Limits of tolerance
In search of principles governing to usage of the Japanese language

In this paper I would like to argue that the real difficulty of the Japanese language does not lie in the intricacies of grammar and vocabulary, but in finding the demarcation line between what may be said, even if it is grammatically wrong, and what may not be said, even if it is grammatically correct.

This demarcation line is, as I see it, created by all those elements that are essential for maintaining a feeling of mental comfort. Moreover, these elements are not arbitrary but formed in interaction with other members of the same language community. Thus in German a wrong formation of the past tense of a verb (e.g. "ich schreibte") by a non-native speaker *might* be a more serious mistake than a comparable fault in Japanese, being coupled to a native German speaker's loss of mental comfort in the face of someone not learning or independently applying rules properly. Limits of tolerance when using a language thus have a lot to do with how the speakers of that language believe that society – and not only language - should function.

To learn about the limits of tolerance in Japanese requires that we gain an understanding of how our Japanese counterpart believes that a society should function. Of course I do not ignore the fact that there are systems of belief on many levels - individual, group, local, regional or cultural. Here it is only possible to speak of belief systems that are widely shared among Japanese speakers on a cultural level.

To understand a belief system - a system that stresses specific types of behaviour considered essential for the maintenance of emotional security - it is practical first of all to find out how an individual's actions within his or her social unit have been shaped and legitimised.

Here I can only briefly name the major systems that in Japan defined what a human being is and what human behaviour ought to be like. Probably the most basic of these systems was one that can be termed Taoism. In effect it explained the universe as a continuous process of changes brought about by the working of one force upon another. A central element of Taoism is the concept of *yin* and yang, "cool/sinking/feminine" and "hot/rising/masculine". According to this world view there can be no final state or definite goal. Within such a system

mental comfort and self-esteem are closely tied to finding one's own relative position in a network of complementary elements that make up the universe.

The greatest direct impact on the concrete patterns of "making sense of the universe" certainly came from Buddhist teachings. Besides being – or being made - compatible with basic Taoist concepts Buddhism layed particular stress on the idea of enlightenment through detachment, i.e. through acceptance of the fact that "self" must make every effort to find harmony with the endless cycle of changing constellations, and that it is not the constellations that will adapt to "self".

Confucianism – and particularly the orthodox teachings of what is known as Neo-Confucianism (*shushigaku,* "the teachings of Chu Hsi" [1130-1200]) – is a third decisive factor to shape Japanese values and places central importance on the formation of "virtue". Virtue, in *shushigaku* terms, includes a deep understanding of the fact that each element in the universe exists relative to another element. Virtue itself can be likened to an inner compass (concretely referred to as *kokoro* – "heart") that helps a person properly fit into a given constellation of other persons in space and time, and act appropriately.

Shintô, finally, has functioned as an expansion of Confucian ideas, defining relationships not only within society, but also between society and those deities that – being indigenous - guarantee the well being of all Japanese. In conjunction with popular forms of Buddhism (i.e. the belief in Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who will do favours for mankind) it brings the realm of spiritual forces close enough to the human world to permit a direct and concrete relationship with it. The spiritual world thus shapes human life, not from the distance through rule and punishment, but rather through the return of favours, encouraging belief in the "I-give-you-so-that-you-give-me" principle and the proper management of relationships.

All the main systems of thought that have fundamentally shaped Japan have important characteristics in common. All in their way hold the view that individual and social action must occur inside an overall frame of an all-encompassing universal principle that is kept going thanks to the eternal give-and-take between close-knit complementary elements. This principle regulates all things, including human society. Survival and mental comfort, therefore, depends on whether this give-and-take between close-knit complementary elements functions smoothly. This, in turn, demands that complementary relationships are perceived and acknowledged.

At this point I must hasten to add that in modern Japan there are certainly many more belief systems than those of Taoist-Buddhist-Confucian origin. However, we must bear in mind that Japan has been exposed to Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism for the entire length of its known history, i.e. for well over 1500 years. Moreover, Confucian elements form the nucleus of all instructions for proper behaviour right up to this very day.

We have so far employed a historical perspective to try to grasp what factors may have structured Japanese beliefs in how society should function. The form in which Japan seeks to maintain mental comfort reflects these beliefs and also determines how the Japanese use their language.

Let me now approach the Japanese system of beliefs from quite a different angle. By what means, I would like to ask, does a member of modern Japanese society reinforce the validity of his or her belief system? I will touch upon two major means here. The first one is an absolutely astounding quantity of material produced to help a person find the proper way to speak, write or act in a practically infinite number of possible constellations. Not only is the material produced in this context enormous, so is also the time invested in teaching and practising to act in specific constellations. As a result, large segments of communicative action are entirely formalized, expressing nothing more and nothing less than awareness of a specific constellation. We would certainly reach the limit of Japanese tolerance if we on our part did not show - even if our grammar is faulty - at least an effort to adapt to a given constellation, or - worse still - try to personally define a constellation without considering the background facts.

Written or unwritten instructions for all sorts of human activity from teaching in school to employment in a firm or participation in a sports club are good examples to show the fundamental position of statements holding that human action must follow from the understanding of a person's relative position in a network of relationships with other persons. "A person's position" naturally also means reflecting upon the fact of being a man or a woman, a younger or elder person, a giver or receiver, and so on.

