Fabric of the Japanese mindset

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When interacting with Japanese people, have you ever felt them quite inquisitive about your age? Have you ever felt somewhat alienated, not quite accepted in Japan? Some foreigners in Japan reach strong conclusions: I distinctly remember an American couple who firmly—and, of course, mistakenly—believed that all Japanese are racists who would never want to sit next to them on the train.

Let's talk today about social phenomena which are born of mindsets woven into the structural fabric of the Japanese language.

Previously, I have discussed the so-called *desu/masu* style (distal style) of Japanese, which allows the creation of a certain distance between speakers. Typically, younger people employ this style to show respect to their elders. Even when speaker and listener are the same age, they might use this speech style to maintain a comfortable distance with each other. As they get to know each other better, the distance becomes annoying, and *desu/masu* style is replaced by more direct communication; this "direct style" is typically seen among children, close friends, family members, teammates and so on.

The styles force a choice on every communication: direct or distal style? To communicate appropriately, the first consideration becomes the relative age of one's counterpart. If uncertain, the safer approach, distal style, is used, but even while talking one might switch to direct style upon learning that the counterpart is in fact one's junior, or that both sides were born in the same year.

Native Japanese are not strongly aware of distinguishing between the two styles—they do it almost unconsciously. However, natives do feel a strong urge to select a style; it makes them more comfortable talking in a given situation. This feeling prompts native speakers to try to ascertain their counterpart's age. If asking directly is awkward, people might ask about the zodiac animal of the other person's birth year, the year of their university graduation, the year they joined their company or other clues.

European languages tend to have two speech styles which are distinguished by different use of second-person pronouns (sueh as "you") and their related verb forms. Interestingly, English lacks this type of style distinction. My belief is that this "missing" style distinction plays a key role in the general Anglo-American idea that seniority-based social systems are a bad thing. Seniority seems undemo-

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cratic, unfair even, when viewed from the English-language approach that assumes all people are equal.

After World War II, this "modern" idea was strongly stressed in Japanese education; I now feel that it was stretched too far. (Mind you, though, I'm not saying this because I have now become a senior person myself.) I believe that longer life experience is in itself respect-worthy, regardless of social status. That many languages have tools supporting a seniority-based structure makes me believe that this idea is widely held. Nor do I see this as contradicting equality among people!

In addition to seniority, another language-based mindset shapes Japanese society: *uchi-soto* ("in-group/out-group"). Although the idea is not uniquely Japanese, and reflects something found in any society, Japanese is equipped with linguistic tools that show it explicitly and systematically.

Uchi-soto is based on the idea that everyone belongs to a group; people within the group are in-group, the rest are out-group. The natural and most obvious in-group is one's family, so, in Japanese, all family members are handled as if one were talking about oneself and no honorific terms are used. To Japanese people, the largest in-group is the Japanese themselves vis-a-vis foreigners. Presumably if we are ever visited by space aliens, "humanity" would become the largest in-group with "the aliens" comprising the relative "out-group."

The in-group/out-group concept covers all groups one belongs to. So, a well-mannered secretary refers to the boss, whether chief executive officer, chairman or whomever, without the honorific "-san," using just the last name (which in fact might sound quite rude from the boss's point of view), when she is talking to someone outside the company. If talking to someone within the company, the secretary would use honorific terms when referring to the boss. Whether to treat a person as in-group or out-group depends on whom you talk to; it is all relative.

Foreigners are inevitably first seen as out-group vis-a-vis the Japanese as a whole. That is why you are often referred to as *gaijin* ("out-person"). With obvious differences in appearance, it is not easy to get rid of your gaijin-ness. While this can lead to a sense of alienation, it seems clear to me, however, that this is not the same thing as prejudice. Even among Japanese, out-group people are all out-group, whether they are foreign or just from a different organization.

We can think of the fabric of the Japanese mindset about society in this way: The warp follows seniority, and the woof tracks group affiliation. Polite social interaction requires that you think not only in terms of "up and down" (direct versus distal), but also "side to side" (in-group versus out-group).