

# **Itte Il Kotto, Itte wa Ikenai Koto : What to say and what not to say : a cross-cultural survey of social and linguistic behaviour in japanese and italian**

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*ITTE II KOTO, ITTE WA IKENAI KOTO -*  
WHAT TO SAY AND WHAT NOT TO SAY. A  
CROSS-CULTURAL SURVEY OF SOCIAL AND  
LINGUISTIC BEHAVIOUR IN JAPANESE AND ITALIAN\*\*

In this paper, the author deals with issues related to cross-cultural communication between Japanese and (especially) Italian speakers. It is the sequel of a previous work which was mainly concerned with the linguistic devices reflecting social behavior in Japanese. The author is interested in showing how appropriate subjects are selected for discussion in the two cultures. The aim of the paper is to try to provide a possible explanation of the underlying cultural patterns at work in both languages, by introducing the shapes they assume linguistically and noting to what extent they do so during an interaction. It also introduces the term "ethnicity" (which is different from "ethnocentrism") as a useful factor in the process of interpretation and comprehension of a different culture.

*Keywords:* Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics, Keigo (Japanese Honorific Language), Ethnicity/Ethnocentrism, Ethnolinguistics.

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## 1. Beyond *Keigo* and *mainasu no keigo*

In a previous paper (Nannini, forthcoming), I discussed the linguistic codification of social relationships in Japanese, represented by the so-called *keigo* and its “counterpart”. As I pointed out, this counterpart has no univocal terminology to be referred to, I used the naming *mainasu* (Engl. *minus*) *no keigo*, following the Japanese scholar Minami. I also tried to show how *mainasu no keigo* cannot be simply looked at as a “neutral” form of expression, but that it shows as much coherence and consistency as the *keigo* does. The paper also dealt with the sociological and environmental frames individuated and classified by Japanese scholars and the consequent linguistic behaviour judged to be appropriate to a certain frame. In applying such considerations to the actual linguistic behaviour, I showed the linguistic devices coming into play both in the honorific expression defined by *keigo* and in the *mainasu no keigo*, classifying them through the criteria of morpho-syntactical and lexical variations. Consequently, I introduced some examples showing occurrences of *prefixes* and/or *suffixes*, and examples of what I called lexical substitution. The latter is not exclusively found in Japanese, but is a device used also by many Western languages: Italian *andare* - *venire* vs. *recarsi*, vary according to different degrees of formality, as English *to lend a hand* vs. *to help* vs. *to co-operate*. The relation between *to die* vs. *to pass away* shows an “euphemism” that, during an interaction, is supposed to express consideration for the listener’s feelings, etc. For the Japanese, I quoted the verb *itadaku* (lit. “to receive”), which can mean *eat* or *drink* when the speaker judges appropriate to put him or herself in a humble position (“receiving something from someone whose status is judged as higher than the one of the speaker”, which is an item of what the Japanese acknowledge as *kenjôgo* “humble language or expression”). Nevertheless, it has to be replaced by *meshiagaru* when the speaker is offering something to a person of a higher status than his or hers (in Japan. *sonkeigo* “language (expression) of respect”). The pronominal system provided further examples: it shows different forms according to *who is speaking* and *to whom*, if it is a male or a female, if the interaction takes place in a frame of formal or informal occasions or environment, etc. Men’s language shows a wider range of choice than women’s language. Women usually tend, not only in Japanese, to refer to a linguistic pattern either more formal or more “elegant” than male speech. In Japanese, this is called *bika-go* (“embellished language (expression)”). Still, the mechanisms shown by

*bikago* are the same performed by the other forms of *keigo*: it is the social and environmental frames that allow us to make distinctions among the different uses (and intentions) of the speakers. Of course, this does not exclude the fact that male speech can use *bikago* under certain circumstances.

