

# Beyond Japanese Pragmatics: Non-Linguistic Aspects of Communicating Meaning in Context

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The field of pragmatics is somewhat more difficult to define than other fields in linguistics, such as morphology or syntax. Consequently, definitions of pragmatics abound (Locastro, 2003). While there are many different definitions of the field of pragmatics, what is common amongst all these definitions is that pragmatics is concerned with how language is used to communicate meaning in context.

Research in Japanese pragmatics can be broadly separated into two categories. One is research into how specific forms are used in context. These forms tend to be frequently occurring forms that can convey various meanings depending on context. Sentence-final forms, modifiers, adverbial expressions, backchannel expressions, phrases, honorific expressions, gendered forms and others have all been the subject of pragmatics research (e.g., Cook, 1993; Katagiri, 2007; Matsumoto, 1985; Naruoka, 2012; Obana, 2012; Okamoto, 1995; Shibamoto-Smith, 2011; etc.).

The other broad category that Japanese pragmatics research falls into is how speech acts are performed. Speech acts that have received attention in Japanese pragmatics research include apologizing, expressing gratitude, refusing, disagreeing, complimenting, making small talk, teasing, expressing opinions, and others (e.g., Barnlund & Araki, 1985; Ebsworth & Kodama,

2011; Geyer, 2010; Hosoda, 2006; Long, 2010; Ohashi, 2010; etc.). While this category has received relatively less attention than research on specific forms, there is nevertheless a significant body of research covering speech acts in Japanese.

However, there are other aspects of communication that do not fit into either of these categories. The forms in question are not prototypically linguistic. Rather these forms generally consist of decisions that are made and acted upon. While these forms have been subject to research, that research has generally been anthropological in nature (e.g., Agar, 1996; Hall, 1959). Nevertheless, these forms are used to communicate meaning in context, and the nature of that meaning is consistent with the type of meaning communicated by other pragmatic phenomena. Furthermore, for second language learners of Japanese, these aspects of communication are often not well understood, and regularly lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding.

LoCastro (2003) has argued that “limiting analysis of pragmatic meaning to linguistic forms is not adequate” (p. 6). However, research into non-linguistic pragmatic forms has trailed far behind research into linguistic pragmatic forms. Perhaps one reason for the discrepancy is that because these aspects of communication are not prototypically linguistic, they are generally not subjectable to typical pragmatic research methods, such as discourse analysis. While the performance of most speech acts can be audio recorded and analyzed, these non-linguistic aspects of communication would not be easily revealed through analysis of discourse.

In this paper, I will attempt to illustrate some of these non-linguistic pragmatic phenomena using examples from Japanese. Because I became aware of these examples primarily through my

experiences working with students who were studying abroad in Japan, my examples consist of forms that were interpreted differently by Americans and Japanese in a study abroad context. I will also argue that these forms, while essentially non-linguistic in nature, should nevertheless be the subject of pragmatics research.

I will first describe the structure of language, with a focus on how forms that are not prototypically linguistic can nevertheless be associated with meaning. I will then discuss the role of cultural values in communicating and interpreting pragmatic meaning. Lastly, I will give several examples of behavior that is essentially non-linguistic, but which nevertheless communicates pragmatic meaning, using examples of miscommunications that arise between American study abroad students and the Japanese natives that they interact with.

## **1. The structure of language**

According to usage-based language learning theory, languages are learned as language forms are experienced in context (Bybee, 2010; Tomasello, 1999). Through domain-general learning processes, forms become associated with the contexts in which they are experienced. As memories of experiences accumulate, and are categorized, mental representations of language forms and meanings emerge and become associated with each other.

If, as usage-based language learning theory stipulates, domain-general learning processes are responsible for the connections between language forms and their meanings that comprise language, then one would expect that the type of form

that becomes associated with meaning would not necessarily be restricted to prototypical language forms. For example, gesture and facial expression, which are not typical linguistic forms, are understood to communicate meaning. Tannen, in a paper titled “the pragmatics of cross-cultural communication” (1984), notes that silence itself can communicate meaning. While silence or facial expressions are not prototypically linguistic, they nevertheless have an association with meaning.

