The culture of concealment in Japanese society

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"The ideal condition of the mind ... is one in which we can feel comfortable having secrets" Takeo Doi (cited in Smith, 1997, p. 46).

A visitor to Japan at first finds comfort in many familiar signs of western civilization and much to admire in Japanese culture and art. Soon enough the quicksand of reality creates anxiety for the newcomer who begins to notice the paradoxes inherent in Japanese society.

A tourist will mostly find Japanese people polite, helpful and kind but occasionally Japanese will completely ignore a foreigner asking for directions. A package forgotten somewhere hours earlier will be found at the same location or at the police station. However, bicycles and umbrellas are often stolen. Honesty is highly appreciated but deceptive silence is the norm in social interactions where truth might reveal too much personal information.

There are many aspects of Japanese culture which inhibit and frustrate language acquisition. Much has been written about shyness, passivity, group censure and lack of individuality. These concepts have often been applied to the Japanese character although these assumptions deserve to be questioned. Of greater significance to this article is the cultural tendency to conceal and its implications in language learning.

History of concealment

As people living on an island with limited resources, Japanese learned to survive by working together to achieve common goals. To avoid conflict in society, a potentially life threatening situation in a village, people were willing to submit to loss of individual freedom of expression. Social order was maintained in rigid forms based on rank, gender etc. The goal of maintaining harmony at all costs became paramount, as did the stability of personal relationships.

These ethical values were raised to new heights during Japan's feudal era. Shoguns and

samurai left an indelible effect on Japanese consciousness.　Since survival meant hiding one's true feelings and surrendering one's ambitions, concealment was socially reinforced, sanctioned by religious praxis and philosophical thought.　Zen Buddhism taught samurai how to detach themselves from visible reality and find enlightenment within, while Confucian values emphasized their obedience, austerity, rigorous work ethic and suppression of self.

Oppression created a climate of fear in the middle ages and Japanese have not yet liberated themselves from this psychological condition.　Today, social rank still frequently defines behaviour as when business cards are exchanged in order to assess social importance and thus select the appropriate language expressions to avoid offending the other party (i. e. by not acknowledging their perceived superiority).

Smith (1997, p. 60) believes that Japan jumped from feudalism to the modern era abruptly without developing an understanding of real democracy.　He points out that although the American inspired constitution brought democracy to Japan the ruling political forces have made it ineffectual (Smith, p. 15-16).　As a result, Japanese continue to act the same as always, only revealing their true feelings to close friends — open public expression of feelings is still a taboo.

Hidden social differences

"Every Japanese wears a mask ... It is within the group that the Japanese put on their masks ... By wearing them, the Japanese signify to themselves that there are no differences among them, and that having no differences is part of what it means to be Japanese" (Smith, p. 40-42).

But differences do exist.　Smith suggests that Japanese have to hide their individuality because of group censure and offers the experience of Masao Miyamoto, a psychiatrist who suffered social ostracism while working in a bureaucratic role for the Ministry of Health. Having lived in America for 10 years before returning to Japan, he was unwilling to give up his individuality to fit in with his work group. Miyamoto writes (cited in Smith, p. 84), "You are allowed to have divergent thoughts as long as they are not publicly expressed."　In other words, democracy is internalized.

Bailey (1999, p. 189-192) points out that many Japanese are ashamed of their "invisible differences" — physical or mental handicaps, social problems such as divorce or even minor embarrassments such as dialects from remote regions.　Similarly, Japanese whose ancestors were Korean, Ainu, or Burakumin may suffer humiliation if their identity is revealed and, thus, try to hide their "shameful" differences.　Even the poor are ignored — "Society turns its back on the wretched and they become invisible" (p. 62).　As a consequence, mainstream

Japanese, who prefer to accept the illusion of a homogenous Japanese culture, may never learn the truth about their classmates, co-workers or neighbours.

Shame and social phobia

Dr. K. Okano (1994) states that Japanese culture has inculcated shame behaviour as a virtue — "one's bashful and overpowered looks, lack of verbal assertiveness, and avoidance of gaze ... demonstrate one's weakness, limitations, or inadequacy, which reduces the potential of arousing jealousy and feelings of competitiveness in others". He describes Japanese society as pseudo-sociophobic because, although this form of behaviour can sometimes be an indication of emotional disorder, in Japan it is more often a culturally appropriate message.