In this paper, I will try to explain further how cultural and consequent linguistic behaviour acquire visibility in the selection of *themes* that can or cannot be talked about, and, if they can, *how* the speaker is supposed to deal with them, comparing Japanese with other languages, especially Italian. A correct communication implies awareness that not all subjects can be talked about in different cultures, and that, when they can, the underlying patterns may be different. An observation of the linguistic behaviour of both Japanese and Italian speakers has led me to consider this to be part of a pragmatic competence that should be reached in the study and the employment of a language. In order to gather materials relevant for the present discussion, I asked many informants, both Japanese and non-Japanese living in Japan. I got further information through Japanese TV commercials and other TV programs. As a teacher of Italian in Japanese colleges and universities, I have also had the opportunity of discussing with my students their reactions to a message, comparing, for instance, advertisements available in Japanese and Italian magazines<sup>1</sup>. More material, especially for the issues related to correct linguistic behaviour in Japan, was obtained from the study by Mizutani-Mizutani (1987), explicitly conceived for foreigners, and the one by Donahue (1998)<sup>2</sup>. Both were of great value in helping me to define the contents of this work.

In the first place, I would like to discuss the issue of *ethnocentrism*, a central concept in Donahue's analysis. He implies that, if we want to be

<sup>1</sup>I would like to express my appreciation to Prof. Satoru Nagami (Tokyo University), Prof. Toshikazu Ichinose and Prof. Evelyn G. Yokota (Kunitachi College of Music), Prof. Michio Fujitani (Teikyo University), Prof. Shinji Yamamoto (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies), Dr. Taro Hyuga and Dr. Tetsushi Higashi. All of them have been very patient in answering my questions and discussing with me many of the issues introduced here. I am especially thankful to Prof. Yokota for helping me to understand differences between both Japanese and American English on the one hand, and Italian and American English on the other. I am also thankful to my students in Kunitachi College of Music, Tokyo University and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies for discussing with me these issues inside and outside of class. Their openness and their curiosity really helped me to understand the Japanese way of communication with a deeper insight.

<sup>2</sup>Donahue (1998) is focused almost exclusively on American vs. Japanese communication: nevertheless, though some aspects may not seem totally convincing, the wide range of topics makes this study one of the most interesting recently published about the issue.

able to interact with a different culture and way of communication, we must “put aside” our *ethnocentrism* which leads to *double standards* in the contact with a different culture. As a definition, he states that: “When this kind of bias operates in favour of one’s nation or culture, we call it ethnocentrism - evaluating other cultures by the standards of one’s own, which usually presumes a sense of superiority”. (Donahue 1998: 57). Nevertheless, he acknowledges: “Some modicum of nationalism may be necessary to give us a sense of who we are. If it is excessive, however, such sentiment may reduce our ability to view clearly other cultures”. (Donahue 1998: 58)

He is aware that “ethnocentrism is inherent in perception and probably can only be minimized at best” (Donahue 1998: 54) and realizes that “some degree of nationalism is probably unavoidable. Indeed, it may even be psychologically healthy” (Donahue 1998: 57). He seems to use *ethnocentrism* and *nationalism* as synonyms.

Though Donahue’s view is clear, I am not totally satisfied with this terminology. Dictionaries confirm that *ethnocentrism* implies an unjustified “sense of superiority” of one’s culture, which brings Donahue to pair it with *nationalism*. On the one hand, I am not sure that we can equate the two terms, but, even if we could, I think the availability of a more neutral term could be methodologically helpful. In this perspective, I would suggest *ethnicity*. With this term, I intend to suggest that the role played by one’s culture is *the only means* available to use in the contact with a different one. In other words, everyone is born and raised inside his or her own culture: it is impossible to imagine an “a-cultural” person. We need then to define a cultural basic feature. In these terms, *ethnicity* and *ethnocentrism* would be quite different. Donahue states that “ethnocentrism” (not, in my view, *nationalism*) is “unavoidable”. This may be true, and it would be true even if we do not attribute to our culture any superiority, employing it, on the contrary, to provide us *the features* which become (a combination of) frames through which we can learn about another culture. We can therefore define the term *ethnicity*, in this context, as the consciousness of one’s own culture, with no other connotations. Donahue himself, in the end, implicitly seems to rely on the role of one’s culture when he deals with “empathy”, reminding us how we can understand another culture without “losing sight” of ours. He correctly points out that it is necessary not to overemphasize the differences, but rather to stress the similarities<sup>3</sup>. I have neither the ability nor the knowledge for an anthropologi-

cal study. My interest lies in the interaction of a foreigner with the Japanese culture and language, rather than in the anthropologist's point of view of describing it. I would only stress that, paradoxically perhaps, our own culture seems to be the only way that allows us to go beyond our "small cultural field". I have no intention, though, to deny the importance of "contextualized understanding" and "empathy" in order to achieve correct communication, very properly stressed by Donahue (1988: 62-67).

