

Communication and Style Shift in Japanese

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1. Introduction

Language is used to serve a variety of different needs. As is commonly acknowledged, we use language to think, to communicate and to get things done. In this paper, I will take a fresh look at the relationship between language and communication, through an analysis of the two basic speech styles in Japanese, viz. *daliu* style and *desumasu* style¹, in terms of ‘intention to represent’ and ‘intention to communicate’.

The concept of style in Japanese is complex. Unlike English and many other languages, there is no neutral style, and every use of the Japanese language requires a stylistic choice. For a given situation one style may be more appropriate, expected, normal, and unmarked, but that same style will be most inappropriate and surprising if used in some other situation (Jordan and Noda 1987: 32). The speaker’s communicative attitude is signaled with the use of communication marker and/or sentence particle.

Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the communicative aspects of the dichotomous style system in Japanese linguistics. Following the works by Halliday (1970), Bierwisch (1980) and Searle (1983) on language and communication, it will be demonstrated that Japanese utterances in *daliu* style represent the speaker’s thought, knowledge or feelings, but carries no communication intentions, while those with *desumasu* marker and/or sentence particles embody interpersonal/communicative intentions.

2. Halliday’s Theory of Language Function

Halliday (1970: 143), in discussing his theory of language, identified the following three functions of language:

- (1) a. Ideational Function: Language serves for the expression of ‘content’: that is, of the speaker’s experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness.
- b. Interpersonal Function: Language serves to establish and maintain social relations: for the expression of social roles, which include the communication roles created by language itself—for example the roles of questioner and respondent, which we take on by asking or answering a question; and also for getting things done, by means of the interaction between one person and another.
- c. Textual Function: Language has to provide for making links with itself and with features of the situation in which it is used. One aspect of the textual function is the establishment of cohesive relations from one sentence to another in a discourse.

Among the three functions above, the third one, (1 c), has no direct bearing on the theme of the paper. It is Halliday’s identification and distinction of (1 a) and (1 b) that is of crucial importance to the functional analysis of the basic Japanese speech styles.

3. Representation versus Communication

3.1 Bierwisch’s Distinction between Language and Communication

Bierwisch (1980) argues for the importance of basic distinction between language and communication. For him, (i) natural language is the most important means of human communication, and (ii) communication is the primary objective of language use, but (iii) they must nevertheless clearly be distinguished for at least three reasons. His argument goes as follows:

- (2) First, there is a wide variety of cases where language is used outside of any communicative interaction. Clarifying one’s thought by monologues or using language as an external memory by making notes are just two examples, which cannot be explained in terms of communication in any serious way, but are still fully-fledged instances of lan-

guage use.

Second, even if there were no language use outside of communication, one would nevertheless have to admit that there is a large amount of communication which is not based on language at all, for example, hand-shake and other non-verbal behaviors.

Third, the linguistic and the communicative aspect are determined by different and largely independent principles and rules even in clear-cut cases of verbal communication. In other words, language and communication are based on different systems of knowledge. Under certain conditions you may therefore understand very well what someone wants to communicate without understanding what he says, and you may in other cases understand what someone says without understanding what he wants to communicate.

Birewisch's contention is taken up and developed in Searle (1983), as shown in the next section.

3.2. Searle's Theory of Language Use

Searle (1983: 165–166), in his discussion of philosophy of mind, makes the distinction between representation and communication:

- (3) We need to have a clear distinction between representation and communication. Characteristically a man who makes a statement both intends to represent some fact or state of affairs and intends to communicate this representation to his hearers. But his representing intention is not the same as his communication intention. Communication is a matter of producing certain effects on one's hearers, but one can intend to represent something without caring at all about the effects on one's hearers. . . . There are, therefore, two aspects to meaning intentions, the intention to represent and the intention to communicate. The traditional discussion of these problems, my own work included, suffers from failure to distinguish between them and from the assumption that the whole account of meaning can be given in terms of communication intentions. On the present assumption, representation is prior to communication and representing intentions are prior to communication intentions. Part of what one communicates is the content of one's representations, but one can intend to represent something without intending to communicate.