The type of meaning conveyed by non-linguistic types of forms would depend on context. In the case of silence, it would not be possible to assign a meaning to silence without considering the context in which that silence occurred. Other forms that are not prototypically linguistic also must be understood in context.

As stated previously, pragmatics is concerned with how language is used in context. Consequently, pragmatics tends to be concerned less with the content of what is said, and more with the intentions behind what is said, and how native speakers are able to correctly understand those intentions. Because of this focus on intentions, the type of meaning that is the subject of pragmatic study tends to be related to an individual’s character, or in other words whether or not an individual is a good or bad person. Pragmatic mistakes thus tend to be interpreted not as a sign that a person is lacking in linguistic ability, but rather that they are lacking character qualities (Thomas, 1983). Given that pragmatic meaning is often associated with the quality of one’s character, it is not surprising that much research in Japanese pragmatics has addressed the topic of politeness (e.g., Cook, 2006; 2011; Okamoto Shigeko, 1998; 2011; Okamoto Shinichiro, 2002; Saito, 2010, etc.).

The forms I will mention below, which are not prototypically linguistic, also communicate meaning that is related to one's character, and must be understood in context. These similarities with pragmatic phenomena suggest that these forms should also be the subject of pragmatics research, and should receive greater attention in pragmatics research.

## **2. Cultural Values**

Every culture emphasizes certain values. These values place constraints on the behavior of members of society (Seelye, 1993). While all values are likely present and realized to some degree in every culture, the relative importance placed on each value varies from culture to culture. The specific behaviors that are associated with each value also vary from culture to culture.

These values are taught both implicitly and explicitly. An example of implicit teaching of values would be through modeling behavior that is considered to be congruent with a culture's values. An example of explicit teaching would be referring to values as justification for particular behaviors. The extent to which members of society act in accordance with these values reflects upon the quality of their character.

Members of a society regularly communicate information about their character through pragmatics. Because the quality of one's character in a particular society is strongly influenced by the extent to which one adheres to the values emphasized in that society, pragmatic meaning, through which information about one's character is communicated, is strongly connected to cultural values. This connection arises through experiences interacting with others. As individuals experience forms (both

linguistic and non-linguistic) in context, those forms become associated with what they have experienced. Their experience includes interactions with people that they understand to have good character, and interactions through which behaviors are explicitly taught to be connected with values that they understand to be associated with good character.

When individuals encounter behavior that they are familiar with, their prior experience will determine the meaning that they associate with the behavior. When individuals encounter unfamiliar behavior, their cultural values will influence how they interpret the behavior. If the situation is one in which an expected behavior did not occur, and the expected behavior has an association with good character, the intention behind the behavior that did occur will often be interpreted as negative. In other words, the behavior that did occur will be interpreted as a sign that the one who did the behavior has a deficiency in their character. Cultural values will determine the particular character quality that is interpreted as deficient.

Below I will describe some American and Japanese cultural values. I will also describe some behaviors that are generally considered to be associated with these cultural values. I will focus on the values that affect how intentions are interpreted in the specific examples I provide in the next section. Thus, this list of values is not considered to be comprehensive.

## ***2.1 American Cultural Values***

### *2.1.1 Personal freedom*

Freedom is highly valued in American society. Consequently, allowing others the freedom to pursue their own wants and interests is part of what constitutes a good person in American culture, and communicates to others that one respects them. Someone who pursues their own wants and desires at the expense of allowing others the same privilege would not be viewed as a good person.

One common way in which others' personal freedom is respected in American culture is through respecting others' time. One respects others' time by doing tasks efficiently, and by not requiring others to participate in tasks when it is not necessary. Wasting others' time, which occurs when someone is made to wait or participate in an activity unnecessarily, is considered rude in American culture.

Another common way in which others' personal freedom is respected is by providing others with choice. Allowing others to make choices allows them to exercise their personal freedom. Consequently, not providing others with choices restricts that freedom and can be viewed as inconsiderate.

### *2.1.2. Honesty*

Honesty is highly valued in American society. Truthfulness is considered to be a quality possessed by a good person. In American society, good people will be truthful even when the consequences of being honest result in personal loss (e.g., of resources, face, position, etc.).

