa*
 QT NOM TOP be perhaps POL but communication TOP
- 9 *kihontekini torete iru...itte ru koto wa wakaru <2>*
 fundamentally succeed say things TOP understand
- 10 *tte iu zentei dattara...narete nai kara ... da to omou n desu yo//*
 QT premise be COND be used to NEG because is Q think NOM POL FP

⁹ INT: interviewer; KEN: male interviewee, AYA: female interviewee. COND: conditional, FP: clause/sentence final particle, HES: hesitation marker, NEG: negative, N: nominalizer; NOM: nominative, OBJ: direct object; PAST: past tense marker, POL: polite marker, Q: question marker, QT: quotation marker, RCST: recast (the truncated word is marked by “-“); TOP: topic, @: laughter, /: slight fall, //: final fall. Numbers in angular brackets indicate a pause of X seconds.: indicates pauses greater than 0.5 seconds; a colon indicates lengthening. [...] indicates a few lines omitted as they were repetitions, or, as in line 0 of the English translation, words added to the translated version.

- 11 **INT** *e? gaikokujin ni?*
what foreigner
- 12 **KEN** *ee//*
yes
- 13 **INT** *a soo desu ka// ...aa//*
Is that so POL Q I see
- 14 **KEN** *kocchi no hoo wo mite iru to anshin suru to ka@@@*
this way OBJ look feel reassured something like
- 15 **INT** *aa//*
I see
- 16 **AYA** *sore:mo aru ka na to iu no to..tsukisoi ga sono hito ga tsuite kite iru*
That too to be Q FP QT N and escort NOM this person NOM be with
- 17 *joo:kyoo: dato: nanka kanja san: ga..wo kodomo atsukai janai n desu*
situation be if maybe patient NOM OBJ child treat be NEG N POL
- 18 *kedo, nanka so iu no tte iu no wa, mo- tatoeba.. roo:jin ni.. oyome*
but maybe that case QT NOM TOP RCST for ex. elderly daughter in law
- 19 *san ga tuite kite itara oyome san ni dake: mite hanasu to ka, ano:*
NOM accompany if daughter in law only look speak etc. HES
- 20 *kookoosei no ko ni okaasan ga tsuite iru to ka, tte ittara okaasan ni dake*
student mother accompany etc. in case mother only
- 21 *hanasu toka tte iu no wa...sugoi shitsurei na koto da kedo aru yoo na*
speak etc. Q N TOP very rude thing be but is like
- 22 *ki ga suru n desu yo:*
have a feeling N POL FP
- 23 **INT** *tashika ni ne..watashi wa memai ga suru kara itta n de atte, yappari*
true FP I TOP dizzy be because NOM be in fact
- 24 *chotto bokete ta ndesu yo, tashika ni ano: sore ga miete ta no*
a little dazed PAST N POL FP true HES that nom show PAST N
- 25 *kamo shirenai...tomodachi ga soo iu fuuni setsumei shita n desu ne*
perhaps friend NOM that way explain PAST N POL FP
- 26 *...ano...yappari tsukisoi no hito ni hanashita hooga anzen da to ka...*
well after all escort person speak better safe is etc.
- 27 *soitta bamen =kara=*
such circumstances from
- 28 **AYA** *=nanka= de mo, anzen da janakute...nanka soko dewa...nanikashira no*
maybe but safe be NEG maybe there TOP some sort
- 29 *koo: shinri ga..nanka <6> aru yoona ki ga shimasu ne:*
such reasoning maybe there is like have an impression FP
- 0 **INT** what sort of reasoning do you think is [behind] this? [...]
- 1-2 Why is the nurse only looking at my friend? How would you interpret this?
- 3 **KEN** if I were to witness something like that?
- 4 **INT** yes. Why would she avoid my gaze and only talk to my friend?
- 5 **KEN** maybe...in such a case, if it's not a problem with the language... if you

- 6-7 are truly making an effort to speak but communication is failing, it's
 8 possible that one would give up, but if communication is taking
 9-10 place...and she understood what you were saying <2> if that were the
 case...I think...it's because...she's not used to [it].
- 11 **INT** to what? Foreigners?
- 12 **KEN** yes.
- 13 **INT** Oh I see.
- 14 **KEN** Looking at your friend she would feel reassured, or something like that.
- 15 **INT** I see.
- 16 **AYA** That too may be possible, but also...maybe when one brings someone
 17-18 along, it's not exactly like you treat the patient as a child but...somehow
 in cases like that...for example if there's an elderly person accompanied
 19-20 by his daughter in law, you might only speak and make eye contact with
 her, if you had a high school child accompanied by his mother you might
 21-22 speak to his mother...that would be really rude, but I have the feeling
 that something like that could happen.
- 23 **INT** certainly I did say that I was feeling dizzy, and I was in a bit of a daze,
 24-25 certainly...it is possible that that was apparent...my friend explained it
 26 like this...like, after all...it's safer to speak to the person accompanying
 27 someone... =from these circumstances. =
- 28 **AYA** = maybe =, but...not 'safer'...perhaps in that case...[there would be]
 29 something like a reasoning of some kind <6> I have the feeling that there
 could be [something like that...]