Searle's distinction between the 'intention to represent' and the 'intention to communicate' is probably universal. Most linguistic utterances have both functions. What is most notable in (3), however, is the final sentence, 'one can intend to represent something without intending to communicate.' It opens up new vistas for our analysis of the form and function of the Japanese basic speech styles.

4. Speech Styles in Japanese

Any JFL (Japanese as a foreign language) or JSL (Japanese as a second language) textbook tells you that Japanese has various speech styles. The following list shows some of the Japanese expressions equivalent to 'That's right,' in English.

- (4) a. Sono tori da. b. Sono tori desu. c. Sono tori da yo.
 d. Sono tori da ne. e. Sono tori yo. f. Sono tori ne.
 g. Sono tori de aru. h. Sono tori de arimasu. i. Sono tori de gozaimasu.

Although there is a general agreement about the existence of different speech styles in Japanese, their classification and nomenclature differs widely among scholars and textbook writers. Some linguists go so far as to talk about "the messy reality of style shifting" (Jones and Ono 2008).

Here, I will not be concerned with all of the styles, but concentrate on the basic distinction between *dalilu* and *desu/masu* forms. But before moving on to discuss the nature and function of the two forms, let us look at various labels used in current literature and classrooms.

- (5) a. *dalilu*: plain, non-polite, informal, direct
 b. *desu/masu*: polite, (addressee) honorific/humble, formal, distal

I will henceforth adopt the terms ‘direct-style’ and ‘distal-style,’ which are used in Jordan and Noda (1987).

The popular assumption about the direct-style vs. distal-style dichotomy in Japanese predication is that it is politeness-based. I do not subscribe to such a view and argue that the choice between the two styles is not politeness-motivated, but linguistically-based. Compare the form and function of the following pairs of sentences:

- (6) a. Sore wa uso da. [Subject + Predicate Nominal + Copula]
 that TOP lie COP
 b. Sore wa uso desu. [Subject + Predicate Nominal +CM²]
 that TOP lie CM
 ‘That’s a lie’
- (7) a. Kono ocha wa oishii. [Subject + Adjective]
 this tea TOP tasty
 b. Kono ocha wa oishii-desu. [Subject + Adjective +CM]
 this tea TOP tasty be CM
 ‘This tea is tasty’
- (8) a. Taifu ga kuru. [Subject + Verb]
 typhoon NM come
 b. Taifu ga ki-mas-u. [Subject + Verb +CM]
 typhoon NM come-CM
 ‘A typhoon is coming’

The direct-style expressions, (6 a), (7 a) and (8 a), have the form of [subject + predicate], while the distal-style expressions, (6 b), (7 b) and (8 b), have the form of [subject + predicate + *masu/desu*]. The (a) versions, lacking a communication marker, are simply representations of the speaker’s judgment, opinion or knowledge. The (b) versions with a communication marker attached to the predicate embody both representation and communication.

5. Direct-Style

5.1 Form

As we saw in Section 4, direct-style expressions have the simple form of [subject + predicate]. The list in (9) shows direct-style predicate types and their English translation:

(9) Direct-style predicate types		
category	example	English
PN ³	<i>Onaji da.</i>	‘It’s the same’
PP ⁴	<i>Kyoto kara da.</i>	‘It’s from Kyoto’
Adjectival	<i>Ookii.</i>	‘It’s big’
Verbal	<i>Chigau.</i>	‘It’s different’ ⁵

Da, the direct-style copula, occurs immediately following a predicate nominal (PN) or a postpositional particle (PP), but never follows an adjectival; *i* is the final vowel sound of an adjectival, and *u* is the final vowel sound of a verbal.