## 2. What to compare and how

As stimulating an issue as this can be, to find a frame that makes a cultural interpretation of the data possible is more easily said than done. Data usually come to the observer at random and it is no easy task to try to organize them in a clear fashion. My provisional solution was to select a few basic subjects, especially the ones more likely to show up in an interaction, and to compare the linguistic behaviour of the speakers when dealing with them. This way of proceeding has, of course, many shortcomings and can by no means be considered as the "last word" about the issue; it is nothing but a starting point in need of corrections, better focusing and adjustment<sup>4</sup>.

Here follows a simple list of the themes selected for discussion:

- a) Family and marital status
- b) Age and ageing, death
- c) Body and health

<sup>3</sup> Donahue (1988: 67): "... a situated understanding of a foreign culture involves balancing the similarities and the differences of the two cultures involved. The foreign observer identifies closely enough with the target culture to understand the particular situation while never losing sight of his or her own culture. A balance between similarities and differences helps to ensure the use of various frames of reference, rather than just that of one's own culture. This balance is also an attempt to correct the overemphasis on cultural differences, a common tendency..." (italics are mine)

<sup>4</sup> On different occasions (Nannini 1999, 2000), I have expressed my interest in the subject, which was mainly determined by the concern about what the teaching of the Italian Language should be like in countries whose culture is so different. All the observations made until now, some of which I will introduce again here, however, were presented without real organization. I hope that this time I will be able to give an understandable shape to the notes made sparsely in the past.



d) Money

e) Attitude in speaking, apologizing and taking responsibility

There are of course many others subjects worthy of discussion that I have decided not to examine here. One of these is *gender*, a very interesting and important issue, which, from a linguistic viewpoint, has been treated in Shibamoto (1985). I preferred to pay special attention to themes that seem not to have been dealt with at present and especially from a non-Japanese point of view. In the course of the discussion, I will try to offer an interpretation of how and why the Japanese interact with each other in a certain way and how and why it is different from the way Italians (and often Westerners in general) would. On the other hand, I believe that attention to such differences can be of help in cross-cultural communication and also in defining the needs of learners of the two languages.

### 2.1. *Family and marital status*

It is not rare that the Japanese both among themselves and of foreigners ask questions about being married. Even after having just been introduced, one of the first questions is:

<i>Dokushin</i>	<i>desu</i>	<i>ka?</i>
Single	<i>copula</i>	<i>interr. particle</i>

It also happens that people ask of singles “why they don’t marry?”. One of my acquaintances, tired of being asked, used to answer that “there was someone”. A friend of mine was asked directly if she was divorced because her attitude was “so free”. No surprise, then, that it is normal procedure to offer to introduce a possible partner through an *o-miai* (lit. “*honorific-see-meet*”), and actually, in Japan, *o-miai* marriages (*o-miai-kekkon*) are not at all rare. An unpleasant consequence of *o-miai*, though, is that it is not easy to say that the introduced person would not fit as a partner. In this case, there are formulas that, without seeming to say so, make the person who proposed the *o-miai* understand, such as “He (She) is too good for a person like me” or “I’m not good enough for him (her)”.