One way in which honesty is observed in American culture is through being straightforward. Being straightforward typically involves communicating clearly and openly. The expectation for

clear and open communication also applies to situations in which one has an issue or a concern. A good person will generally be open and clear when communicating a concern to another individual, even if that individual is the source of the concern.

Not withholding information is another way in which one is straightforward, particularly information that could reflect negatively on the one who decided whether or not to reveal that information. Conversely, one who fails to be forthcoming with information can create a negative impression.

### *2.1.3. Courage*

Courage, or bravery, is highly valued in American society. Courage involves acting without fear, or acting in spite of fear. Thus, an individual who refrains from doing a behavior that is considered good in American society because they are afraid of retaliation, or other negative consequences, would be considered to be deficient in their character to a certain degree.

One way that courage is manifested in American society is by “standing up” for what is right. In other words, a good person will advocate for what is considered to be right, even when others are unwilling to do so. Regardless of what others think, or how others react, one should be willing to advocate for what is right. Often, standing up for what is right requires one to criticize or correct the behavior of an individual who is in a higher social position, and it may involve doing so publicly. As long as the individual who is “standing up” is correct in their understanding of what is right, this behavior is unlikely to create a negative impression regarding the person’s character.



## ***2.1 Japanese cultural values***

### *2.2.1. Harmony*

Harmony is highly valued in Japanese society (Hendry, 2013). In other words, the ability to interact with others without conflict is highly valued. A good person is thus one who is able to avoid conflict in their interactions with others.

In Japanese society, one common way in which harmony is realized is when a person sacrifices their own desires for the sake of the group. Thus, in a situation in which an individual's desires are contrary to the desires of other group members, a good person would sacrifice their own desires for the sake of the group. A person who is unwilling to sacrifice their own desires for the sake of the group is generally considered to have character deficiencies in Japanese society.

Another way in which harmony is realized is by not stating negative views directly. In Japanese culture, it is typical to express negative views in an indirect way, particularly when the interaction is between individuals who do not have a close and equal relationship, or the one expressing the negative view is relatively lower status than the other. Expressing views in an indirect way shows that the one expressing the negative view is considerate of the feelings and/or position of the other person.

### *2.2.2. Respect*

Respect is highly valued in Japanese society. In context of the current discussion of cultural values, respect can be considered to be acknowledging the abilities or accomplishments of others,

particularly those who are of higher social status, or those who are members of the out-group (Hendry, 2013).

While there are many ways in which respect is manifested in Japanese society, one way that pertains to the examples I will describe below is following the advice of experts. When one has a problem that pertains to a certain subject, seeking and following the advice of one whose training, position, or experience qualifies them as knowledgeable about that subject shows respect to that individual.

### *2.2.3. Diligence*

In Japanese culture, diligence is highly valued. The ability to work hard is a characteristic of a good person. Not avoiding work and being willing to take on extra tasks are viewed quite highly in Japanese culture.

One way in which the value of diligence is manifest in Japanese culture is through attention to detail. Taking the time and effort to attend to small matters is viewed well. Conversely, someone who is unable to or uninterested in taking the time and effort to complete menial or seemingly insignificant tasks is not viewed well. In Japanese culture, all tasks are viewed as important, regardless of how small or insignificant they may seem.

## **3. Examples of non-linguistic pragmatic forms**

In this section, I will provide four different examples of behaviors that convey information regarding one's character. In addition to describing the behavior, I will also describe how the

behavior is interpreted differently in American and Japanese culture. I will also argue that these types of behaviors ought to receive more attention in pragmatics research.

### ***3.1. Mandatory events***

In study abroad in Japan, it is not uncommon to have a number of mandatory events. While in most cases these events are not explicitly labeled as mandatory, any event for which participation is not considered to be optional would fall into this category.

These mandatory events can create a negative impression among American students. American students can take these events as a sign that program administrators don't trust them or don't respect them. The Japanese administrators who plan these events, however, typically have no negative intentions, and expect for these events to be well-received.