Furthermore he disagrees with his American counterparts who view shame as "basically a negative feeling", and who counsel that "the clinical objective is to help patients become aware of it and then get rid of it". He explains that Japanese look upon someone who shows no shame as "insensitive" and "unfit for society" and that "people are even required to 'fake' sociophobic-like manifestations to be accepted in the society".

In addition, there is a cultural assumption favouring evasive behaviour — "One's importance, power, or value should be only implied or suggested, but not revealed openly. This belief implies that what is hidden is powerful. On the other hand, what is manifest has already lost its power or value" (Okano).

Western contrast

In western society people respect open expression of thoughts and feelings and feel uncomfortable with silence and concealment. American society places little value in concealment preferring instead open disclosure of information. Most Americans are very direct and appreciate a similar response to their comments and questions.

Furthermore, in recent years Americans have experienced increasing exposure of previously hidden subjects such as incest, racism etc. and, in particular, a media frenzy invading the privacy of public individuals e. g. politicians and movie stars. The media's theory is that these people have relinquished their rights to privacy because they have become famous and earn substantial incomes, and so must accept the public's curiousity.

Nagel (1998) asserts that there is a need for concealment and that exposure of the private lives of public individuals is not in the public interest. He claims that these people, whose achievements or qualifications bring them to public attention, are unfairly discredited

by exposure of personal information which is essentially irrelevant to their public role. He suggests that this trend, will eventually require even private individuals to publicly avow their agreement with the conservative view of personal morality and thus infringe on their freedom.

He explains that privacy serves a useful social function, "to leave a great range of potentially disruptive material unacknowledged ... feelings of hostility, contempt, derision, envy, vanity, boredom, fear, sexual desire or aversion", and that civilization would cease to exist if everyone's thoughts were exposed.　He believes that society uses the public arena to deal with the issues that must be faced by its members as a collective and that conventions of reticence provide people with a framework to co-exist peacefully during this process.

Tatemae and Politeness

Karel van Wolferen has described "tatemae" as "socially sanctioned deceit" (cited in March, 1996, p. 24).　For many westerners it appears to be an over-emphasis on hypocritical politeness.　Perhaps people who regard this as a social encumbrance have not considered its historical role in Japanese feudal society.

Leech[1] (2000) defines politeness as a goal-oriented social lubricant to achieve agreement and avoid conflict.　In conversational terms, one tries to place oneself lower while raising the other person's status in order to assure them of one's good intentions and provide proof of one's good manners.　Tact and silence are used to preserve appearances.　For example, a boss refusing a legitimate request for a pay increase might explain the difficult financial situation of the company and indirectly suggest the potential of a raise as things improve. The important consideration is to maintain a feeling of cooperation.

Etiquette requires formulaic behaviour in most social groups, even the least civilized. Hierarchical rules govern most human communication.　Politeness seeks to create a harmonious environment while preserving the status quo.

Slogans are used in many countries to establish common attitudes.　In Japan, they are often "tatemae" — for example, for the last 2 decades "internationalization" has been the buzz word driving business forward even though it is not at all clear what relevance this may have for the large number of Japanese with little foreign contact or interest (March, 1996, p. 23).

1　Froms a lecture given by G. Leech at Doshisha University, Kyoto in May, 2000.

Nevertheless, formulaic expressions are instilled in children throughout their early educa-tion （Bailey, 1997）. Furthermore, formal patterns of speech seem to govern ordinary com-munication. Thus they seem to insure that people always know what to expect and what to avoid in any given social situation. This may explain why many Japanese students may refuse to speak unless they follow a clear script with instructions.

Silence as a form of aesthetic expression

"What is concealed is the flower — what is not concealed cannot be the flower" （*cited in Doi, 1986, p. 110*）.

Just as shyness has its virtues, for example, in developing sensitivity, concealment has helped develop the hidden esoteric quality of Japanese art and its appreciation of "mikansei" or incompleteness. This concept deserves clarification. A skilled potter destroys a perfect bowl and then mends it with gold and glue. The intention is to encourage the viewer to look past the visible imperfection and imagine the bowl in its perfect state. One can never apprehend the complete truth but, by exercising imagination, an aspect of hidden reality is revealed to each individual.

