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## JAPANESE AND AMERICAN INDIRECTNESS<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** There are widely held and accepted characterisations of American and Japanese communicative styles, including stereotypes concerning relative directness or indirectness of communication. It will be argued here that, contrary to prevailing conceptions, both direct and indirect communication are appropriate behaviour for each group. It is the social relationship of the participants, their assumptions about the nature of the communicative task being performed, and the manner in which linguistic indirectness is manifested, which will affect the mutual interpretation of directness.

### Introduction

In a travel guide to Japan, the writer offers the following counsel (Ainsley, 1989):

The Japanese rarely speak directly; in business especially, but in life generally as well, they will 'er' and 'um' and hesitate and leave things vague rather than commit themselves to a decision or opinion. Therefore, follow these rules when talking to them:

- (1) If they say *yes*, they mean *no*
- (2) If they say *perhaps*, they probably mean *yes*
- (3) If they say *no*, they aren't Japanese

Not unlike this popular advice, much current and past academic research which contrasts Japanese and American behaviour has likewise been informed by a similar assumption that the two cultures are separated by an almost insurmountable gulf of complete cultural dissimilarity. This proclivity for polarising Japanese and American communicative behaviour is especially apparent when comparisons are made of the relative directness or indirectness of communication. There are widely held and accepted characterisations of Americans as always forthright, direct and clear, and Japanese as always indirect, non-verbal and ambiguous. These characterizations are often seen as established social fact rather than as hypothesized generalisation. Table 1 lists only a few studies which have established or buttressed this reification of opposites.

Despite these many similar characterisations, there are nevertheless occasions

Table 1 The reification of opposites

Study	Japanese	American
Doi (1974)	non verbal, indirect	verbal, direct
Hall & Hall (1987)	indirect	direct
Graham & Herberger (1983)	indirect	direct
Ramsey & Birk (1983)	nonverbal, indirect	verbal, direct
Lebra (1976)	nonverbal, indirect	verbal, direct
Graham & Sato (1984)	implicit	competitive, explicit
Condon (1974, 1985)	indirect	direct
Okabe (1983)	groupism, indirect	individualism, direct
Pascale & Athos (1981)	indirect	direct
	cooperative	competitive
Nakane (1970, 1974)	indirect	direct
March (1982)	indirect	direct
Ueda (1974)	indirect	direct
Gibney (1979)	indirect	direct
Alston (1985)	indirect	direct
Toyama (1975)	circular discourse	linear discourse

in which Japanese will express themselves with a great deal of explicitness and directness, and in which Americans will be ambiguous and indirect. The question is, if both Japanese and Americans are equally capable of and willing to be both indirect and direct in speech, why do we continue to acknowledge and echo images of behaviour of only one type? To what extent are the above generalisations (which more truthfully should be called stereotypes) accurate? Is this manner of approaching Japanese and American intercultural interaction useful or productive? Have these 'inherited misperceptions' (Wilkinson, 1981: 23) in the minds of scholars lead to a recognition of only those features that are perceived as opposite or contrasting and a neglect of similarities?

This paper will briefly touch on some instances of directness and indirectness used by Japanese speakers and American English speakers. Contrary to widely-held and accepted stereotypes that characterise Americans as always forthright and clear, and Japanese as always indefinite and ambiguous, both directness and indirectness are appropriate behaviour for each group. The social relationships of the participants, their assumptions about the nature of the communicative task being performed, as well as the manner in which linguistic indirectness is manifested, will all affect the interpretation of directness. It is to these differences that I will now turn.

### Ways in Which Language May be Indirect

In his characteristically eloquent way, the linguist Edward Sapir expressed the interesting fact that all languages can, at times, appear to be exceedingly ambiguous (in Mandelbaum, 1949: 1056):

A single word passed between members of an intimate group, in spite of its apparent vagueness and ambiguity, may constitute a far more precise communication than volumes of carefully prepared correspondence interchanged between two governments.

Some linguists have suggested that most communication, in any language, is in fact characterised by some type of indirectness, and that there is a basic conversational practice of favouring the implicit over the explicit. Among the numerous ways in which a language may express indirectness are many devices which can be found in both Japanese and English, including reliance upon implied meaning, use of syntactic and discourse structure, lexical choice, and so on. The following list, which is not in any way definitive, will be discussed in this section of the paper:

- situated lexical choice
- conversational structure of negative responses
- conversational pre-sequences
- unanchored ostensives
- syntactic and discourse structure
- obligatory conventions and formulaic expressions

### Situated lexical choice

One of the ways Japanese are most often characterised as being indirect is when it comes to 'saying no'. For example, Alston (1985: 137) claims that 'Few Japanese are willing to say "no" to someone'. Some writers also presume that 'saying no' is always a simple matter when speaking English:

Unlike English, which has the very simple and convenient word 'no', which causes no discomfort or awkwardness or offense on the part of the listener, the Japanese 'ie' sounds rather formal and too straightforward (Ueda, 1974: 186).