The values mentioned above provide an explanation of the differing interpretation of these events. For Americans, allowing others personal freedom generally communicates respect. Events that one must attend, regardless of one's personal preference, limit that personal freedom. Because children in American society are given less personal freedom than adults, and allowing others personal freedom to make their own choices is part of how one acknowledges others as adults, mandatory events can communicate a lack of trust or respect to American students. The students may feel that program staff do not view them adults who are capable of caring for themselves. While Americans certainly expect a certain number of mandatory events, if the number of

mandatory events exceeds what is perceived as necessary or reasonable, these events can create a negative impression.

From the Japanese perspective, these events should be well received. Because they live in Japan, the Japanese staff would all be considered experts regarding what to do in Japan. In this situation, the assumption is that they could make more effective decisions regarding what to do to experience the country than the students could on their own. Consequently, the considerate thing for the staff to do would be to make those decisions and plan events for the students, rather than expecting the students, who have less knowledge of Japan, to do the planning themselves. The students' reaction, which shows an unwillingness to appreciate or follow the experts' recommendations, can be perceived as unappreciative and somewhat disrespectful.

A similar pattern is seen if guest/host relationships in Japan and the U.S. are compared. In typical guest/host relationships in Japan, the host is expected to make decisions. For example, the host makes the decisions regarding what food or drink will be provided to the guest. In this situation, the host is the most knowledgeable about what they have to offer. Thus, the host is the expert in this situation. It is therefore expected that the host will make the decisions, and a considerate guest will comply and be appreciative of the host's efforts.

In the American guest/host situation, the host will often ask the guest for their preferences regarding whether or not to eat or drink anything, or what to eat or drink. In this situation, the host provides choices to the guest, and it is the guest that usually makes the decisions. Thus, in the American situation a good host respects the personal freedom of the guest. However, in the Japanese situation the value of respect takes precedence.

The act of holding a mandatory event, or a non-mandatory event, likely falls outside of the realm of typical pragmatics research, because the behavior is not linguistic, but rather a decision that is made and acted upon. However, the meaning conveyed by that action in context communicates the quality of the doer's character, which is consistent with the type of meaning typically conveyed by linguistic elements that are the subject of pragmatics research.

Students' reactions to what is perceived as an excessive amount of mandatory events can also be a source of miscommunication. In American culture, in which courage is highly valued, a good person will stand up for what is right. In this situation, an American student who perceives the number of mandatory events to be excessive may decide to address the issue with program staff. For the American student, a willingness to attempt to address the problem, even when others are unwilling to do so, would be perceived positively.

In Japanese culture, on the other hand, because of the value placed on harmony, a grievance would need to be much more severe to warrant addressing with program staff. Consequently, the decision to address the issue with program staff can communicate that the issue is more severe than it actually is. If the issue is, in fact, not very severe, it can communicate a lack of consideration for others. In the case of mandatory events, because Japanese staff expect that the events will be appreciated by the students, having a large number of mandatory events would generally not seem to be a severe enough grievance to warrant addressing with the staff. Consequently, student attempts to address an excess of mandatory events with program staff can ultimately convey a negative impression.

When the student addresses the issue with program staff, the student is likely to do so directly, which is also contrary to Japanese expectations. The degree of directness or indirectness in how one conveys a negative viewpoint has been the subject of pragmatic analysis (e.g., Hosoda, 2006; Saito, 2011). However, while the degree of directness or indirectness in how the students addresses the problem with program staff would be subject to typical pragmatic research methods, the decision whether or not to attempt to address the issue with program staff in the first place would not be.

### ***3.2. Official announcements***

In study abroad, it is necessary to inform participants regarding the structure of the program and the various events that participants are expected to participate in. However, the timing of these announcements can convey different meanings depending on the culture. In Japanese culture, it is typical for this information to be provided after all the details have been finalized. However, for the American students, who expect the information to be conveyed earlier, the timing of this information can create a negative impression.

In American culture, in which personal freedom is highly valued, this type of information tends to be given at a relatively early stage. Providing this type of information at an early stage makes it easier for participants to make their own plans, or, in other words, to exercise their own personal freedom. Thus, in this context providing information to participants at an early stage communicates that those who run the program are considerate.