A few minutes later, we begin discussing another, similar, case: I am talking to two people, one of whom is my friend, and the other an acquaintance of my friend, when the latter asks my friend a question about me: "when does she (=me) return to Italy?"

- 30 **INT** *sorewa yappari kekkoo ki ni natte @@ kanojo wa itsu itaria ni*
 that quite be annoyed she TOP when Italy
 31 *kaeru n desu ka @@*
 return NOM COP Q
- 32 **KEN** *nanka chokusetu hanashitara <2> shitsurei ni naru n janai ka tte*
 well directly speak COND rude become NOM be NEG Q QT
 33 *omotte iru hito mo iru to omou n desu yo ne, nanka...*
 think people too there are QT think NOM POL FP FP, something
- 34 **INT** *shitashisugite...*
 too familiar
- 35 **KEN** *nn, nanka, konna ni wakatte nai no ni, kyuuni, chokusetsu*
 ehrrm maybe, in this way understand NEG though suddenly directly
 36 *hanashikakeru to.. furanku ni nari sugiru yoo na kanji ni*
 address COND forthright become too much sort of feeling
 37 *nacchau kara <3>*
 become because

- 38 **AYA** = *sore mo aru: ka: mo: shirenai: =*
that too be it is possible
- 39 **KEN** = *hai, de, chokusetsu hanasanai to = kaette shitsureina kanji ni*
yes and directly talk NEG COND rather rude feeling
- 40 *nacchau tte iu no wa.. aru yoona ki ga shimasu ne.*
become QT NOM TOP there is something like have a feeling FP
- 41 **INT** *aa, yappari nanka watashini mushiro kyori wo tamotte hoshii to/*
I see, perhaps in a way me rather distance keep want to QT
- 42 **KEN** *nn, tamotte hoshii no ka, tamotoo to shite iru dake nano ka/*
yeah keep want (you) to NOM Q, keep intend to only be NOM Q
- 30 **INT** I was a bit annoyed, [by his asking my friend] “When *does she go*
31 *back to Italy?*”
- 32 **KEN** (It’s that) I think that there are also people who may possibly think it
33 could be rude to speak directly, you know? I mean...
- 34 **INT** [it would be] too familiar...
- 35 **KEN** well, mmhh... [they avoid speaking directly] since if you suddenly
36-37 address someone directly despite not knowing [that person] well
enough, then it sounds as though one may have become too
'casual'...yes...and...
- 38 **AYA** yes, that too is possible
- 39 **KEN** yes, and on the other hand if one does not address that person
40 directly, on the contrary I have the feeling that in some cases it could
possibly be considered somewhat rude...
- 41 **INT** ah, so they think they’d prefer me to keep a certain distance
- 42 **KEN** well... mmhh...[I wonder whether]...they want you to keep a
distance, or they are rather trying to keep a distance...

4.3. Analysis

Is it possible to pin down my perception of evasiveness to some specific elements of this verbal exchange? Looking at the last excerpt, I think that Ken’s contribution contains several elements that we could call, following Caffi (2007), ‘mitigating’ forms. For Caffi, “[...] the basic function of mitigators is deresponsibilization with respect to both content and addressee.” (2007: 88). Ken uses mitigators in statements that mark his own standpoint: “...*aru yoona kanji ga shimasu ne.*” (= I have the feeling that perhaps it could be said that..., in line 40) as well as that of other people: “*naru n ja nai ka to omotte iru hito*” (‘people who could possibly think...’, in lines 32-33), “*furanku ni nari sugiru yoo na kanji*” (‘a feeling that it could possibly be too casual [=lit. frank] to...’, in line 36), which all convey a sense of epistemic distancing or ‘detachment’ (Stubbs 1986) vis-à-vis the expressed propositions. Quite perceptively, Caffi also notes that “the advantage of deresponsibilization is

counterbalanced by the possibility that the mitigated message can have contrasting interpretations and hence be ambiguous”. These are of course conventional indirect routines frequently used in Japanese, but they nevertheless are symptomatic of Ken’s relinquishing authority over his interpretations, and avoidance of categorical statements.

As for the forms that we could call ‘straightforward statements’ (lines 10 and 33), they are both mitigated by the verb ‘to think’, which “softens the force of the assertion”, and projects the impression that “[...] the speaker is not too brash, tactless, or domineering” (Maynard 1996: 220). Moreover, in responding to my interjection in line 41, while effectively rejecting my interpretation, he avoids any explicit signal of disagreement, questions my statement, and simply mentions an interpretation that is alternative to mine (while possibly leaving the matrix predicate, e.g. ‘I don’t know/ I wonder’, or other verb to this effect, unexpressed¹⁰).