Westerners tend to find it inappropriate to be asked if they are married or single (though among young people it is normal to ask if one has a boyfriend or a girlfriend), as it is something very private. Japanese, instead, are not at all bothered in answering *Ee* or *Hai* (Yes) or

<i>Iie,</i>	<i>kekkon</i>	<i>shite-imasu</i> (No, I am married)
No,	marriage	to do-to be (lit. "No, I'm being married.") <sup>5</sup>

In Mizutani-Mizutani (1987: 67-68), *Kekkon shite iru-n-desu-ka*. ("Are you married?", in the form employed for "asking or stating the reason for a certain situation"), the authors point out that "it can imply something like 'Are you anxious to go home so early because you are married and have to have supper with your husband?'". The question, here, is asked of a woman, but it can be asked of a man as well. In that case, it may imply something like expressing reproach under the assumption that the listener does not enjoy the company. That Japanese society gives priority to connections related to one's job rather than to one's family is well known<sup>6</sup>. That is the reason why it might sound impolite to say that you have to go home because your husband or wife is waiting for you. Of course, this does not mean that Japanese do not value their families: the point lies in *when* and *where* it is appropriate to show it. This appears to be an example of what is better not to talk about in certain situations. It appears as well to be in contrast with what a foreigner would do, as there is nothing to be ashamed about saying that, as your husband or wife is waiting for you, you have to go. The Japanese tend to deny that they ask such questions so often: one wonders if it is a foreigner's sensibility that perceives it as something peculiar. In other cases, however, expressing appreciation for one's family is welcome; still, it is better not to show too much of it: rather, it seems preferable to minimize it, which is what any Japanese would do if someone praises one of his or her family members.

There are a few expressions that sound very amusing (if not definitely malicious) to foreigners' ears. For example, the expressions that a woman might use in referring to her husband. A retired man, who spends most of the time at home having nothing to do, is said to be a *nure-ochi-ba*. The literal meaning is "wet fallen leaves" and can be used when talking to someone who is not a family member. The image here, in spite of its appearance, is not at all poetic: it suggests the immobility and sadness of someone, stuck at the same place, who doesn't know what to do with himself. Another amusing expression is *sôdai-gomi* ("bulky garbage"), which underlines his uselessness and being in the way, which is particu-

<sup>5</sup>What in English may sound like a progressive form, in Japanese can express the result of an action.

<sup>6</sup>See the study by sociologist Nakane (1989 [1984]), especially chapter 4: "Characteristic and Value Orientation of Japanese Man"



larly important in the usually small Japanese apartments. Among others, there is a saying that goes:

*Teishu-wa genki-de rusu ga ii.*  
 Husband-theme healthy-and (connective form of the copula) outside-subject good.  
 "Talking of husbands, the best thing is their being healthy and not at home"<sup>7</sup>.

But also for one's wife there are such not exactly tender expressions; one of them is *gusai* ("stupid wife"), a term related with *kenjôgo* ("humble expression")<sup>8</sup>. If you happen to appear too appreciative about your partner, you can be rewarded with a *Gochisô-sama deshita*. It usually means "thank you for the good meal": it is evident that the "good meal" takes the place here for the unnecessary words of praise. The Japanese are often surprised when foreigners openly express appreciation for their partners.

Here are two more typical examples I happened to experience personally. When a baby is born, the Japanese use a few sayings that are very appreciative, but at first I was not at all able to interpret them as such. If the baby is a girl and if we are told *o-ningyô-san mitai!* ("She looks like a doll!"), we understand that "she is very pretty" and it sounds quite nice. But what if you are told:

*Warui mushi-ga tsukanai yô-ni shinai-to kenai.*  
 Bad insect-subj. not to stick in such a way that not to do it's no good  
 "You have to be careful that bad insects do not stick".

The warning is about disreputable men who might be attracted by the baby's charm in the future, when she has grown up - which to our ears

<sup>7</sup>See Nakane (1989 [1984]: 132): "For the husband, the object of concern is the home as a whole, rather than his wife and his children as individuals. This is indeed the traditional concept of 'ie' or 'uchi', with the 'household' usually now restricted in scope to include only his wife and his children.

My-home-ism keeps husband, wife and children together, ... the husband... finds it all the easier to concentrate his attention on the affairs of his place of work. A man's attention to his wife and children decreases as he climbs the promotion ladder... The Japanese husband appears far more free than his western counterpart, and, on this account, Japanese wives come in for their fair share of sympathy. But the average middle-aged Japanese wife does not appear to need such sympathy; she will often say something such as, 'How fortunate it is to have a husband who is healthy and at work' (in other words, absent from home).... The core of the Japanese family, ancient and modern, is the parent-child relationship, not that between husband and wife".