A consequence of the American preference for information to be communicated at an early stage is that sometimes information is communicated before decisions have been made or finalized. This type of information is typically referred to as a “heads-up”. Recipients are informed as to the current state of affairs and what is likely to happen. While it is understood that the information provided has not yet been finalized, and may change in the future, because this type of information allows recipients to more effectively make their own plans, it is still looked upon favorably.

Failing to provide information at an early stage thus runs contrary to American cultural values. Consequently, when information is not provided at an early stage, the natural conclusion for an American is that it is a character deficiency that has led to the observed behavior. In the case of failing to provide programmatic information, a natural conclusion would be that the staff responsible for the program had failed to start planning the program.

In Japanese culture, in which attention to detail is highly valued, this type of programmatic information tends to be given once all the details have been finalized. Because it is expected that information will be provided after all the details have been finalized, to provide the information at a stage at which the details are not yet finalized would communicate a lack of diligence. Thus, while in Japanese society waiting until details are finalized to communicate programmatic information is viewed positively, in American society providing information early enough that recipients can make their own plans, even if the information is incomplete or not yet finalized, is viewed positively.

A similar issue can arise when details about the program are communicated to students after the students have committed to participate in the program. For the American students, not being given all the information before being asked to decide whether or not to participate in the program can seem dishonest. Because Americans would expect the information to be provided beforehand, and American values dictate that a good person would do so, it can seem that the program staff are attempting to withhold information for malicious purposes. For example, American students may conclude that program staff are aware that the program is poor, but in order to have more students enroll they have deliberately withheld information that could be perceived negatively. If students later learn information about the program that could be perceived negatively, it can reinforce the impression that program staff are acting with malicious intent. For example, a large number of mandatory events could be perceived as additional evidence that program staff are acting with ill intent.

For Japanese staff, however, providing information at too early a stage, particularly when that information has not yet been finalized, would communicate a lack of diligence on the part of the staff. Thus, from the Japanese perspective, waiting until details were finalized would communicate that the program staff were good people, and providing information beforehand that had not yet been finalized would communicate that the staff were deficient in character quality. Furthermore, if the additional information provided consisted of additional mandatory events, the Japanese staff would expect a positive reaction from the students.



While the timing at which information is provided had not yet received much attention in pragmatics research. One reason for this lack of attention may be that the timing itself does not involve language per se, and thus is not be subject to typical pragmatic analysis. Nevertheless, the timing at which information is provided conveys meaning, and that meaning reflects on the character of the individuals involved. Thus, while this topic has not yet received much attention in pragmatics research, it nevertheless can have a significant impact on the extent to which people from different cultures are able to maintain amicable relationships.

### ***3.3. Coursework***

For American students, some of the work they are required to do as part of their Japanese language classes, whether homework or work done during class, may seem unnecessary from their perspective. In particular, work that takes time to complete but does not seem to have a significant educational pay-off can create a negative impression in American students. Often, the assignment involves repetition of the same task, such as repeated writing of kanji or reading the same passage.

Part of the reason that this type of assignment creates a negative impression in the American students is because of the value placed upon personal freedom in American culture. Because Americans respect others' personal freedom by respecting their time, these activities, which Americans perceive to be time-consuming and lacking in educational merit, can communicate a lack of respect for the students' time, and thus for their personal freedom. Because this type of activity is not

associated positively with American cultural values, the activities can communicate that the instructors that designed or assigned the activities have character deficiencies. For example, it would not be uncommon for American students to conclude that these activities were assigned because teachers had failed to be diligent enough in their lesson planning to create an effective lesson, or had failed to give sufficient consideration to the design or selection of assignments. In other words, the natural conclusion is that the teacher assigned these activities because they had given higher priority to their own personal interests than to their responsibility as teachers.

However, for the Japanese teachers, these assignments are considered to have clear and justified educational value. In accordance with the value placed on diligence in Japanese culture, all work is considered valuable and to have a purpose. In particular, repetitive work, which has connections to Buddhism, is viewed much more positively in Japanese culture than American culture. Furthermore, because diligence is often manifested through attention to detail, the level of skill mastery that is considered normal in Japanese culture tends to be higher than that of American cultural standards. Thus, while in American culture this type of activity can communicate that a teacher is a poor teacher, in Japanese culture this type of activity communicates that a teacher is a good teacher.