Statements such as these reflect an assumption that Americans routinely respond with 'no' at any opportunity and in any situation without any reserve whatsoever. One reason for the seeming ubiquitousness of the English word 'no' may be because there are different, and more frequent situations, in which the use of 'no' is appropriate. In other words, the English 'no' has a wider range of meaning than the translated Japanese word *ie*. In many instances, a Japanese speaker would say other words that are the *functional equivalent* of 'no' instead of the literal equivalent. Yet even in English, a straightforward 'no' is hardly inoffensive when declining or refusing requests, invitations, suggestions and other such actions, an aspect of conversational structure that will be discussed later. Some of the pragmatic 'no' equivalents in Japanese are *chigau* ('it's different'), *dame* ('no good'), *sonna koto wa nai* ('It's no such thing'), *iya desu* ('that's hateful'), and *betsu ni* ('not especially'). The following is an example:

- 1 A: *Ashita yoji ga aru deshō?*  
(You probably have some business tomorrow?)  
2 B: *Chigau*  
(It's a different)

In cases like this, saying *chigau* is just as direct as saying 'no' would be in English. This points to the danger of equating 'no' with its literal translation and assuming that they have the same meaning and function in interaction. In fact, some researchers have done just that. One investigator counted the number of times 'no' and *ie* were said by Japanese and Americans in order to determine which group is most direct (Graham, 1983).

One important point to note is that directness or indirectness are not in any sense *inherent* features of sentences, or words themselves. The following description of Japanese and American communication styles is typical of the way this topic is conceptualised:

Reflecting the cultural value of precision, Americans' tendency to use *explicit* words is the most noteworthy characteristic of their communicative style . . . The cultural assumptions of interdependence and harmony require that Japanese speakers limit themselves to *implicit* and even ambiguous use of words (Okabe, 1983: 34, my emphasis).

Many writers imagine, as Okabe does, that directness or indirectness are features of language that actually reside in the actual words used. As a case in point, the Japanese word *dōmo* is often cited as an 'ambiguous word'. *Dōmo* can mean 'very', 'quite', 'really', 'thank you', 'sorry', 'excuse me', 'somehow', and numerous other things. According to Mizutani & Mizutani (1977: 22) it can be used as an indication of negative judgement or as a lubricating social expression. Examined in isolation, like a pearl extracted from an oyster, *dōmo* is ambiguous. But consider this exchange (Mizutani & Mizutani, 1979: 156, my glosses):

- 1 A: *Dōmo okao no iro ga amari yoku arimasen ne*  
(Somehow you don't look very well)  
2 B: *Chotto kono goro nebusoku deshite ne*  
(I haven't been sleeping well these days)

B's answer of Line 2 shows that he has no trouble understanding A's *dōmo* in Line 1 as meaning 'somehow' rather than other potential meanings such as 'thank you' or 'quite'. In this example *dōmo* means something different:

- 1 A: *Ashita yasunde mo ii deshō ka*  
(May I be excused tomorrow?)  
2 B: *Ashita desu ka?*  
(Tomorrow?)  
3 A: *ē* (yes)  
4 B: *Ma, nantoka shimashō*  
(Well, I guess I'll manage somehow or other)

- 5 A: *Dōmo*  
(Thank you)

A asks B a favour in Line 1, and B grants A the favour in Line 4, after which an expression of gratitude is relevant and expected. In this case A's *dōmo* will easily be interpreted as meaning 'thank you' rather than 'somehow' or 'quite'. In the setting of its natural occurrence, the word *dōmo* is not ambiguous at all. And so, as Schegloff (1976: 99) points out, 'most theoretically or heuristically conjurable ambiguities never actually arise'. What is often neglected in analyses is the importance of context and situated meaning. In other words:

Situated and located meaning makes use of-but is never completely determined by-the dictionaries, etymologies, semantic appropriateness, institutional origins, and other sources and resonances that linguists and symbolic anthropologists rely upon (Moerman, 1988: 97).