5.2 Distribution

The direct-style (imperfective, affirmative) form is the unmarked, dictionary (citation) form, which is used at the end of a sentence as well as in a subordinate clause. It is the final part of the main clause that is reserved for communication markers, if any. The communication marking takes place only on the main predicate of a sentence. There is no need for subordinate predicate marking, since they do not constitute an utterance by itself. If the distal-style is used in a subordinate clause, the whole expression sounds awkward (hyper-correction or foreigner-talk).

- (10) a. Taifu ga kuru to omoi-masu.
 typhoon NM come LK think-CM

- 'I think a typhoon is coming'
 b. ?Taifu ga ki-masu to omoi-masu.
 typhoon come-CM LK think-CM

As will be shown below the direct-style form acquires communication function when *desu/masu* marker and/or a sentence particle/particles are added. It is how a sentence as a whole ends that decides its communicative style.

5.3 Function

A direct-style speech is not officially addressed to anybody: the form ending with *da/i/ru* is not for public interaction. It is essentially a private expression of the speaker's inner thought, knowledge or feelings, uttered for self-confirmation, complacency or satisfaction. It is like a monologue, but not exactly the same. A monologue is addressed to oneself, while a direct-style speech, though frequently uttered in the presence of others, has no addressee. While a monologue expects no response from others, a direct-style speech may, regardless of its lack of communication intentions, elicit a response or start a conversation.

The form provides a means for a speaker to represent his/her thoughts, knowledge or feelings without any interpersonal consideration. What is communicated by a direct-style discourse, then, is only the content of one's representation (in the sense of Searle) or ideational content (in the sense of Halliday). The form does not carry communication intentions (in the sense of Searle), or interpersonal function (in the sense of Halliday).

To communicate means, in Latin, to 'share with others.' We talk to others in order to share thoughts, information, knowledge and feelings with them. The use of direct-style discourse is not 'communication' in the strict sense of the word, but it does not intentionally hide, suppress or reserve one's thoughts, either. Whether or not, or how, a person/persons within the hearing range, without being ostensibly addressed, will respond to a direct-style utterance is another matter. The content of the message may get communicated without the speaker's commitment to communication.

5.4 Double-edged Nature of Interpersonal Effects

A direct-style speech may sound abrupt or impolite. This is something that is expected because the form itself lacks communication intentions/interpersonal function. Hence comes the impression of inconsiderateness for others. For this reason most EFL/ESL textbooks avoid introducing the form in the early stages, in spite of the fact that it is the basic (citation/dictionary) form of Japanese predicates. The direct-style is hence not suitable for usage in out-group conversation, or in front of superiors, elders or strangers, who may be upset, and think that the speaker is rude, disrespectful, uncourteous or impudent.

Seen in different light, the direct-style sounds casual and friendly when used among in-group: the form sends out the metamessage of solidarity and rapport, to the effect, 'We can communicate without the formalities.' The direct-style is thus the normal and expected way of speech among family members and close friends, or in situations when one does not need to stand on ceremony.

6. Distal-style

Distal-style predication ending with *desu/masu* is the base-line, canonical form, which is normally the first form taught to learners of Japanese. This speech is more generally acceptable for anybody anywhere than the direct style. Functionally, *desu/masu* are communication markers for verbals.; they serve to add the speaker's communication (interpersonal) intentions to an utterance, signaling that the speaker is showing solicitude toward the addressee, and is maintaining some linguistic distance from him/her.

Speaking in distal-style is to take a less direct and more formal attitude, showing a sign of deference to the addressee. This is in contrast to speaking in direct-style. To talk directly means to act intimately or friendly, but at the same time, to act abruptly or carelessly. Just as the direct-style speech is a double-sided sword, so is the distal-style speech: the participants maintain a certain distance, which in turn sends a metamessage that they do not speak to each other as close friends or intimates.

Whether or not a particular predicate is distal-style is precisely and easily determined: you only need to look at the main predicate and see if it ends in *desu/masu*.

7. Sentence Particles

A sentence-particle is one of a small group of words that occurs at the end of a sentence. It serves to add a communicative force to the sentence. A direct-style speech thus acquires an interpersonal communicative function by the addition of a sentence particle. The following are some of the sentence particles in common use in standard Japanese⁶. (The question marker *ka* is excluded here, since it is not directly related to our concern.)