Besides these relatively ostensible strategies, we could consider topical organizational features of the text expressed by Ken, using Bavelas et al. (1990)’s discussion of the broad category of ‘equivocal’ messages. As a notional category, ‘equivocation’ is defined as “[...] non-straightforward communication, including messages that are ambiguous, indirect, contradictory or evasive” (1990: 60)¹¹. A message can be equivocal based on the extent to which it ‘blurs’ its relation to any of the situational coordinates of Sender (who expresses a viewpoint), Receiver (who is the target), Content (what is being expressed) and Context (co-textual relationships). We have seen above that Ken uses several devices that make viewpoint attribution slightly less distinct or certain (the use of distancing evidentials); he also generalizes his statements to refer to generic “people” (line 33) rather than the specific case I submitted. In terms of content, Ken’s lines 5-10 are the only instance in which I obtained a comment on the specific case I am referring to (“[the nurse] is not used to foreigners”) but it is noteworthy that even this is not an evaluative comment (or minimally so), and the numerous hesitations (pauses of one or two seconds) reveal its dispreferred status anyway; moreover, the comment is offered only at the end of a ‘double’ account (see below on this), which has the effect of delaying and ‘relativizing’ the final statement. The two explicit evaluations produced by Ken (lines 32-33: “it would be rude to speak directly”, and 35-37: “addressing someone

¹⁰ Ken’s last remark in line 42 could be judged as indirect if understood to be incomplete (i.e. lacking a matrix predicate as the one hypothesized above), but its form is formally undistinguished from a genuine question, so its ‘incompleteness’ could only be confirmed by Ken.

¹¹ Hence all equivocal messages are indirect but not viceversa.

directly may sound too casual”) refer to generic ‘people’ rather than a specific case, so while enunciating a social norm, Ken does not position himself either in line with or against it¹². Finally, in terms of co-textual relations, we could note that other comments too are formulated as ‘double accounts’ (cf Watanabe 1993’s “multiple accounts”) that provide counterpoints to the statements he is about to make: in the first excerpt, Ken’s lines 5-10 juxtapose the scenario in which language is a problem—in which case the nurse could be justified for not talking directly to me—and the scenario in which language is not a problem—in which case the reason is the nurse’s lack of familiarity with foreigners, which could potentially cast her as blameworthy. The slow tempo and many pauses indeed suggest some hesitation, although Ken tactfully does not commit himself to an explicit negative judgment. In lines 35-37 again he first provides a justification for the instance of deflected communication that I put to him (by saying that some people may avoid speaking directly to me for fear of sounding too ‘casual’, which is a potentially misaligning move given my obvious disapproval of that behaviour) only to add a statement (lines 39-40) that acknowledges the legitimacy of my irritation (a move which arguably realigns our perspectives). These counterpoints provide an enlarged, inclusive perspective and effectively reduce his need to take a more definite personal stance.

But perceptions of cautiousness or elusiveness, long-windedness, or indeed general indirectness, cannot be fully justified by recourse to a cumulative analysis of a number of (indirect) individual linguistic devices, or by a one-sided analysis of Ken’s orientation to the topic. Meanings cannot be identified independently from the interactional circumstances in which they are uttered; they are initiated, developed, and ‘synchronized’ between, in relation to, or in response to, the participants themselves and their dynamically changing, discursive positions. They are therefore co-constituted, ‘interactionally achieved’ (Arundale 1999), and interpreted through a great deal of circumstantial filtering. The impression of indirectness derives rather from the relation¹³ of the actual message with

¹² The way he identifies the receiver could also be construed as being mitigated: “if they speak directly” in line 32, instead of a more specific “if they speak directly to you”. Like in note 10, this is not an intrinsic property of this utterance and something that could be only be confirmed by Ken. There is a less generic verb in line 36 “to address (you) directly” but again the referent can only be recovered pragmatically.

¹³ Agha (2007); this is closer to Ervin-Tripp’s (1972: 235) definition of style as something defined by co-occurrence rules (syntagmatic relations) and alternation rules (or paradigmatic relations). The first define a ‘register’, the latter provide a

different kinds of expectations, either pre-existing a conversation (e.g. the discursive roles that I expected Ken, Aya and myself to hold during the interview: they the experts, me the novice), or being generated through it (e.g. the second part of a question/answer pair, certain amounts and types of information, etc), which are of course subject to variable conventions regarding discourse patterns, as well as acceptable social stances.

I expected to obtain a discernable positioning (in line with the declared purpose of the interview) and I struggled to elicit any. I expected interpretations of specific cases, and received (until I forced my interviewees to be more precise) interpretations of generalized cases. I expected some authoritative statement, and at best I received suggestions as to possible interpretations. Although I had hoped that my explicit affective evaluation (“I was a bit annoyed”) would cue some sort of explicit positioning on Ken’s part, Ken’s response only revealed an attempt to remain as neutral as possible. While I was eager to obtain some overt indication of Ken’s stances with respect to the specific episodes I recounted, this seemed to be a type of information that he was unwilling to volunteer. It is clear therefore that my perception was shaped not by an unprejudiced, ‘clean-slate’ reading of Ken’s behaviour, but the mismatch between my—rather arbitrary and unilateral—expectations, and the type of contribution that he was intent in constructing.

There seemed to be, in other words, a mismatch between their and my understanding of the very nature of the situation (the purpose of the interview, our roles in it, the amount and type of information that could be considered adequate, etc.), i.e. the different “structures of expectations” at play, which I will refer to here as different *frames*.