### The conversational structure of negative responses

In an article titled 'Sixteen Ways to Avoid Saying "No" in Japan' (Ueda, 1974), the author lists strategies she feels are used by Japanese to avoid using a direct 'no' as an answer.<sup>2</sup> Hinds (1984: 4) also points out that Japanese avoid direct refusals through the use of silence, evasions, repetitions and pretended misunderstandings. It is useful at this point to compare negative responses as they occur in situated conversation, because with surprising regularity, these types of responses in both languages are similar in structure. Many of the strategies mentioned by Ueda and Hinds in fact parallel the structure of negative responses or 'dispreferred responses' as they are called, which conversation analysts have described for English (Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Atkinson & Drew, 1979; summarised by Levinson, 1983). Some of the strategies seen in both languages are:

- (1) *Pauses*  
responses follow silences and gaps
- (2) *Prefaces*  
markers that preface the response  
uh, well, e::r, (English)  
*anō, mā, ē, sá, <hss:>* (Japanese)
- (3) *Qualifiers*  
sure, but, let me see (English)  
*chotto, jitsu wa, muzukashi* (Japanese)
- (4) *Appreciations or apologies*
- (5) *Token agreements*  
followed by a negative response  
that modifies it
- (6) *Accounts*  
reasons or explanations for  
the dispreferred action

A few English and Japanese examples of how these negative responses are structured in conversation are:

- 1 A: Um I wondered if there's any chance of seeing you  
 2 tomorrow sometime (0.5) morning or before the  
 3 seminar  
 4 (1.0)  
 5 B: Ahum (.) I doubt it

(Levinson, 1983: 335)

- 1 A: She says you might want that dress I bought, I don't know  
 2 whether you do  
 3 B: Oh thanks (well) let me see I really have lots of dresses

(Levinson 1983: 335)

- 1 A: *Onésantachi dake sake ni oshokuji nasaimasu ka?*  
 (Will you (sisters) be eating before the others?)  
 2 B: uhh  
 3 (0.1)  
 4 B: *uhn é yo matteru wa*  
 (Uh, that's okay, we'll wait)

(From a Japanese soap opera, Miller, 1988)

- 1 A: *Sô iu kanji arun ja nai*  
 (Don't you have such a feeling?)  
 2 B: *Sô:::ne::: Boku wa kanji nai hô desu*  
 (Well, let's see, I'm inclined not to feel that)

(From a Japanese interview, Miller, 1988)

While the structure of negative response may be the same, speakers of one language may not recognise or be alerted to the markers or prefaces that have an equivalent function in the other language. So, for example, English speakers do not always recognise the Japanese inbreathed fricative <hss:>, or hiss as a dispreferred preface marker (Miller, 1991). The result is that an English speaker who has no problem identifying negative responses in English will view the same structures in Japanese as indirect or ambiguous speech. Before one can claim that Japanese never say 'no', the structure of negative responses in the same type of communicative events in both languages needs to be compared.

### Conversational pre-sequences

American indirectness has been found by conversation analysts to often take the form of 'pre-sequences' in conversational structure.<sup>3</sup> Pre-sequencing is the use of preliminary or prefacing statements to projected speech acts and includes

varieties such as pre-requests (Merritt, 1976), pre-invitations (Atkinson & Drew, 1979), and pre-announcements (Terasaki, 1976). An example of a pre-invitation in English is:

- 1 R: Hi John  
 2 C: How ya doin-say what'r you doing?  
 3 R: Well we're going out. Why?  
 4 C: Oh, I was just gonna say come out and come over here an'  
 5 talk this evening, but if you're going out you can't very  
 6 well do that

Pre-sequences allow a speaker to test the waters, to see how a request or invitation will be received in order to avoid refusals or rejections. As discussed by Levinson (1983: 359), pre-sequences are a form of indirect speech which makes it possible for speakers to avoid performing direct conversational actions. Strategies of this sort are used by many Americans as face-saving maneuvers. This is rather unconscious behaviour, however, and many people fail to see it as a form of indirectness in conversation.