A: *yo*

Yo is called ‘informative sentence-particle’, ‘informative particle,’ or ‘a particle of assertion.’ It is used to provide assurances, contradictions, and warnings (to the addressee). *Yo* indicates that the speaker assumes s/he is providing the addressee with new information or a new suggestion:

Kore wa tane (da) yo⁷. ‘This is a seed, I inform you.’
this TOP seed COP

This particle should be avoided in those situations where an assertion becomes rude. In particular, its use in the presence of superiors requires caution.

B. *ne*

Ne is called a ‘confirmatory particle’, ‘sentence-particle of confirmation, agreement or deliberation’. The speaker seeks confirmation of an assumption s/he made; ‘right?’ ‘don’t you agree?’ ‘isn’t it?’ etc⁸.

Kore wa tane da ne. ‘This is a seed, as I think about it’
this TOP seed COP

C. *wa*

Wa is ‘a particle of mild assertion’. It never follows tentative, consultative, or imperative forms:

Kore wa tane da wa. ‘This is a seed, I should say.’
this TOP seed COP

(These particles sometimes occur in combined forms as *yo ne*, *wa yo*, *wa ne*, etc.)

Sentences ending in *da/i/yo* followed by a particle/particle combination sound slightly blunt. They are acceptable for in-group (people close enough to the speaker to talk casually without solicitude) but are avoided in talking to out-group.

8. Performative Analysis

The expressions ‘I say to you,’ ‘I assure you,’ and ‘I inform you,’ in the above literal translation of the Japanese sentence remind us of the performative analysis proposed by Ross (1970). Ross’s claim that the performative verb is the highest predicate in the underlying abstract sentence, which is to be deleted in the course of syntactic derivation, has no longer an advocate, but we must recognize that Japanese distal-style verbal ending and sentence final particles do seem to possess the force of ‘I say to you,’ etc. A speaker uttering a communicative version of Japanese sentence is no doubt performing a locutionary act.

9. Style Shift and Subjective vs. Objective Predication

Style shift is part and parcel of Japanese communication. Complications do arise when politeness and honorific elements are taken into account, but we do not go into them here. In the preceding sections we have discussed the difference between the direct-style and the distal-style predication. A speaker may choose direct-style in talking to in-group, sending out the metamesage of intimate, friendly relationships, in order to get payoff in rapport. On the other hand, a direct-style speech may be considered uncivil in the presence of out-group: it may convey implicit message that the speaker has the upper hand, showing no solicitude about the affect of his/her language on others.

In this section we consider another important aspect of speech and writing, namely, the subjective versus objective predication. The direct-style, which is used to represent an ideational content without interpersonal, subjective elements, provides a means for an objective predication. This is also the reason why subordinate clauses are in direct style. A subordinate clause expresses a proposition, which is devoid of communication intention.

Let us look next at another major series of communication markers in Japanese, viz. *de-aruu/de-arimasu/de-gozaimas*.

They all sound ceremonial, stiff and somewhat old-fashioned but are in wide use in formal situations. *De-arimasu*, is often called the polite version of *de-aruu* (cf. Makino and Tsutusi 2008: 35). However, the politeness level of the two forms is the same. The difference between the two is based on communication intention rather than politeness. If one wants to be super polite one say *de-gozaimasu*.

De-aruu form is used for objective predication in scientific and scholarly writings, where there is no room for subjectivity, while the *de-arimasu*, though found in some formal business letters, is mainly used in public speeches. Let us compare the following five Japanese sentences, which are all translated as ‘this is important.’

- (11) a. Kore wa juyo de-aruu.
 b. Kore wa juyo da.
 c. Kore wa juyo desu.
 d. Kore wa juyo de-arimasu.
 e. Kore wa juyo de-gozaimasu.