The term frame is used in different senses in various disciplinary traditions. Tannen distinguishes an interactive notion of frame “[...] in Bateson’s and Goffman’s sense, that is, what people think they are doing when they talk to each other (i.e. are they joking, lecturing or arguing?)” (1993: 6), from ‘knowledge schemas’, which refer to “participant’s expectations about people, objects, events and settings in the world” (in Shank and Abelson’s or Fillmore’s sense, 1993: 60 ff.)¹⁴. While schematic knowledge of actional wholes typified by specific lexical items (e.g. *buy*

contrast with what that style is not; see also Tannen [1984] 2005 ‘*conversational style*’; Hymes 1974: ‘*a way or mode of doing something*’.

¹⁴ While some find the two concepts distinguishable in principle (e.g. Hanks 1993:128), Tannen notes that to consider the former ‘dynamic’ (because constructed and derived in interaction) and the latter ‘static’ (because they reside in speakers’ minds prior to interaction) is unjustified, as even pre-existing expectations are continually tested and modified against experience.

and *sell* in Fillmore's discussion) is of course part of speaker's metalinguistic competence activated in any linguistic interaction, the type of knowledge discussed in cognitive semantics is not of immediate relevance to the discussion in this paper. So I will use the term *frames* in the Levinsonian sense of an 'activity type': "[...] a fuzzy category, whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with constraints on participants, settings, and so on, but *above all on the kinds of allowable contributions*" (from Clark 1996: 30, my italics). I understand knowledge of these frames to constitute part of speakers' metalinguistic and metapragmatic competence (it is linked to speakers' knowledge of the typical linguistic signs associated with certain activities, and to knowledge of normalized modes of behaviour) and therefore act as a set of expectations regarding typical courses of action. This knowledge is constructed through processes of socialization, and it is therefore constantly updated in light of new experience. Additionally, as a product of socialization practices, frames can evoke cultural dimensions.

In this paper, as I will explain below, I discuss abstract, generic types of frames that are likely to underlie a range of interactional scenarios.

5. From linguistic signs to interpretive frames and values

One may well assume the social setting of "ethnographic interview" to have universally understood features: "a researcher interviewing an informant, who is taken to be an authoritative source, within an established domain for the conversation, etc...", but the possibly heterogeneous conceptualizations of discursive roles and practices that participants bring to it mean that it is by no means a 'universal frame'.

One's course of action in a specific situation is determined by one's assessment not only of hierarchical relationships or group membership (factors that are routinely mentioned in explaining interactional behaviour) but also in terms of what actors know about conventionalized 'modes of participation', or frames, such as 'cooperation' and 'competition' (Jackendoff 2007: 176)¹⁵. My expectations, conduct, and response to Ken's conduct in the interview suggest the possibility that two different models for ethnographic interviews were at play: a *competitive* one in which the participants are able to contribute with different individual

¹⁵ The poles of *cooperativeness* and *competition* can be seen as one of the variable dimensions that can characterize joint activities (see Clark 1996: 31). The others, which I do not discuss explicitly here, are: scriptedness (vs. unscriptedness), formality (vs. informality), verballity (vs non-verballity) and governance (egalitarian vs. autocratic).

stances, envisage the task as a game of minds in which a ‘winning’ argument leads to a specific outcome which eliminates other possible outcomes, and feel bound only by the task at hand, and a *collaborative* one, in which the participants feel bound to maintain interactional alignment, envisage the task’s outcome as the result of mutual agreement, and feel bound to each other in some (social, affective) capacity, beyond the task at hand.

So while my questioning attempted to prompt an explicit marking of my interviewees’ stance vis-à-vis the episodes I recounted, aimed at obtaining a definitive conclusion, and proposed interpretations that I wanted to be explicitly accepted or challenged (in line with my competitive frame), my interviewees’ contribution seemed to aim at maintaining some kind of overarching alignment and achieve a non-exclusive conclusion that reflected multiple positions (in line with a collaborative frame).

It is at this level of conceptualization, that of frame, that the constellation of linguistic signals makes sense: “[...] global predictions or expectations provide the ground against which possible ambiguities at the perceptual, or sequential levels can be resolved” (Gumperz 1992: 233). So understanding a frame provides us with an enriched interpretation of the utterances, and the various mitigators and instances of ‘equivocal’ messages I described above are less ‘equivocal’ in light of the aims of a participant working in a collaborative frame. If giving opinions positions people and has the potential to reveal their misalignment, a way to maintain alignment is by blurring the edges of a stance.

It should not be thought that Ken is just ‘hiding’ an explicit stance, that should theoretically be invariably expressed in any interview—by the mechanisms I described above he is intent in constructing his ‘scene’, a rather rich scene, in which some meanings are being highlighted and others shaded. The totality of his (verbal) behaviour makes this scene public and available to interpretation (although my interpretation may or may not coincide with the meanings or stances Ken had meant to project: Arundale 1999: 131); his stance is woven in relation to my own stance and interpretable against it. Once I made my stance explicit by casting these episodes as ‘problematic’, or by stating that “I was a bit annoyed” by them, I produced an alignment vis-à-vis the events that constrained Ken’s subsequent positioning¹⁶. In the context of our relationship (as newly

¹⁶ DuBois maintains that taking a stance means performing three acts: by *evaluating* something we (causally and inferentially) *position* ourselves with respect to others, and by positioning ourselves we *align* ourselves with others (2007: 163).

acquainted parties, bearers of different positions in the academic hierarchy, age, gender and cultural background) Ken's stancetaking was indeed a delicate matter. Ken used an indirect style to resolve a potential interactional tension. At the same time however, his stance was an expression of his social morality, and was indexical of a broader sociocultural framework (Englebretson 2007: 3).