### Unanchored ostensives

In English there are conventions for the use of referring words such as 'this', 'these', 'them', and 'there'. As Gumperz, Aulakh & Kaltman (1982: 46) point out, English ostensives and temporal and spatial locatives such as these need to be 'anchored' in conversation when they refer to items not in the presence of both speakers, and there are conventions about how much and what sort of material can come between a referring word and its referent. A listener recovers the absence of information through his knowledge of the situation, the preceding talk, and what lexical items are present. The rules for ostensive use of the Japanese words *kore* (this), *sore* (that), and *are* (that) are good examples of *unanchored* ostensives. In the case of *are* (that), it is often used in conversation to refer to something that was mentioned hours or even days beforehand. Americans accustomed to having different rules for the use of unanchored words such as *are* (that) may consider this use indirect or ambiguous. In the following example, *are* refers to something which presumed upon prior shared information:

- 1 N: *Are ka na?*  
 (Is it that?)  
 2 L: *Um so salsa*  
 (yeah, that's right, the salsa) (Miller, 1988)

In the context in which this was said, there had been no reference to salsa that day, yet N's use of *are* was nevertheless not ambiguous or indirect. The speakers shared a background (they had eaten it together), and there was a disambiguating context (N was holding a bowl of it). In English, one would anchor the word 'that' to something else, such as 'that stuff', 'that salsa', 'that hot junk we

ate', and so on. English speakers sometimes have idiosyncratic repertoires of nonsense words that are used to anchor ostensives, including 'thingamajig', 'doohickey', and 'whatchmucallit'. Someone accustomed to an anchored ostensive might easily view its use alone as somehow vague.

### Syntactic and discourse structure

We rely on what has been called discourse structure (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982) or content organisation (Scollon & Scollon, 1981) to interpret talk and to recognise communicative tasks such as persuading, giving advice, or instructing. Discourse structure will indicate what the most important idea is, what is old or new information, and what the speaker's point of view is. We use this knowledge, together with the placement of utterances in conversation, to recognise when someone is performing some communicative task, such as asking a question or giving a refusal.

Some types of ostensible indirectness are simply the result of a difference in expressive flexibility between Japanese and English syntactic and discourse structure. Japanese sentences allow for constructions in which some words have more meaning packed into them so that other information, which might actually be obligatory in English, can be left implicit. Explicitly said referents are not always needed, because the listener recovers the implicit information through a knowledge of the situation, topicalisation, the preceding talk, word order, and what lexical items are present. One grammarian refers to this in her discussion of the 'specificity' of Japanese verbs (McClain, 1981: 19). This means that many Japanese verbs carry a semantic load that is only accomplished through the use of more than one word in English. An example is the English verb 'to wear' which can be used with objects such as dress, hat, shoes, ring, tie, glasses, scarf, badge and wrist watch, but in Japanese the verbs *kimasu*, *kaburimasu*, *hakimasu*, *hanemasu*, *shimemasu*, *kakemasu*, *makimasu*, *tsukemasu* and *shimasu* are used for the corresponding objects. In the following sentence there is a zero-pronoun for the subject:

*keki o meshiagarimasu*  
(he) eats cake

In this sentence it is obvious from the use of this particular verb that the subject of the sentence is not the speaker, but is someone who is a social superior, yet the absence of a stated pronoun poses no problem in understanding and does not result in an 'indirect' sentence. An American speaker, however, with a model of English syntax in mind, may well view it as indirect because there is often no explicitly-stated pronoun or other named subject.<sup>4</sup>

Another example of seeming indirectness is the use of the second and first person pronouns *anata* (you) and *watashi* (me, I) in most informal conversations.<sup>5</sup> Americans learning Japanese often begin their sentences with *watashi wa* or *anata wa* because they are habituated to their essential presence in English. English requires the use of these pronouns in many cases, and speakers will

overuse Japanese pronouns and other implicit subjects, and end up sounding extremely direct, and even rude, when they do so.

The absence of some types of information in Japanese, however, does not always mean that the resulting sentence is indirect. Indeed, in some cases where there is very little information, the utterance can still be very direct for other reasons. Consider this sentence:

*hayaku yoku naru zo*  
hurry up and get better

(from a TV commercial)

According to Cook (1987: 125) and Ueno (1971: 74) the sentence final particle *zo* has the meaning of affective intensity, directness and strong insistence, so that despite the fact that this sentence has an implicit subject, with *zo* attached it produces a statement with an almost dogmatic ring to it.

Content organisation is often based on what knowledge is assumed to be understood by participants, and refers to what is actually said and what is left up to the listener to infer. Talk which contains more information or has more content than a hearer expects will result in an impression of verbosity, directness or aggressiveness. Talk which contains less information than is normally expected will give the listener a feeling of evasiveness and ambiguity. Spoken Japanese, therefore, can appear almost cryptic to English speakers because so many particles, verbs, subjects and personal pronouns are omitted. Likewise, an American's talk which contains more information than is usually expected will appear rather direct. Many researchers have an English-centred view of Japanese, in which anytime the language does not behave in English-like ways, it is thought of as intuitive or indirect.