On the level of language, these reflections entail carefully choosing verbs, prefixes or additional phrases that mark how the speaker is adapting to a given partner, but also the use of specific emphatic elements, a specific intonation, specific gestures, careful deliberation as to the way to proceed in giving information (i.e. how to chop up and order one's information so that it can be presented in proper portions and in a proper sequence to a specific receiver), or

how and when to omit elements of information, relying on the fact that the person I am talking to is adjusting to me the same way as I am adjusting to him, and that he will therefore complete my signals.

It is highly probable that a Japanese speaker cannot deal with the inversion of the rule "First clarification of relationships → then the presentation of a fact". Not being able to deal with disregard for the primary aspect of human action, namely the specific structure of a relationship, means that for a Japanese partner even a small mistake in signalling awareness of a relationship is likely to be beyond the limits of his tolerance.

Another means of reinforcing a system of beliefs besides that of publishing and practising details of different kinds of relationships is the use of sanctions. It is most interesting to observe, however, that sanctions in Japan tend not to mark lines that should not be crossed. Thus forbidding something outright, or mapping out rules and regulations that tell you what *not* to do, is not a common way to keep behaviour in check. Rather, sanctioning consists of getting the offender, a) to reflect upon who he or she *is*, then b) to think of the deeper meaning of being part of a relationship with others, and thereby c) to himself arrive at the conclusion that appropriate forms of behaviour are necessary.

Some expressions associated with reprimand are: *kokoro* - heart, in the sense of: "look into your heart, the laws of nature will tell you that you must adjust", or *hansei* - reflection, in the sense of: "reflect upon who you are and who the other person is." A further very important concept is *rei*. *rei* may be described as the feeling, and the totality of actions arising from this feeling, that you cannot exist outside a framework of other people who were there before you and who are there around you. *rei* implies also *aisatsu*, "acknowledgement of the existence of another person" (very inadequately often translated as "greeting"). In specific contexts *rei* can also mean "paying for an effort", "showing respect towards ancestors or any supernatural power", or simply "proper behaviour". Mistakes in the usage of *rei* are, be it noted, something very different from the concept of "bad manners", since *rei* does not primarily imply following a rule. Rather, *rei* is built upon the idea of a proper inner attitude. An improper attitude is certainly a worse offence in Japan than just the breach of manners.

The basic values in Japanese culture can be said not to focus on what may or may not be done in an abstract sense. Rather, they work to train the mind from the outset to subject all actions to the consideration of a given relationship: "Who am I, and who is the other person?", that is the central question. Attributable to these basic values is an astonishing lack of structures to keep

people apart, such as laws, time slots, space markers, and, on the level of language, speech forms that indicate mainly distance without any nearer definition of a specific relationship. In such Japanese conceptions as "you person of my group but higher standing in relation to me", or "you younger person, for whom I am responsible", it is not distance that is perceived, but rather complementary forces working upon each other.

We might say that every culture possesses certain "sacred" areas, any infringement upon which, either verbally or by some action, will cause mental discomfort and a feeling that the social fabric and with it one's own identity is in question. In Japan this "sacred" area could be defined as "The belief that the world, that feeds and nourishes us and to which we owe our existence, must always be kept going". To keep the world going it is essential that all individual units in it interact, interaction meaning the working of close-knit complementary elements upon each other. So that this system does not brake down it is necessary that both parties act in accordance with an understanding of the overall situation, as well as of their specific position within it. Moreover, it is legitimate and necessary to structure relationships around a common effort to achieve something, a non achievement-oriented relationship tending to appear senseless - if nothing is to be achieved, why should existence then be based on complementary relationships? The limits of tolerance are, thus, presumably reached when anything from outside prevents or hinders the usage of complementary relationships within a framework of "keeping things going".

Four conclusions with regard to the use of the Japanese language can be drawn:

1. If we do use Japanese it must be born in mind that our primary effort needs to focus upon signalling who we are, and who the person spoken to is. If we do this, even if we are not able to give adequate linguistic form to our thoughts, the person spoken to as a rule will begin to move towards us and complete our thoughts. We, however, ought to be able to do the same and pick up the ideas of our partner, if communication is to succeed.

2. As mentioned when referring to the enormous amount of material available to help finding one's way through given relationships, the degree of formalized elements in Japanese is extremely high. However, these formalized elements in many situations are perfectly sufficient to provide the feeling that all is well and functioning. If action is not seen as something independent of relationships, then to signal awareness of a relationship basically guarantees correct action.

3. Faulty Japanese grammar and vocabulary should not, I think, be called "wrong". Rather, in view of the necessity to acknowledge complementary relationships, we should say that – if there is no such thing as "faulty Japanese" – there is certainly something like "an incorrect inner attitude which has not worked to prevent a person bothering another person by producing unintelligible expressions." In other words, the problem we are facing is not one of wright or wrong, but one of bothering or not bothering someone else.

4. Far more important than the problem of correct grammar and vocabulary is the question: "*What* do I - in view of who *I* am and who the *other person* is - altogether talk about, and *how*, i.e. with what rhythm, in what portions, and with what omissions, do I talk about something?" We will definitely have reached the limits of tolerance if our partner politely tells us, "Please remember who *you* are, and who *we* are!"

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Inhalt:

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