While claiming that his stance evokes presupposed systems of sociocultural values (see DuBois 2007: 139) I by no means intend to claim that the same sociocultural values apply to the whole of Japanese society, or even that this is a constant character of Ken's behaviour across any type of situation, setting, or participant frameworks—on the contrary, it is very much symbiotic to my own behaviour. But to the extent that his behaviour in this situation can be said to display a perceivably coherent character, other participants would ascribe their interpretations to him and hold him accountable for a specific social and moral ideology.

The discussion that follows is schematized in figures 11-1 and 11-2.

The signs that Ken has provided me with (linguistic signs) are, to me, indices of a coherent style (an indirect style); but while indirectness is an emergent property of conversation (a metasemiotic result of the relation of linguistic signs with specific co-textual and contextual conditions¹⁷), it is also the input for further metasemiotic generalizations (these facts are indicated by the upward arrows; inverse processes relating to how one's value system affects one's verbal behaviour are represented by the downward arrows). I noted earlier that an indirect style can be evaluated in different ways: positive (creating rapport) or negative (being evasive). At the time of the interview, I perceived it negatively—Ken's style frustrated my expectations in many ways, including my (interested) research agenda. With the revised analytic agenda that I have for the purpose of this paper, and under the different conditions in which I can now approach the text (a detached post-facto analysis, free of the constraints of real-time face-to-face interaction), I will try instead to describe the mechanisms that subtend generalizations from linguistic signs to value attribution and how these can lead to (negative) evaluations.

Before I do that, I need to clarify the terminology I will use, in particular in relation to values, which is inspired by Jackendoff (2007). A value is, for Jackendoff, a conceptualized abstract property (hence not something existing in the "real" world), associated with (conceptualized) objects, persons, and actions, and that serves as an intermediary in a system of "folk logic". Crucially, value is not a unitary notion, but can be

¹⁷ As opposed to an 'anticipated' product of the conversation (see Clark 1996: 22).

broken down in various sub-values (e.g. affective-, utility-, normative-, quality-, esteem-value etc.). Variability in what (sub-)values are associated with what entities is what engenders cross-and intra-cultural variation (2007: 277 ff.). For instance, in some Japanese circles, going out for a drink with colleagues at the end of the day is *de rigueur* (the activity therefore is associated with a high normative-value), and the social payoff (i.e. the strengthening of group membership) may also be high (a high utility-value) but some people may feel a strong dislike for the inebriated crowds of the late train they have to catch after the drinking session (i.e. assign the activity a low affective-value): this may alter—devalue or undermine—their overall evaluation of the event, even though one recognizes the high normative- and utility-value of going out for a drink.

Here, I will comment only on a few types of value that are relevant to my discussion. Lastly, let us note that each value is explicated (see the top part of the figures) in terms of ‘principles’ (or ‘input rules’), that give grounds for assigning values to objects, people and actions, and ‘guidelines’ (or ‘output rules’) that spell out how the principles affect behaviour. Each principle specifies what gives the value a high and a low valence: for example, for the affective-value, the high valence reads: “harmonious discussion feels good”, and conversely the low valence reads: e.g. “disharmonious discussion feels bad” (the negative values are omitted, for the sake of simplicity, from the tables). The examples of principles and procedures that I use for each value are just indicative—many others could be assumed.

VALUE TYPE	PRINCIPLES (settings of values)	>	PROCEDURES (guidelines for action)
affective value	a harmonious discussion feels good	>	<i>do what promotes harmony</i>
utility value	smooth conversation is beneficial	>	<i>avoid open disagreement, misalignment</i>
normative value	respecting other people’s viewpoints is good	>	<i>minimize egocentric statements</i>
...
ACTIVITY FRAME: COOPERATION			

↑↓

METASIGN: indirect style

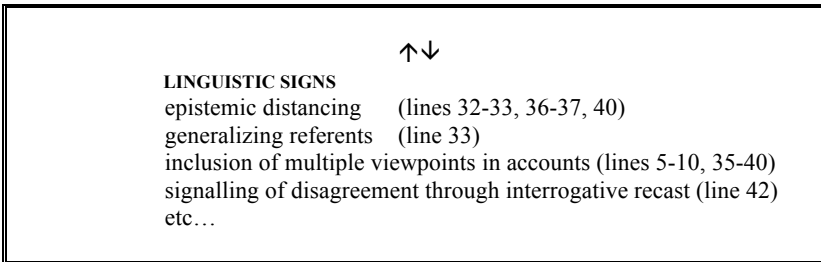


Figure 11-1: From linguistic signs to values – cooperative frame and concomitant values