### Obligatory conventions and formulaic expressions

What we call direct or indirect communication also relates to the matter of reliance on formulaic expressions or on obligatory convention. This is what some linguists describe as conversational implicature or indirect speech acts (Grice, 1975). Hearers understand what is said not only because of the literal meaning of what is said, but also from what is implicated in these 'indirect speech acts'. Indirect speech acts usually take a conventional form so that the underlying proposition can be interpreted without difficulty. Levinson (1983: 264) notes that indirect speech acts are rather common in English, as when 'the imperative is very rarely used to issue requests in English, instead we tend to employ sentences that only indirectly do requesting'. An example is found in the movie *The Return of the Pink Panther*, when Inspector Clouseau asks someone on the street 'Do you know where the Palace Hotel is?' The passerby answers 'Yes' and walks off. The sequence is amusing because there is a convention in English of understanding 'Do you know where X is' as really meaning 'Please tell me where X is'.

The absence of explicit information is common in both Japanese and English



when there is a cultural setting or situation in which there is shared background information, called ellipses, or when a formulaic expression is always used and expected. In this last case, only part of the formulaic expression need be said. I once attended a fund-raising party for a Sumo stable or training academy in Osaka. The *oyakata* or head of this particular school had just been pledged a huge sum of money. Facing a group of his patrons, who were standing in a circle sipping cocktails, he expressed his gratitude with just such an abbreviated expression. He inclined his head slightly, and while making a gesture with his hand using a circular movement extending outward away from his chest, he mumbled

*Iroiro* ...  
various

The part of the expression to be supplied by the patron would have been something such as:

*iroiro o sewa ni narimashita*  
(I'm indebted to you for various things)

Any ambiguity in his use of *iroiro* would arise only for a hypothetical hearer who was not aware that a statement of gratitude was customary and expected in a situation like this. The truncated form did not, therefore, really represent any truly ambiguous sentence.

### Directness and Indirectness in Conversations Between Japanese and Americans

Do these differences in how directness is expressed cause problems in intercultural interactions? We know that there are mutual stereotypes that Japanese and Americans hold about each other regarding relative indirectness. Perhaps through the examination of naturally-occurring talk, it is possible to locate some specific differences in discourse structure, misunderstandings about the communicative task, and other linguistic means for displaying indirectness, which may be the basis for these seemingly logical, yet nevertheless mistaken interpretations. In this section I will examine some conversations which were transcribed from videotapes made of interactions between American and Japanese co-workers in Tokyo.

In my observations and recordings, I found that speakers of both languages move between being relatively direct to relatively indirect in their talk, unconsciously changing both structure and content to suit the context and the local needs of the ongoing talk. What was most intriguing was that, although I found no instances of Japanese being consistently indirect and Americans being consistently direct, participants themselves may have later characterised the interactions that way.

In this first exchange, misunderstanding about the context, the type of com-

municative task being performed, and some of the preface markers in negative responses resulted in misinterpretation. As a result, the Japanese interpreted the American's behaviour as pushy and aggressive, while the American interpreted the Japanese behaviour as evasive and non-committed. Participants each used rationally arrived at, yet mistaken interpretations of the others' behaviour.

This conversation took place at an advertising agency between an American copywriter named Ember (E), and one of his Japanese co-workers named Nakada (N). This sequence is part of a longer conversation in which they are talking about several different ads and the English copy for them which Ember has written. This segment is part of a discussion they are having about one ad in particular:

#### Data segment 1

- 1 E: I mean yuh can see through it right  
2 you don't have to use your imagination you can  
3 see every little thing so- (it's) right  
4 (it) plays off the-the visual  
5 (leaves) nothing to the imagination ((whispered))  
6 (.05)  
7 N: <hss:> Is that so?  
8 (.02)  
9 N: idea is cl-very clear to me // (now) //  
10 E: //no:w//  
11 N: this video can do everything  
12 E: =do *everything*  
13 (.08)  
14 N: But too much pitch for the vih (hehh) sual  
15 E: too mu (hhahh) ch? //No no no no//  
16 N: //too much visual//no?  
17 E: no (.) no I don't think so  
18 (.02)  
19 N: ((smacks lips)) (hhh) maybe  
20 E: (maybe?)  
21 N: ye//ahh//  
22 E: //I thin// I think it's okay