<sup>8</sup>For a detailed explanation of this and other Japanese technical terms, see Nannini (forthcoming).

may sound like a bit too much. When my son was born, I happened to be congratulated by a friend who said:

*Ôkiku nattara onna-o nakaseru!*  
 Big to-become-when woman-object to cry-to make  
 “When he grows up, he’ll make women cry!”

I did not realize immediately that my friend was talking about the baby in the future being good looking, and my first reaction was from a totally different point of view. I wondered how terrible he was going to be: hard-hearted, insensitive and a troublemaker.

## 2.2 Age, ageing and death

It seems that the Japanese do not mind talking about age and eventually death. Here is an example, very poetic to a Western ear, of what the elderly people better sometimes say. In April, when the sakura trees (Japanese cherry) are in full bloom, the Japanese tradition is to gather together and to picnic under the trees, enjoying a good time and feeling that a new year has begun. On such occasions, one can sometimes hear an elderly person say:

*Ato nan-kai sakura – o mirareru no deshoo?*  
 From now on how many times cherry-tree-obj. can see copula (dubitat.).  
 “How many times will I be able to see the *sakura* trees in full bloom?”

As “one time” stands for “one year”, the meaning is: “How many years have I left in front of me?”. It seems to be a very gentle acknowledgement of death. Related to this subject, there are other expressions that Westerners would consider surprising. To show how they care about the good relationship of a new couple, it is common for the parents to tell them to have a baby soon, even during the party after the wedding ceremony:

*Shinu mae ni mago-no kao ga mitai*  
 To die before grandchild-of face-subj. to see-to want  
 “Before I die, I want to see my grandchildren’s face”. Or simply *Hayaku mago-no kao ga mitai*, where the only difference is “soon” instead of “before I die”.

The Japanese are not bothered by such expressions, because they are meant to show the loving feelings of the parents for the new family. For Westerners, though, they are usually felt as an inappropriate invasion of their right to decide, freely, whether or not to have a baby.

As such, the general attitude of the Italians toward death is usually to avoid the subject and not to talk about it at all. When the elderly do talk about it, they may imply something like a reproach: "I know I am in the way, but I'll stop bothering you soon..."

### *2.3 Body and health*

In this respect, we find many common expressions that are surprising to a foreign ear. To be as brief as possible, I will discuss a few aspects of this topic beforehand. As I have noted elsewhere (Nannini 1999: 235-236; Nannini 2000: 232-234), the Japanese are considered to use mainly indirect ways of expression, while foreigners, usually seen as more assertive and straight, are likely to use more direct ones. Nevertheless, sometimes, as Donahue also states,<sup>9</sup> this does not seem to be the case. He correctly explains that, though Japanese can be "clear-cut" to other Japanese, a foreigner might still find "vagueness" in their words. This may depend on the fact that the foreigner "has not attended to the most significant contextual cues, assumed certain pretexts of information, or both". In the examples that follow, though, the problem is not "vagueness" at all. In these cases, I propose to distinguish between "direct and indirect" on the one side and "implicit and explicit" on the other. I do not mean to deny that the Japanese prefer and are perfectly conscious of being indirect, which they tend to see as a "unique" character of theirs (Donahue 1998: 261-262): in Japanese one can refer to a person as a "direction" (Japan. *kata*). Nevertheless, I find that the tendency to indirectness does not necessarily imply a preference for implicitness. It seems, instead, that, in cer-

<sup>9</sup> Donahue (1998: 262-266). In an attempt to define contrastive rhetoric, he discusses the "vagueness" and "indirectness" that are often associated with the Japanese language, and, through the words of the translator Roger Pulver, stresses that: "The mystique of subtlety, like the mystique of ambiguity, apparently lies in unspoken words. I don't buy this. Every language, at least the ones I know, has masses of unspoken messages and implied subtleties, Japanese no more or less than any". Donahue believes that what clarifies the "vagueness" is mainly the context, and to support this opinion quotes Edwin Reischauer's words: "Japanese can be very clear-cut... It can be perfectly clear and Japanese scientists learned they had to make things clear that way... The work of the Japanese scientist can be put directly into English and spread around the world." But my point, as shown in the text, is quite different.