This mysterious quality in art is reflected in everyday life. A person can never know the complete truth of another being, and any attempt to understand the other being will always run into assumptions that are based inside the person and reveal more about the person than the other being. As Gadamer （1994, p. 260） states, "All understanding is essen-tially self-understanding".

Silence in communication is acceptable among Japanese because it reduces the risk of offending or revealing sensitive information. This act of concealment in human relations leaves it up to the other person to fill in the blanks and use their imagination to figure out the real meaning. "Silence, indirect expressions, intuitive understanding, the use of euphem-isms, nonverbal language and gestures" （March, p. 32） are considered elegant and efficient as well as socially safer.

A Japanese woman once told me that if her husband was upset with her he wouldn't say anything about it but by a subtle change in his behaviour she would know. If she asked him what was wrong he wouldn't reply but, once again, by his behaviour and using intuition she would know when she had guessed the correct answer！

Mind reading may be a favourite pastime among Japanese — in fact the term "ishin denshin" refers to the uncanny ability among a group of Japanese to sense each others

feelings, avoid conflict and achieve consensus.   Subtle gestures, brief eye contact and hesitant vocalization can be read as coded messages that are understood on a 'gut level' in social interactions and then carefully interpreted at a later date.

This level of sensitivity goes hand in hand with the traditional cultural bias towards refinement and attention to detail and perhaps, in part, explains the national propensity for excellent artisanship.   In social situations this approach is actually a coping strategy used to achieve compromise and thus establish harmony.   In the business world, the term "kaizen" implies continuous small improvements rather than sudden innovation.   Imai (cited in March, 1996) writes that kaizen "is often undramatic and subtle ... its results seldom immediately visible" (p. 54).

Although foreigners often complain about the slow pace of decision making in their dealings with Japanese business, the patience of their negotiators has often led to successful outcomes for Japan.   Perhaps this socially conditioned willingness to set aside the immediate goal and accept incompleteness while assessing minute implications has significantly contributed to Japan's economic success.

Implications in the language classroom

One of the many challenges facing English language teachers in Japan is where to draw the line between proudly representing one's cultural values versus acknowledging the students', especially when the latter's inhibit their learning process.   I believe that more headway can be made if the teacher drops some of their own culturally based assumptions about education while striving to find a middle ground where students can participate without fear of humiliation (Piasetski, 2001).

Bailey (1997) has described the multiple dimensions of Japanese students' educational experience.   He asserts that there are a large variety of student types and that it is unwise to categorize them in typically dogmatic terms such as shy or lacking individuality.   He points out that the American mass consumer society is obviously not a symbol of individualism or independence even though many Americans still prefer to see themselves in this cultural stereotype.   White (cited in Bailey, 1997) suggests that "it may be that it is the Japanese, not the American youth, who is the greater individualist" because Japanese adolescents often choose loner role models from films in contrast to the more affluent establishment figures chosen by young Americans.

Japanese education has fostered a climate of control in the classroom with peer pressure encouraging conformity (Bailey, 1991).   This socialization process has created a tendency towards sociophobic behaviour.   However, those strong enough to resist the pressure can still

develop an internal freedom.   Perhaps our role in the language class is simply to encourage this inner development and help students recognize that learning a second language is a route to greater liberty because they can enjoy a wider range of experience.

Conclusion

Although concealment has mostly negative connotations in western society, this article has tried to present a balanced view of the issue.   As Nagel （1998） writes, "Concealment includes not only secrecy and deception, but also reticence and nonacknowledgment".   Furthermore, he explains that the latter are not deceptive because they are part of well-established social conventions — "If I don't tell you everything I think and feel about you that is not a case of deception, since you don't expect me to do so and would probably be appalled if I did".

As we have seen, there is a strong contrast between American and Japanese cultural attitudes towards concealment.   "The Japanese tend to glorify and attach too much value to what is hidden, whereas Americans in general tend to devalue and minimize what is hidden and instead try to disclose it" （Okano, 1994）.

There are many forms of silence in Japanese culture, ninja, Shinto rituals, Noh, zen, Butoh, etc.   Japanese society appreciates minimalism and miniaturization, as well as empty space within confined areas.   American society pays more attention to material comforts and luxurious, expansive vistas.   Perhaps exploring the issue of concealment will help us understand how to find a balanced viewpoint between these radically different cultural perspectives.

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