They share the structure, [N (this) TOP (wa) N (important) be]. The only difference lies in the presentation style: (11a) with *de-aruu* is an objective statement, (11b) with direct-style embodied in *da* is a representation of the speaker’s opinion without communication intentions, and (11c) with distal-style marker *desu* embodies both representation and communication of the speaker’s opinion. In (11d), *de-arimasu* indicates a formal speech comprising representation and communication of the speaker’s opinion. In (11e), which contains the same message as (11d), the honorific morphology (*-gozai-*) signals the speaker’s respectful attitude toward the addressee⁹.

It is noteworthy that, of all the style markers in Japanese, *de-aruu* is the only one suitable for objective, scientific writings. Mori (1979) maintains that the subject of *de-aruu* predicate is presented as a third-person. This means that, even if *I* or *you* is the actual subject, it is treated as a part of an objective description. *De-aruu* is hence reserved for objective, scientific predications, which exclude subjective, interpersonal elements¹⁰.

10. Style Shifting in English

The English language also has its own style differences. Joos (1961), for example, pointed out the five styles: frozen, formal, consultative, casual and intimate. But they are not as systematic as in Japanese. What is most important for our discussion here is that any speech in English inherently embodies communication force. Let us look at the following English sentences and their Japanese equivalents:

- (12) a. Ugh! You’ve been drinking again.
 b. Yada, mata nonde-kita no ne.
 ugh again drink return LK SP
- (13) a. Hey, you skipped the line.
 b. Kimi, warikomi wa dame da yo.
 you break-into TOP no-good COP SP
- (14) a. I’ll bring a little something for you.
 b. Chotto-shita presento o motte-iku yo.
 little present ACC bring SP

Imai (1995)

Comparison of the naturally occurring utterances in English and Japanese above, reveals that the Japanese versions all consist of a direct-style expression and a sentence particle. Without particle, they all lack communication intentions. English versions, on the other hands, are all inherently communicative. They do not need a communication marker nor a sentence particle as in Japanese. Sentences like (12a), (13a) and (14a) can be uttered to anybody: it does not matter if the addressee is a family member or a total stranger. Unlike Japanese, to utter an English sentence in front of others automatically means to share its content with them.

11. Direct-Style Utterance in Public

If you say something in English in public, it is addressed to the people around you. Proper response is expected. In Japa-

nese culture, however, it is not uncommon for people to utter a sentence addressed to nobody in the presence of others. Misunderstandings do occur if they do so in front of an English speaker, for instance. If you say, ‘I’m cold’ when you are out walking with an Englishman, he might respond by saying, ‘Shall I lend you my coat?’ You then would say, ‘Thank you. You are very kind, but I didn’t mean that.’ The problem here is that your spontaneous utterance is received as a personal communication. For him, an utterance in the company of others is a public speech requiring a response.

If you say the same thing in front of a Japanese person, his or her response would be, ‘Yes, it is, isn’t it?’ and that’s the end of the conversation. It is OK to keep uttering, *Samui* ‘I’m cold,’ many times in front of a Japanese person. It is simply a spontaneous response to a severe weather, not a plea to others to do something about it. It would be disastrous if you do the same thing in front of an English speaker. He or she would become annoyed with you and say, “Stop that, please. There is nothing I can do about it.” This is just one example, but it provides us with a crucial difference between a Japanese utterance and that of English (or other European languages).

The biggest reason for such an inter-cultural misunderstanding is that there is no style opposition in English equivalent to the opposition of direct-style and distal-style predication in Japanese. A Japanese person saying ‘I’m cold’ or ‘I’m afraid’ in front of others believes s/he is uttering a spontaneous direct-style sentence, without knowing that a similar expression in English carries a clear and definite communicative function.

12. Concluding Remarks

The analysis in this paper has significant implications for the analysis of Japanese communication styles. The present line of argument, for instance, provides a linguistically grounded account of the observations that Japanese people do not say ‘I love you’ so much as Americans or Europeans.