tain cases, in Western languages (and especially Italian in at least one case I will show later), implicit expressions are highly recommended. As a teacher, I have sometimes to listen to my students' excuses (I will explain further about apology in 4.4.) for their being late. So it happens that I hear something like:

<i>Sumimasen.</i>	<i>Nebô</i>	<i>shimashita.</i>
Sorry.	Oversleeping	to do-past "Sorry, I overslept"
<i>Futsukayoi</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>okirarenakatta.</i>
Hangover	<i>copula</i> (connective)	to wake up-cannot –past
"I have a hangover, I couldn't wake up"		

Drinking and being drunk is not a real problem in Japanese society (although youngsters are not allowed to buy or drink alcohol until they are twenty years old). Hangovers are considered nothing else than an unpleasant consequence of a pleasant night. Italians, instead, tend to see them as signs of the inability to keep control over oneself. In Japan, many advertisements on TV, newspapers or trains refer to drinking and hangovers. Drinking together is not only a way of socializing or spending time with friends, but it is also one of the favourite ways of doing business. It is also a way of relaxing after a day's work, as Nakane (1989 [1984]: 130) explains: "It is Japanese tradition that *whatever is said in drink is excused and should be forgotten*. The bar is therefore important as a place to pour out all frustrations. Many Japanese will say without scruple 'I can't live without a bar.'" (italics mine)<sup>10</sup>.

Another of my students' excuses sound as follows:

<i>Onaka-o</i>	<i>kowashite,</i>	<i>geri</i>	<i>shite-imasu.</i>
My belly-obj.	to break,	diarrhoea	to be doing. "I broke my belly and have diarrhoea".

In this case, the word for "belly" (not "stomach") is not in the familiar form (*hara*), so it seems to show consideration for the listener. Still, it is

<sup>10</sup>Nakane (1989 [1984]: 129-131) discusses in depth the meaning of drinking and bars (and "bar madames" and hostesses) in Japanese culture, stressing how different it is from the meaning an American would give to drinking together with one's colleagues or friends. Nakane connects this with personal relations "which do not require much intellectual manoeuvre but demand highly sensitive and nervous procedure. Indeed, these procedures involve a degree of nervous fatigue and expenditure of emotion not normally found in such measure in other societies". Cfr. also Higa in Nannini (forthcoming)

very difficult to define these “indirect” expressions, but it is easy to think that you should *not* inform your teacher down to such details. I truly doubt that in Italy they would work as reasonable excuses. It seems that the younger generations tend to make more use of such “straightness”. Still, I happened to listen to a lady speaking to a young man who had serious problems with his sight. Talking directly *to* him, and talking *about* him, she said:

*Me no warui hito wa*

Eyes-of bad person-*theme* “The ones who have bad eyes...”

I felt that the problem of the young man would have required something less explicit, or better, not to be mentioned at all.

Illnesses that Italians would not mention, using a periphrasis instead, show up in everyday speech. The use of a word such as *cancer*, in Italian (*cancro*, Japan. *gan*), would be limited to the absolutely necessary. Italians would far prefer to call it *una brutta malattia*, *un brutto male* (“a bad illness”), while in Japanese, and, as it seems, also in American English, it is common in everyday language: TV commercials of insurance companies promise you total coverage in case of hospitalization due to cancer. My students are generally surprised when I tell them to avoid being too specific, and to be instead as generic as possible when referring to eventual health problems, leaving the details to when they talk to a physician or a pharmacist. They find Italians to be “too delicate” or willing to “deny the evidence” (the same can be said also about the subject of death discussed above).

I will briefly introduce a last example: it seems that, in this case, Americans would employ expressions similar to the Japanese, while Italians would avoid them. Invited to someone’s place for a meal and preferring not to help oneself to more of a dish, the Japanese usually say:

*O-naka*  
*honor.-belly*

*ga ippai*  
*subj. full*

*desu.*  
copula “My belly is full”.