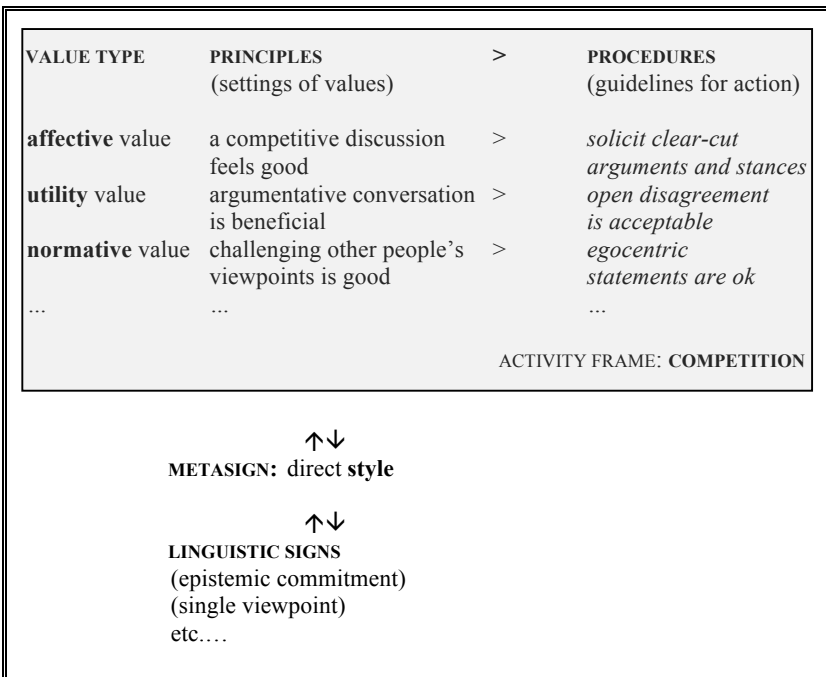


Figure 11-2: From linguistic signs to values – competitive frame and concomitant values

From Ken’s verbal behaviour I could assume his preference for non-categorical statements about a specific individual’s behaviour, his inclination to express his stance inferentially rather than explicitly, his

unwillingness to engage in direct argumentation with another participant, his preference for inclusive accounts. At this level¹⁸, my interpretation and my attribution of an ‘indirect style’ to Ken’s performance is textual and based on systemic properties.

A descriptive linguist may stop just there; but as members of different social groups and bearers of different cultural values, our interpretation normally goes further: we judge people based on the way they talk and against our parameters of ‘normality’, i.e. the normalized behaviours that we are familiar with (though we may not actively behave so ourselves). This requires a reflexive model of behaviour that tells us how people are supposed to act in that specific interactional context. This model includes acquired scripts for specific situations, and corresponds to what I here call ‘frame’ (see 4.3).

Any individual who, like Ken, has been socialized to a notion that stating opinions to near strangers in a public, semi-formal context must be done as collaboratively as possible, will find Ken’s verbal behaviour and stance perfectly natural—possibly unremarkable. An individual may hold, or be familiar with, a set of values consistent with that behaviour and stance: s/he will assume that Ken assigns a high affective-value (specifying what feels good or bad) and a high utility-value (specifying costs and benefits) to diplomatic, harmonious conversation; that he is conforming to a normative value (a moral code of conduct) that dictates inclusiveness and stigmatizes egocentrism (figure 11-1).

But as individuals accustomed to a competitive frame (figure 11-2), in which it is an argumentative, animated discussion that is associated with a sense of satisfaction (high affective-value) and beneficial effects (high utility-value), and in which personal, self-asserting statements are perfectly compatible with norms of acceptable behaviour (normative-value), the verbal signs provided in Ken’s performance generate some kind of discomfort and dissonance. Those signs are indeed likely to be evaluated negatively (i.e. to hold low affective-, utility-, normative-values), as we have seen with the charges of ambiguity, evasiveness, vagueness, or lack of logic. The extent to which we can make sense of Ken’s behaviour depends uniquely on our familiarity with his value system (and the corresponding frame). As bearers of different value systems (or as uninformed novices in intercultural encounters, the prototypical case of the language and culture learner), our responses to Ken’s behaviour can range from complete bewilderment to mild

¹⁸ Please note that I am not suggesting any temporal sequencing in the interpretive processes, and reference to different levels of, or different points in participants interpretation depends on the sequence of my analysis.

frustration, because we fail to find coherence between the values we entertain (and that affect our judgement) and the verbal signals that Ken displays; we lack knowledge or understanding of the interpretive frame.

The case of the language learner exemplifies the extreme case where values are not shared, and possibly also not known—in fact, often a crucial discovery in language and culture learning is that different values exist even for what we may consider ‘universal truths’. But the community of users of Japanese language of course also includes individuals who do not actively share Ken’s values (for example, those who assign a higher utility-value to challenging and being challenged in one’s views; those who attach a higher affective-value to direct challenges, etc.), but are familiar with them. Such individuals are unlikely to be entirely puzzled by Ken’s indirectness: they would be able to recognize his behaviour as one of many models of behaviour. They may still evaluate it negatively, but this will be an informed evaluation of Ken’s values, not the result of one’s unilateral and absolutist reading of the ‘rules of the game’.