In this part of the conversation Ember is explaining how the ad copy 'works' and what he's trying to do with the ad, which is followed by a silence (Line 6). Nakada produces an inbreathed fricative (Line 7) and then asks 'Is that so?' He says that while the idea for the ad makes sense (Lines 9 and 11), the ad puts too much emphasis on its visual component (Line 14). After Ember's explanation ended in Line 5, some type of assessment or comment would have been appropriate. Instead, the silence, Nakada's hiss and question, and his reasons for not liking the ad copy together constitute what was described earlier as a typical negative response structure or a 'dispreferred response'. In other words,

Nakada does not like this particular ad. Indeed, at the end of this conversation he tells Ember that the other ad copy he has written is fine, but to 'think about' this one a little more. In Japanese conversation, *kangaete okimashô* ('let's think about it') is a formulaic expression which often means 'it won't do' or 'this isn't right'. By telling Ember to 'think about it' Nakada may be using this English expression as though it has the same function as *kangaete okimashô*, and that it will be interpreted accordingly (as a rejection). Nakada's closing instructions to Ember reveal one of the misunderstandings present during their conversation. Ember thinks the meeting with Nakada is for the purpose of explaining the English copy to a Japanese co-worker who may not understand the nuances of the English used. Because he thinks the interaction is for the explanation of his ideas for the ads, he sees nothing rude or impertinent about expressing his opinions freely. This assumption is seen in his disagreement with Nakada's negative remark of Line 14 with his own opinion in Lines 15 and 17. That Ember thinks he is expressing an opinion is also clear in Line 22's 'I think it's okay'. A few days after this conversation took place Ember was in fact surprised when he learned that this particular ad had been put aside. He most likely had interpreted Nakada's 'maybe' in Line 19 and 'yeah' of Line 21 as possibly showing a change of opinion. He also did not understand Nakada's suggestion to 'think about it' as a type of refusal, otherwise he would not have been surprised when the ad was in fact turned down. Nakada, however, thought the meeting with Ember was for the purpose of telling him which ads had been selected for use and which should go back to the drawing board. In this context of what he thought the interaction was for (giving instructions), Ember's 'no's of Lines 15 and 17 are the type of response many Japanese speakers would be likely to interpret as too direct a form of disagreement, rather than the expression of a differing opinion which Ember intended.

Much interethnic misunderstanding or miscommunication is of this type—which may be called pragmatic misunderstanding (Miller, 1994). In these cases participants draw conclusions and make interpretations that differ from those of other participants. As past research on interethnic communication has shown (Gumperz, 1982; Scollon & Scollon, 1981), participants often analyse pragmatic misunderstandings not as the result of cultural and linguistic differences, but rather attribute them to stereotyped, ethnic character traits.

In this conversation between an American (P) and two of his Japanese co-workers (T & K), we can see many of these features of directness and indirectness expressed in talk which switches back and forth between both languages.

#### Data segment 2A

- 1 P: What about more posters? (.01) *dame?*  
(no good)
- 2 T: No no no
- 3 P: No no no? Yokohama?
- 4 T: Yokoha:ma: s-station e-I think enough
- 5 P: What about *densha no naka posuta dame?*

(posters in trains, no good?)

- 6 T: *Densha no naka no posuta wa supésu ne . . .*  
(As far as posters inside trains go, the space is . . .)
- 5 P: um
- 6 T: *so*  
(like that)
- 7 P: *hai*  
(yes)
- 8 T: *Kore eki fuyasu? (.) jûhachi station*  
(Shall we increase stations on this one? 18 stations?)
- 9 *Kore jûbun dakara ne*  
(Because this is plenty)
- 10 K: *Jûbun deshô*  
(It's probably enough)
- 11 T: Enough
- 12 P: Enough
- 13 T: Enough
- 14 (?) I think so
- 15 (?) um
- 16 P: What about radio?
- 17 T: *Radio nihyakunijûman dekiru ka?*  
(Can we do radio with 2,200,000 yen)
- (a few minutes interim of talk about radio)
- 18 P: Not enough
- 19 (.03)
- 20 Hehheh you're so happy to get // rid of radio //
- 21 T: //dame dame dame//dame dame

(no good, no good, no good, no good, no good)

Tanaka's 'no no no' of Line 2 is expressing his negative opinion about using more posters. Tanaka and Penn have a close working relationship and are fellow members of a group, and therefore Tanaka shows no reluctance in expressing his opinion by repeating 'no'. Penn wants to explore the options for potential advertising, such as magazines, posters, or radio, but Tanaka has already formed a decision, and consistently disagrees with Penn by offering reasons why his suggestions are untenable. One strategy he uses to disagree is to bring attention to what is supposedly obvious and self-evidently damning information. In Line 6 he leaves the sentence incomplete and up to Penn to figure out. The part left unsaid is something such as (*supésu ga semai kara, chotto muri desu* (It's impossible because the space is too narrow')). The implication here is that one need not specify the obvious thing about the space. And Penn understands this without difficulty (Lines 5 and 7).