Americans would have no objection to “I’m full”, while Italians, as seen above, more often than not, avoid being explicit about physical conditions. Even *stomach* would not sound right in Italian, as *stomaco pieno* is usually referred to the right time for taking medicines. Most frequently, they would say *Grazie, basta così*, roughly translatable as “Thank you, it

is sufficient like this”. They would reserve *Sono pieno* or *piena* (“I’m full”) only for a very familiar and intimate situation. Surprisingly, the corresponding Japanese expression, *Moo kekkô desu* (“It is OK like this”), might imply that you didn’t like the dish, and so it is better to say that you cannot eat anymore not to hurt the feelings of your host.

When one happens to be in a celebration where a buffet is offered, the words used at the beginning of the meal are:

*Iroirona ryôri-o go-yoi shite arimasu node, takusan o-meshiagari-kudasai.*

Various dish-*obj* honor.-preparation is done causal much eat-imperative-honorif.

“As many dishes have been prepared, please eat a lot”.

A reasonable way to explain these divergences is to reconsider our discussion about age and death. As a consequence of those assessments and of the examples seen in this section, we can perhaps hypothesize that talking about “nature” (whatever the form, so *without* excluding the body, life, illness or death) is nothing to be ashamed of. This may provide an explanation as to why we have no need to be disturbed by such expressions, and that we should rather recognize them as natural processes whatever they are. On the other hand, if a Japanese is so explicit in a foreign language, it could be very embarrassing for the listener, which is the reason why I find it important to try to include in my teaching the appropriate cultural background.

## 2.4 Money

The Japanese, as well as Italians, giving a present to someone, tend not to stress its value; so, when Italians would say *E’ un pensierino* (lit. “It is only a small thought”), the Japanese say:

*Kimochi dake desu*  
Feeling only copula

“It is only (the expression of my) feelings”, meaning that the listener would deserve something far better. Another expression is

*Tsumaranai mono desu ga*  
Trivial object copula even if



“Even if it is something of no importance (please accept it)”.

It is usual to say, when offering something in one's house:

<i>Nanimo</i>	<i>arimasen</i>	<i>ga</i>
Nothing	to be-negat	even if

“Even if there's nothing (please help yourself)”, when the whole table is filled with many different dishes, often accompanied with:

<i>O-kuchi-ni</i>	<i>awanai</i>	<i>kamoshiremasen</i>	<i>ga</i>
Honor.-mouth-to	fit-negat.	maybe-courtesy form	but

“Maybe you will not like it.” This shows that it is socially correct to lower oneself and to be modest (which has its linguistic correspondent in the form called *kenjôgo*: “humble language (or expression)”). This does not exclude that in some cases talking of money in a rather explicit way can be normal, under circumstances that for an Italian would be, to say the least, surprising. Sometimes it is important to know how one should address (i.e. use the *keigo* or not) the listener according to parameters of hierarchy in society, and so, even indirectly, a Japanese would try to understand what someone's job is, even if it has nothing to do with the situation. This is the reason why, when introduced to someone, the Japanese exchange *meishi* (“calling card”, Donahue 1998: 237), in order to understand each other's position. But the most interesting thing is how talking about money can be a form of appreciation of the listener or for an object he or she has. For instance, while we would tend to stress how nice a new dress looks on a woman, it is not at all rare, among women, to hear something like:

<i>Suteki!</i>	<i>Takakatta</i>	<i>deshô.</i>
Beautiful!	Expensive- past	isn't it?

“That's beautiful! It was expensive, wasn't it?”

The listener will tend to say that it was not at all expensive, or that it was a bargain.

In the paragraph about *giving money* Mizutani-Mizutani (1987: 58) say: “You should not hand money as it is to your teacher [*for personal lessons in traditional arts, for example*]; you should put the money in an enve-

lope and hand it over in an inconspicuous manner – quietly slipping it to the side of your teacher, for instance”.

This suggests that money is something that is better not to talk about, but the same authors (Mizutani-Mizutani 1987: 6), referring to the language of salesmen, tell about “a small investigation” carried out by a teacher of Japanese: “She accompanied dozens of foreign students visiting real estate offices to find rooms to rent. The students wanted to find apartments renting for about 30,000 yen a month, and the real estate agent always spoke to them using the plain form. However, an acquaintance of ours who was looking for a place for about 300,000 yen reports that the real state agents spoke very politely to her”.