The point is that frames and values have to be learned. We cannot experience values directly (although we may infer them from metapragmatic comments) and we do so through experience of frames, or the scripts that (we have learned to assume) regulate behaviour. Repeated exposure to such frames allows us to find coherence¹⁹ in behavioural models, and make sense of them; lack of experience can give rise to negative judgements.

The values underlying a frame are evinced from the use of specific linguistic signs, but of course need to receive validation in some sort of folk reasoning. Many ethnographic commentaries on Japan have indeed highlighted the types of values I mentioned above (see e.g. Lebra 1976), such as preference for non-conflictual argumentation or inclusiveness; in particular, the dislike for egocentric stances has been noted in a recent study on apologetic metapragmatic comments (Pizziconi 2007). In the excerpt presented here, Ken produced two explicit enunciations of normative behaviour (though these are phrased as norms he knows of and not necessarily as norms he personally subscribes to): “speaking directly

¹⁹ Of course, lack of (apparent) coherence is often picked up on in daily conversations (e.g. contradictions between one’s stated morality and one’s actions), but here I refer to a requirement for mutual coordination, that makes us attribute value in consistent ways; coherence is a function of the subjective degree of match between our notion of which values go with which signs, and mismatches are possible since a value is actually a composite result of many sub-values which may have mismatches.

may be rude” (lines 32-33) and “addressing someone directly may sound too casual” (lines 35-37).

However, even when we recognize ‘normalized models of behaviours’ or enunciable social norms, we need to consider that they are not necessarily universally subscribed to by the whole of the Japanese people, and they are not the same as ‘normative models’, i.e. models unquestioningly accepted as standards. Sociolinguistic competence requires an appreciation of finer distinctions with regards to the kind of people that those models are subscribed by, the social purposes that such models serve, and how broadly they are adopted in society. Failure to make these distinctions results in stereotyping overgeneralizations. There are several discussions of this issue from a social, or social-psychological point of view (see e.g. Eelen 2001 and Agha 2007), but here I would like to note the very simple psychological process that inhibits such distinctions. As we move from the recognition of linguistic signs (i.e. as signs belonging to the Japanese language, with specific referential meanings, indexing specific illocutionary stances, etc.) to attributions of values (something that happens early on in language learning), we move onto the much fuzzier area of social cognition. It is here that a seamless but crucial leap can be made between the evidence available to me (Ken’s value preferences as an individual), which has a ‘subjective’ character, and a generalization to other people ‘like’ Ken, or possibly the whole of the Japanese country, which has an ‘objective’ character, and for which I may not have much evidence. In other words, although all we could legitimately conclude is that “non-competitive discussion *feels good to Ken*” (a ‘subjective’ formulation) what we often conclude is that “non-competitive discussion *feels good*” (an ‘objective’ formulation; see Jackendoff 2007: 239)²⁰. As a matter of fact, unjustified and unsupported by any evidence as it is, this kind of reasoning is fairly common, and indeed very human. Stereotyping is a way to simplify complexities, and

²⁰ In Jackendoff’s discussion this is seen as a process whereby we arbitrarily attribute our own subjective take to others; here, I note the similar effects of attributing somebody else’s subjective take to others. Another interesting implication of the distinction between subjective and objective conceptualizations of values pointed out by Jackendoff (2007: 241) is that when someone’s subjective judgement is consistent with objective judgements this accrues another type of value (esteem-value, both self-esteem or the esteem of those who share the same value). However, when someone’s subjective judgement conflicts with the ‘objective’ judgement this generates loss of (self- or other’s) esteem. If I am wrong my self-esteem goes down, if you are wrong, you are “uncultured, savage, lacking in values”. In our case, ‘vague, inscrutable, illogic’.

recognizing differences inevitably increases complexity. But the extra effort (cognitive and material) needed to account for variability also clashes with the need for simplification and economy that governs language classrooms.

6. Summary

The discussion above illustrated the mechanisms involved in the perception and evaluation of a speaker's conversational style. Linguistic forms are of course the means by which speakers signal their orientation to values, but since the same linguistic signs (including the metasign of 'indirect style') may, and often do, have different interactional valences in different value systems²¹, a rigid interpretation of their meanings based on one's own system of values carries the risk of misattribution.

I have tried to show the mechanisms that link the reading of an individual's verbal behaviour to judgements of personhood. Crucial to an understanding of the significance of an indirect style are the participant assumptions regarding the type of activity one is taking part in, its purposes, the participating roles it prescribes, and how it relates to long-term goals beyond the immediate activity undertaken, i.e. their respective frames. The frames assumed in this study are generic relational frames that describe types of "joint actions": cooperative or competitive. Frames shape the linguistic contributions from their inception, and are not just a 'last resort' bit of context, which can be invoked for interpretation to 'fill in' the gaps in semantic or syntactic meaning (Clark 1996: 58). The lack of a common ground in this mediating plane is responsible for mismatches in one's expectations, and potential miscommunication, even when communication seems to proceed with no major hiccups at a lower, denotational level, at a local pragmatic level, etc.

