

Japanese theory of relativity

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Today I'd like to bring something to your attention: Japanese have observed the theory of relativity since well before Einstein!

In an earlier article I showed that there are more than 2,000 shades of meaning possible when saying *I am a cat* in Japanese. I discussed how a Japanese person chooses a suitable word for "I" from among many alternatives, considering the given situation. In other words speakers position themselves according to context. This is one aspect of what I call relativism. Compare this, for example, with English, in which "I" is "I" whomever you speak to, whatever the situation may be. We could call this absolutism.

The same holds true for "you," of course. While in English the people you speak to are always "you," whoever they may be, in speaking Japanese the speaker chooses different words considering relationships, ages and the situation.

This relativism may be seen in the political arena as well. It is quite common that Western political leaders set out principles, such as human rights, freedom or democracy, in order to justify major actions like war, for example. To the contrary, Japanese leaders would rather try to lay out surrounding circumstances and explain why action needs to be taken. In this approach principles are often secondary.

Those of you who have studied Japanese know that one of the important mindsets which needs to be mastered for speaking the language naturally is the *in-group/out-group* concept. The typical *in-group* is your family; everyone else is *out-group*. This is important because you treat your *in-group* a certain way: You never honor or heighten their status, just as you never honor or heighten yourself. You use humble words for family members when you refer to them while talking to someone else. In the past, one even frequently heard derogatory words used to refer to one's family! For instance, "my stupid son" was quite common (among others). Today this has fallen almost completely out of use—but nevertheless, one can see in this (perhaps in an extreme fashion), the Japanese tendency to never heighten the *in-group*.

Things get more complicated when we move outside the family. Traditionally, Japanese have tended to consider the organization they belong to as something like family; so people within an organization are treated as *in-group* when speaking to the organization's *out-group* (typically customers). So, your company's chief executive officer, a Mr. Sato, say, is referred to as just Sato without his title; not

even Sato-san is used when talking to *out-group*. The most junior employees talking with a customer are no exception here—they would still refer simply to Sato. Keep in mind that calling someone by just their name sounds quite rude in Japanese; this is called *yobisute* ("throw away one's name"). Here we are treating Mr. Sato just like a family member, disregarding his position vis-a-vis ourselves. So long as we are discussing Mr. Sato with an *out-group* person, he is never honored in our own speech. When the same senior person is referred to within the organization, when speaking to other *in-group* members, however, he or she is treated with due respect, of course. It all depends on the situation. This is another aspect of relativism.

Another aspect of Japanese relativity is seen in the use of tenses. For instance Japanese has no past tense in the true sense of the word. You might argue that the form *kita*, for instance, is the past tense of the verb, *kuru*. But what about this example, for instance: *Ashita kita toki hanashimashō*. ("Let's talk about it when I 'came' here tomorrow.") Surely the correct English is: "Let's talk about it when I 'come' here tomorrow." But the Japanese equivalent is indeed *kita*, which is the "past tense." Why?

Accurately described, *kita* is not a past form but a "perfective" form. Let us think of the two actions, coming and talking, from the above example. While both will occur tomorrow (in the future), coming will have occurred before talking happens. What you see here is another aspect of relativism.

It seems to me that relativism is as deeply rooted in the Japanese mind as it is rooted in the language. One awkward position a Japanese person often encounters is being asked by an English speaker to answer Yes or No. Frequently, the person spoken to honestly tends to feel like saying, "I cannot really say either way without knowing more about the circumstances." This attitude might look indecisive or as having no principles.

If you think about it more, however, is there anything that is absolutely bad? For instance, killing other people—is it an absolute vice? In war it is encouraged. Capital punishment has been long debated the world over.

Freedom, for example—can it be an absolute value? I would venture certainly not. Once you are with another person (say, in marriage), it is inevitable that your freedom is restricted one way or the other. As long as you live in a society, it is only natural that everyone operates under some restrictions so as not to encroach on other's freedoms (which are also restricted). I maintain that there cannot be absolute freedom, only relative freedom.

The Japanese language seems to simply accept this relativistic world, and its speakers move forward in relation to others. As a Japanese native I am prone to take this relativism as more realistic. How about you?

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