Tanaka's strategy is also seen in his use of *dakara* (literally 'therefore' or 'because of that'). *Dakara* is often used to refer to what is implicitly understood, and in this case Tanaka assumes that eighteen stations is obviously a sufficient number.<sup>7</sup> Coupled with the sentence particle *ne*, which functions to stress it, *dakara* has a flavour of strong opinion. Kaga comes to Tanaka's aid with the

*jūbun deshō* of Line 10, which indicates his own support and agreement with Tanaka's opinion. By using it here Kaga is making a point about how the sufficiency of posters in stations should be obvious. It is possible that Penn is being obdurate and is trying to get his own way in this interaction. It is more likely, however, that some of these methods of manipulation of the discourse structure for indicating strong opinions (by attaching sentence final forms, sentence particles and through deletions) are lost on him, for he continues to inquire about posters in train stations throughout the tape.

At the end of this segment, Tanaka is directly expressing a negative evaluation, both verbally and nonverbally. While he is saying *dame* ('no good') repeatedly, he is making a gesture of pushing something down and away. Figuratively he is getting rid of the idea of radio which he is opposed to. *Dame* is a direct expression used in the same situations in which an American would say 'no' (for example, when a dog is about to chew something up, or a child is about to grab a fragile object).

There next follows talk about posters in train stations. Penn gets a chart of train stations which indicates travellers by sex and area. Although he has abandoned the idea of radio by now, he still wants to pursue the possibility of putting up more posters and brings this topic up again. The three discuss the possibilities of various stations in the Tokyo area, and Penn suggests they use Shinagawa station:

#### Data segment 2B

- 22 T: *Shinagawa iranai yo, Shinagawa* // ( ) //  
(We don't need Shinagawa, Shinagawa)  
23 K: // (inaudible) //  
54 P // *Iranai?* //  
(We don't need it?)  
25 T: *Iranai iranai*  
(We don't need it, we don't need it)  
26 K: *Iranai*  
(We don't need it)

In Line 22 Tanaka explicitly expresses his negative opinion about using Shinagawa station. This utterance is understood from the context as a shortened version of *Shinagawa eki ni posuta mo iranai* ('We don't need any more posters in Shinagawa station'). The sentence particle *yo* serves to emphasise and insist on this opinion. Kamio (1979: 214) suggests that *yo* makes utterances more direct and definite, almost purposeful in character. According to Ueno (1971: 101-9) *yo* expresses the speaker's insistence and forces information on the recipient as a claim, advice or a warning. Penn could be disagreeing with Tanaka and ignoring the insistence the *yo* implies. Another interpretation is that he did not 'hear' the insistence that the *yo* carried, and continues to query them in the talk which follows.

Throughout the talk Tanaka and Kaga have been giving their negative

Table 2 Japanese and American indirectness

<i>Linguistic differences</i>	<i>Resulting interpretations and stereotypes</i>
Japanese Use of markers or prefaces in negative responses	seen as marked, unique type of indirectness
American Use of pre-sequences and markers or prefaces in negative responses	often not recognised as a form of indirectness
Japanese discourse structure allows zero-form	seen as intuitive, ambiguous, indirect
American discourse structure requires information (such as pronouns, subjects, etc)	interpreted as direct
Japanese use of unanchored ostensives ( <i>kore, sore, are</i> ) and spatial locatives ( <i>asoko, sochira, achira</i> )	interpreted as indirect, vague, ambiguous
American use of anchored ostensives and spatial locatives	interpreted as direct, straightforward
Japanese use of words other than <i>ie</i> (literally 'no') to show negation	seen as never saying no, always indirect
American use of 'no' alone or together with other negating words	seen as always saying no, straightforward, direct, argumentive

opinions to Penn, who takes these in stride and continues to prod them for reasons and specific details. We have a sense of back-and-forth argumentation which is said to be a characteristic of American, but not of Japanese, communicative style. These co-workers work in a small, tightly-organised office. During my observations I was impressed by the ambience of closeness which typified their interactions with each other, and with all the other workers in the office. As Nakane (1970) and Rohlen (1974) point out, co-workers are a part of *uchi* ('inside'). One reason for the directness used in this interaction is the closeness of their relationship.<sup>6</sup>

Table 2 summarises some linguistic and pragmatic differences in indirectness discussed above which are available to speakers of each language, and the stereotypes they may give rise to.