The miscommunication that occurs as a result of this type of assignment or activity can lead to a cycle in which teaching and learning loses its effectiveness. In this cycle, the instructor is unwilling to move on to new material until the students have mastered the current material. The instructor continues teaching the same material not only to help students learn the material, but

also to communicate to the students that they have not yet reached the necessary level of proficiency. The students similarly desire to communicate to the instructor that the current teaching methods are ineffective. Because mastery of the material would communicate that their methods were effective, the students refrain from putting in the effort necessary to reach the level of mastery that the instructor is looking for. In this way, the teaching and learning ceases to be effective.

Designing an educational activity would not fall into the realm of language use. However, as the example above demonstrates, the design of the activity communicates different meanings in different cultures, and these meanings reflect on the character of the individuals involved. Thus, while not linguistic *per se*, this form also has much in common with pragmatics.

### **3.4. *Illness***

In the event that a study abroad student homestays with a Japanese family, and becomes sick, it is not uncommon to encounter a situation in which the homestay family want the student to visit the doctor, but the student refuses to do so. While some of these situations occur simply because the American student is under the mistaken impression that a doctor visit in Japan costs more than it actually does, regardless of what causes the situation, when this situation occurs both the American student and the Japanese family can reach the conclusion that the other has significant character deficiencies.

Again, for the American student the value placed on personal freedom is a significant factor. The American student feels that it should be their own choice whether or not to visit the doctor,

particularly when they would be spending their own money to cover the doctor fees, and when the sickness does not seem to be very severe. The homestay family's encouragement for them to visit the doctor can thus communicate to the student that the family does not respect their personal freedom, which creates a negative impression.

For the Japanese family, the value placed upon harmony is an important factor in how the students' actions are interpreted. As mentioned above, one way in which harmony is realized in Japanese culture is by sacrificing self-interest for the sake of the group. In this situation, the student's refusal to visit the doctor, when such a visit could contribute to the safety and well-being of the entire family, seems self-centered, and communicates clear character deficiencies in the student.

Another factor that is present in this situation is the Japanese value of respect, realized through respecting expert opinion. Japanese are, in general, more likely to visit a doctor when sick. The doctor visit ensures that one does not have anything serious. Even if the symptoms suggest that the illness is not cause for concern, one may still visit the doctor, just to be sure.

While respect for expert opinion is likely to be a factor in the behavior in this situation, I do not believe that the student's refusal to visit the doctor communicates anything significantly negative about the student's character specifically in regard to the value of respect. Because the one not being respected would be the doctor in this context, and the doctor is not immediately present in the interaction, the behavior is not expected to have a strong association with a character deficiency related to respect for expert opinion. In this situation, what is communicated about

the student's character in regard to the value of harmony is much stronger.

Again, the decision whether or not to visit a doctor is not a linguistic phenomenon per se. As with the other behaviors mentioned, this behavior involves making a decision and acting on that decision. However, the behavior does communicate meaning, and that meaning reflects upon the character of the person doing the behavior. Thus, while the phenomenon in question is essentially non-linguistic, it nevertheless has much in common with pragmatic phenomena.

#### **4. Conclusion**

There are behaviors that are non-linguistic which nevertheless communicate meaning. For many of these non-linguistic behaviors, the meaning communicated is related to the character of the one who does the behavior. Thus, aside from the fact that the behavior is non-linguistic in nature, the behavior is consistent with other linguistic behavior that is the subject of pragmatics research.

Furthermore, as I have illustrated above, the behaviors I have described have a significant impact on communication. A failure to understand what these behaviors communicate can lead to significant and serious miscommunication. This type of miscommunication can have serious consequences in individuals' ability to participate successfully in a society. I therefore argue that the type of behaviors I have described here should receive increased attention in Japanese pragmatics research.

I also argue that these phenomena should receive increased attention in language teaching. If students understood what these

types of behavior communicated in Japanese culture before going abroad, they would be better able to communicate and maintain positive relationships with others. To the extent that helping language learners to have positive relationships with native speakers of the target language is a goal of language teaching, teaching the phenomena I have described above to language learners would be essential.

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