It is well known that inaccurate form-function mappings are responsible for a great deal of language learners' pragmatic failure. As 'capsules' of human knowledge and understanding about types of interactional patterns that are normally below one's awareness (Hanks 1993: 129), frames are even more sensitive components of interactions. Participants in speech events hold others accountable for their communicative actions but are likely to invoke linguistic signs, rather than frames, in interpretive or argumentative reasoning about what is going on. We have seen this in many commentaries on the Japanese style, including

²¹ Tannen [1984] 2005 talks of 'pragmatic homonymy', i.e. the different interpretation of the same devices.

the quotation from Clancy at the beginning of this paper, that deterministically explain perceptions of evasiveness on the basis of linguistic features of the Japanese language, leaving the ‘evaluator’s’ assumptions regarding the expected goals and features of the exchange unquestioned. Yet, we have seen how our expectations about the relevant ‘scripts’ for joint activities crucially affects our cognitive as well as affective evaluation of the effectiveness (or even comprehensibility) of a communicative exchange. In pedagogical contexts, it is important to highlight how frames condition verbal behaviour, and how they reflect and affect speaker’s stances towards the task at hand and the relationship with other participants. This is not the same as teaching language with a situational syllabus: scripts for post-office or restaurant encounters are more institutionalized and conventionalized than those for stating opinions (during ethnographic interviews, in a university seminar, or at a dinner party). Learners can benefit from guidance (and awareness raising) on how one’s assumptions about goals and participant roles affect communication.

Values are complex concepts, and can be described in terms of clusters of more specific sub-values that may have different valences for different individuals. This conceptualization of values allows us to account for culture-internal variation and reduce the drawbacks of necessary pedagogical simplifications. The implication for teaching is that no single account of ‘cultural values’ is likely to offer an exhaustive and non-stereotypical account of the social meaning of linguistic forms. When offering explanations of this or that form, conventional expression, lexeme, etc. a teacher/textbook may variably resort to a type of morality (“when complimented it is good to deny the compliment and show modesty”), a particular feeling (“it is considered clumsy to say no directly”), or a social norm (“even when you disagree, it is *tatema* [=the socially accepted thing to do, see Doi 1986] not to do so directly”). None of these explanations is ‘more’ true than the others, nor are they necessarily all true at the same time either. They can only be true *for* someone, and the argumentative positioning—the ideology—that they presuppose needs to be addressed directly.

7. Conclusion

I have assumed that the abundance of claims about Japanese indirectness must be taken as genuine perceptions on the part of users, and although distinctions need to be made about what indirectness ‘means’, how socially widespread it is, in what situations it is deployed, and what argumentative positions it sustains (which needs extensive empirical

testing), we need to acknowledge the existence of such perceptions, and account for it in pedagogical contexts. Japanese language no doubt makes extensive use of an indirect style—a style conveyed through the use of several grammaticalized and discourse-based devices—but evidence is available that suggests that this style is subject to a great deal of personal and situational variation, a fact that Japanese language instruction needs to proclaim more audibly (Matsumoto and Okamoto 2003: 34). When an indirect style is selected, this conveys information on the speaker's orientation in relation to other participants. In this study we have seen that this may conflict with the goals of the task (as understood by one participant), but also that it indexes the speaker's priorities: interactional, rather than transactional concerns. Indirect styles can be used to index speakers' affective and social values, which assign importance to harmonious, non-conflictual stances, and condition the nature of the interactional frame.

Language forms can be indirect, but indirectness is not a fixed property of the Japanese language. The structure of the language cannot “foster ambiguity” but it can be exploited to convey ambiguity when this is the very meaning that speakers wish to express. Speakers can be indirect, vague, and ambiguous, but indirectness is also not an intrinsic property of speakers either; it is the result of a semiotic process in which several signs are perceived to converge to convey a consistent register of linguistic use, functional to the expression of alignment. The degree of indirectness we perceive is also a function of participants' goals and expectations (our frames), and therefore it is an emergent property of specific interactions. Language teaching must avoid deterministic statements about the ‘spirit’ of the Japanese language, or essentializing statements about the preferences of a generic Japanese speaker, and focus on the goals of participants in situated activities, which are subject to variations in the stances, identities, and morality displayed.

Previous contrastive analyses of Japanese argumentation strategies (Watanabe 1993 contrasts them with American strategies) have argued that there are systematic cross-cultural differences at the framing level. In this study, I did not confirm nor disprove that this may be the case, but I argued that different settings in the clusters of sub-values in an individual value system allow for variation within a broadly shared cultural orientation. Each interaction provides evidence of an individual's belief system, his/her orientation towards norms of behaviour and affective preferences towards patterns of interaction. Whether the collaborative frame and the underlying values I have described can be generalized to other groups in Japanese society is an empirical matter that depends on the

frequency of occurrence of such behaviour. A truly pluralistic education requires that teachers contextualize their own interpretations and evaluations, and accompany such interpretations with reference to other value systems, for other ‘types’ of people (e.g. different generations, genders, different political or sexual orientations, etc.)²². As a kind of ‘gate keeper’, a teacher carries great responsibility in the creation and sustenance of normative models, and the potential perpetuation of stereotypes and prejudice.

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²² To my knowledge, only one textbook for intermediate/advanced students attempts to provide a juxtaposition of different ideologies in an explicit manner: Kondo & Maruyama 2001, which not surprisingly opens with a chapter on stereotypes.

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