There is also a typical frame that comes into play when you pay with a credit card: the person at the register, as a matter of routine, asks you:

<i>Ikkatsu de</i>	<i>yoroshii</i>	<i>desu</i>	<i>ka</i>
One-time	all right-honorific	copula	interr. particle

“Is a one-time payment all right?” We foreigners would not expect to be asked so openly, in front of other customers waiting for their turn, about something we are used to seeing as personal information. My students, though, told me that many young people answer “*jukkatsu-barai*” (“payment in ten times”) without the least embarrassment. All the examples that we can show seem, thus, to point in the direction that what is “private” for non-Japanese, might not be the same for a Japanese. In addition, going to a Japanese convenience store or a bookstore, one can see people standing and reading magazines or newspapers on display, then putting them back in their places and going out of the store. There is a word for this: *tachi-yomi* “stand-read”. I am sure that in Italy the storekeeper would tell you that if you want to read that magazine, you had better buy it.

## 2.5 Attitude in speaking, apologizing and taking responsibility

Foreigners often have the impression that the Japanese spend a lot of time apologizing. Sometimes, however, the expression for “I’m sorry”: *sumimasen*, is used to thank someone for a small favour or for a small gift. In any case, there is no doubt that Japanese apologize much more than Italians do (except when they are on a full train when foreigners would expect apologies when pushed back and forth). They expect, in any case, to receive apologies for everything that goes wrong, even if one is not

responsible. Mizutani-Mizutani (1987: 41) report the story of an American acquaintance who had borrowed a heater from her landlady: "Something went wrong with it; she went to the landlady and said:

*Koware mashita* (It broke.)

The landlady looked offended, and their relations were seriously damaged after that. The landlady must have expected the American woman to say

*Kowashite-shimatte, sumimasen* (I'm sorry I broke it.)

even though she did not intend to ask her to pay for repairs".

It is known how important it is to bow and lower your head in order to express your apologies through body language: to a Japanese it would be meaningless to be told "I'm sorry" without your whole attitude expressing it. Mizutani-Mizutani stress the fact that apologies are more important and more appreciated than explanations (1987: 49-50), a fact which often makes foreigners uncomfortable. The underlying cultural feature, however, is that a long explanation would mean that one has "no need to feel sorry", as the explanation itself is a sufficient justification for something that went wrong.

Another important aspect I have indirectly introduced in 4.2, is never to sound too assertive and to be as hesitant as possible, as the quoted authors correctly point out, not only when apologizing, but also when making requests or giving explanations. Hesitancy is important to sound polite in Japanese. The information has to be divided into segments ("proceeding step by step": Mizutani-Mizutani 1987: 120). This allows the listener to make *aizuchi*, translated as "back-channeling" by Donahue (1998:147). The conclusion is usually not said, but left to the listener. Examples of *aizuchi* are vocalizations such as *ee* ("yes"), or fixed formulas like *soo desu ne* (roughly: "I see"), *soo desu ka* ("really"). *Aizuchi* is to be regarded as an example of Jakobson's "phatic function" of language. Such formulations are very frequent in Japanese conversation and shows the interest and the involvement of the listener. A low frequency of it would be interpreted as lack of understanding or interest. On the other hand, it is certainly true that in more familiar contexts hesitancy is not necessary and that *aizuchi* is much less frequent.

### 3. Conclusions

As I have said above, this is only a tentative approach to some issues of cross-cultural interaction in Japanese and has no other goal than to show a few features one should take into consideration to understand and correctly communicate in that language. It has also been an opportunity to discuss *ethnicity* as a defining feature that has no need to be minimized or wiped away, but that, instead, can provide important means of comprehension. On the other hand, the reader will understand that I am extremely aware that *ethnocentrism* is a problem we have to deal with in education and that the necessities of a multicultural society cannot ignore it. I hope I succeeded in explaining how useful the consciousness of one's culture can be in order to learn about another one and also to understand more deeply the mental and linguistic process even in one's own.

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