It is commonly thought that the Japanese equivalent of ‘I love you’ is *Aishite-(i)ru*. (There are other candidates such as *Sukida*, to which the present discussion applies just as well.) Many people have been puzzled and/or intrigued by the rarity of *Aishite-(i)ru* in everyday use, which exhibits a striking contrast to the frequent and regular usage of ‘I love you’ in English (and other major European languages).¹¹ Literature on this theme is found in such diverse disciplines as cultural anthropology, ethno-methodology and sociolinguistics. What they all amount to say is that Japanese are generally too shy to say, “I love you.”

However, the reason for the unpopularity of *Aishite-(i)ru* originates not so much in socio-cultural factors such as values, life style, and mentality, but in the basic structure of the Japanese language. Let us look at the following linguistics-based analysis of the direct-style and distal-style version of ‘I love you’ in Japanese:

- (15) a. *Aishite-(i)ru* is intimate and sincere-sounding utterance but it lacks communicative force (i.e. performative element of ‘I say to you’)
 b. *Aishite-imasu*, on the other hand, carry communicative intention but has not much appealing power, since *masu* carries a degree of formality and distance from the addressee.

This is yet another illustration of the fact that Japanese basic style shift is a double-edged sword. One form sends metamessage of intimacy/friendliness but lacks personal appeal, and the other form embodies a communicative intention but sounds distant and cold.

Lastly, one of the new trends in TV documentary narration is to employ direct-style discourse. For example, a narrator would say (16a), whereas a more traditional way of narration would be in distal-style like (16b):

- (16) a. Sono shigoto o makasareta no wa Tanaka Jiro da.
 that job ACC delegate-PAST LK TM is.
 b. Sono shigoto o makasareta no wa Tanaka Jiro desu.
 that job ACC delegate-PAST LK TM is.
 ‘They assigned the job to Jiro Tanaka’

Some people feel uncomfortable hearing (16a). To them, it sounds like a private talk and is unsuitable for a TV documentary. One of the reasons for the raise of discourses like (16a) is that *da*-style serves to present the bare fact without ‘dressing.’ They may sound fresh and modern to some people, just the same as the use of *jibun* ‘self’ as a first-person pronoun among new gen-

erations of Japanese (Hasegawa and Hirose 2005). But to those who are accustomed to the traditional speech style, both the narration in direct-style and the first-person use of *jibun* sound as if the speaker is talking private in public.

I have shown in this paper that the linguistic phenomena concerning communication and speech styles lie at the core of Japanese language and interaction. It is expected that this line of research will serve to shed further light on unsolved questions about socio-cultural aspects of language and communication.

Notes:

- 1 These are imperfective forms. They are changed into perfective forms by the addition of *-ta* morpheme.
- 2 Instead of the conventional practice of glossing *desu* and *masu* as polite style copula, I will gloss them as communication marker (CM).
- 3 Abbreviation for Predicate Nominal
- 4 Abbreviation for Postpositional Particle
- 5 Note that the lexical category of a Japanese word and its English translation are not always the same, e. g. Japanese *chigau* is a verb, but English *different* is an adjective.
- 6 There are many variations in dialects, which are outside the scope of this paper.
- 7 *Da* is an extremely unstable form which is dropped in a number of contexts.
- 8 Each sentence which ends with the particle *ne* conveys one of the three different meanings, and in many contexts more than one meanings are possible. The result is that different occurrences of an otherwise identical conversation may vary.
- 9 When the politeness degree is taken into account, the literal translation of (11e) would be ‘I say to you respectfully that this is important.’
- 10 The humorous title of Natsume Soseki’s famous novel, *Wagahai wa Neko De-aruu* (‘I am a cat’), is a self-introductory line spoken by a cat, at the beginning, which creates irony by being a most improper use of *de-aruu* style speech.
- 11 In popular songs, we hear a lot of phrases like *Aishite-iru* ‘I love you,’ and *Aishite-hosii* ‘I want you to love me’, but these belong to artistic expressions, not a part of everyday conversational Japanese.

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