### Conclusion

The psychologist and interpreter of Japanese interpersonal behaviour, Doi, stated that 'Japanese just don't talk much' (1974: 22). If this were indeed always the case, why would the Japanese language contain metapragmatic expressions such as *dannari senjutsu*, to give someone the 'silent treatment?' Indeed, if Japanese speakers were always in the habit of speaking in oblique and indirect ways, we would not expect there to be many metapragmatic expressions that refer to speech behaviour that is indirect or ambiguous. However, just as there are in English, there are ways to refer to speech or behaviour that is 'marked' as somehow more indirect than what is normally expected or desirable. Some examples in Japanese are:

*hanashi o sorasu* 'to aver the talk'

to sidetrack, dodge, elude

to change the subject

*kotoba o bokasu* 'to shade the talk'

to refuse to come out and say

*tsukamidokoro no nai* 'no place to grab onto'

to be vague, unclear

*gen o sayū ni suru* 'make the talk sway'

to equivocate, to hedge

*ocha o nigosu* 'make the tea muddy'

to talk ambiguously, pussyfoot around.

The existence of these terms and others like them suggests that being indirect or ambiguous is recognisable, marked speech behaviour in Japanese that is different from ordinary talk. Likewise, both English and Japanese have terms and expressions for talk that is considered too direct.

The essential point is that people are not cultural beings who are always either direct or indirect, and neither direct speech nor indirect speech are necessarily a regular, inherent aspect of any language, but are speech behaviours employed in some contexts for particular interactive functions. Too often we engage in a reductionist approach to Japanese and American communicative behaviour, in which we first posit some pre-existing phenomena, such as individuality, conformity, indirectness, and so on, as though it were social fact, and then search for it in interviews, questionnaires, and otherwise scan our world only seeing what we are looking for.

In addition, the habit of focusing on and stressing features that are polar opposites, especially in the *nihonjinron* literature,<sup>8</sup> may be directing our attention to phenomena that, even if they were correctly identified, may not be very important or significant in many interethnic interactions. And if important, we will want to know what actual behaviour leads one to characterise another as either direct or indirect. Rather than describe *groups* as either verbal or nonverbal, we should instead specify those situations in which there are cultural differences in expectations of volubility and silence.

Because writers have emphasised the importance of social harmony in

Japanese society, and individualism in American society, they assume that these differences are reflected in all talk. We should be wary, however, of presuming that certain cultural features have paramount explanatory relevance. Japanese do value social harmony, and this is reflected in many types of communicative behaviour. Americans do value individuality, and this is reflected in many types of interaction. But both cultures also value 'saving face' through the avoidance of direct refusals or rejections, and this is reflected in the similar way that dispreferred responses are structured.

It is too simplistic to simply claim 'they are opposite of us'. Rather, we should specify what the particular situations are in which differences emerge and matter. I have tried to indicate what resources exist in each language to show directness or indirectness, and what the differences in preference for use are. The stereotypes which exist are not the result of a simple dichotomy in communicative behaviour, but are more often based on subtle cultural and linguistic differences, which are always situationally based, and when there are different assumptions and understanding about the nature of an interaction.

### Notes

1. This is based on a section of my dissertation (Miller 1988) and was presented as a paper at the 1992 Mid-Atlantic Region Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting. I would like to thank Linda Chance, Masakazu Iino and Don McCreary for their comments and suggestions.
2. Imai (1981) has also written about the Japanese way to say no.
3. Levinson (1983: 356) also discusses pre-sequences as an aspect of indirectness.
4. In fact, Martin (1975: 185) claims that 74% of all Japanese subjects are omitted in conversation.
5. Rubin (1992) has written a wonderfully funny and realistic discussion of this in his guide for language learners.
6. Interestingly, some native Japanese speakers who view this videotape claim that the only reason the two Japanese co-workers are so direct is because they are talking to a foreigner.
7. Kamio (1979: 215) says that a speaker who uses *deshō* assumes that the hearer already knows what he is saying.
8. McCreary (1992) discusses how the *nihonjinron* stance has resulted in some rather biased linguistic analyses.

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