Japanese Linguistic Ambiguity

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1. Introduction

Languages have euphemisms and people intentionally and unconsciously use them to protect themselves from being offensive and/or build a positive relationship between interlocutors. Euphemism can be divided into three major categories: euphemism, dysphemism (a combination of both is what Allan and Burridge (1991) call X-phemism), and doublespeak. It is not an easy task to set up a clear distinction between these categories. Euphemisms are defined as characterised expressions that seek to avoid being offensive, unpleasant, and unfavourable whereas, dysphemisms, or what Grant (1977) calls malphemism, are expressions to be offensive and indicate negative discernment (Allan & Burridge 1991). Doublespeak is a similar entity to both euphemism and dysphemism, but it contains stronger intentions to interchange or obfuscate the truth of the issue and deceive the audiences (Lutz, 1989).

Not to tell the core of the story is also regarded as euphemistic in character whether or not there is an intention to deceive addressees. Japanese is infamously known as a connotatively obscure language, a notable case in point being the utterances of the Prime Minister Eisaku Sato in his United States visit in 1969, regarding textile imports from Japan. At a meeting, President Nixon urged that the Japanese exercise restraint in their exports, to which Mr. Sato replied, ‘*Zensho shimasu*’, which, the translator explained, means, ‘I will do my best.’ In the Japanese context, no one would have further desire to comment and P.M. Sato actually meant ‘no chance’. President Nixon, however, thought that P.M. Sato would begin to impose restrictions on the Japanese textile exports to the United States. No altered policy took place for the Japanese textile export to the United States except that a stalemate between the two countries regarding trade occurred (Lutz, 1989; Miller, 1977; Wolfson, 1989).

In the example of the discussion between P.M. Sato and President Nixon, use of the difference of linguistic elements was not the issue. The problem was the knowledge of sociological and cultural context. Context becomes the main influential factor for intercultural communication. All euphemistic expressions are basically selected within the context of the world being discussed and the linguistic and/or cultural environment the speaker and listener are part of. Without this, misinformation will be easily transferred to the addressees. Moreover it is vital to consider the role of the context in all types of social discourse especially when speakers of different cultural backgrounds interact. If the context is understood by the individual value system in the target language (or society) and no explanation is offered beforehand to adjust the chasm, communication and euphemistic expressions can be transferred negatively. If the perspective of the context differs between utilisers of the two different languages, focus of the different type context becomes significant, because even if the perspective of the context is common

between utilisers of the two different languages, conflicts may still exist between interlocutors. Thus, euphemism, dysphemism, and doublespeak are not the only issue for choosing different expressions but to be carefully used considering the context, and characteristic feature of the language.

Intercultural miscommunication can be observed very often in not only public situations such as politics but also our own individual private daily lives. In this paper, three significant points: concept of the Japanese context, politeness strategy and social attitude, and use of ambiguity in euphemisms affiliated to the society in Japanese discourse, are highlighted. The discussion will be developed on the premise that euphemism and dysphemism are not the only factor for choosing different expressions but should be carefully utilised considering the context, characteristic features of the language and society.

2. High and Low Context

When having a discussion on context, categories and characteristic features should be clearly understood. Context can be broadly defined in two types, high context and low context. High context is the situation in which human interaction can be exercised exchanging less information such as knowledge, concept and experience between individuals. In other words, interlocutors have already acquired those elements, in more details, each other's personal favour and conceptualisation so that less information is necessary to be exchanged. On the other hand, human interaction in low context needs more information to be exchanged when interacting due to the shortage of the pre-acquired information. This implies that more and accurate information is required with precise words/phrases/topic selection in undeviating speech pattern in order to minimise the communication failure (Azuma, 1997).

The level and degree of the context diverges and will have to do with nationality and/or ethnic group (Rosch & Segler, 1987, cited in Azuma, 1997, see Note for more details). In the consideration of the interacting procedure created by most Japanese people, they are categorised as the high context personalities. Hayashi (1988, p. 167) affirms that 'The traditional Japanese philosophy is that spelling out everything from A to Z in an agreement is a petty, pedantic exercise and presumes divergent interests'. *Ishin denshin* (telepathy or mental communication), *anmokuno ryoukai* (tacit/implicit understanding) are the lexical items to be introduced unintentionally in Japanese daily life very often, without connoting some supernatural phenomenon conducted in the English context. Not only some particular lexicon but linguistic behaviour can be observed differently. An interesting example of the two different contexts is evident when a visitor at home is served a drink by Japanese and English speaking people. In the case of a Japanese host, s/he would offer some drink considering visitors' background information including their personal preference. It could be a glass of cold juice in summer and hot tea or coffee in winter for consumers who don't require alcohol. In most cases, Japanese people do not prompt the visitor's choice, which may sound contrary to etiquette judged by English speaking communities, whereas it is rather a thoughtful manner for Japanese people not to ask their visitor's preference according to their cultural value (Azuma, 1997). Moreover, if the person is a frequent visitor, to raise a question every time would be sometimes regarded as an inconsiderate behaviour. In English speaking countries, however, it is clear that an offer of a drink without ensuring the visitor's favour would not occur in most cases. In addition, when the visitor prefers tea or coffee, questions such as whether

milk (and preference of the type of milk) and sugar (numbers in the spoon size) are required, as well as the strength of the drink itself.

On the other hand, English phrases, *Help yourself* and *Come if you want to* are also hardly acceptable in Japanese contexts. Receiving those locutions after being catered carefully for precise needs, there is always a feeling left by Japanese value judgement as incomplete hospitality from the host. Inquiry is not the only striking element to differentiate the national contextual identity, but addressing personal favour is also part of socio-pragmatic rule in English. Here is one example to demonstrate the rule in English from an interaction between Japanese male and Australian female flatmates. Viewing the News was part of the Japanese flatmate's daily routine. One day, he came to watch the TV News as usual and waited for the program, while the Australian flatmate kept changing the channels since nothing interested her. To his question why she did so and did not turn it to the News although she perfectly understood what he was waiting in front of the TV for, she replied, 'Why don't you say so if you want to watch it?' It is sometimes a perplexing task for Japanese as a high context nation to express our favour because such linguistic behaviour pattern expected by low context nations is deemed discourteous. Thus, low context behaviour rules seem to be constituted by either overt demands or self-determination, unlike Japanese with high context rules requiring a 'potential guest be urged to accept an invitation' (Wolfson, 1989, p. 17).

Azuma gives the example of naming of the menus at Japanese restaurants and reminds us of Japan as a high context nation. There are *omakase ranchi* or *omakase ryouri* which literally means choice of lunch or meals is decided by a third person. Although the menu does not show exactly what they are, people place an order for them with no pre-enquiry. Trusting others without asking for or ensuring details is a segment of Japanese culture that demonstrates Japan as a high context nation (Azuma, 1997). Ignorance of those underlined national contextual identities will cause distortion and result in the breakdown in human interaction.

3. Politeness Strategy

Due to its high context status, vagueness has been broadly accepted in Japanese society. Another factor for Japanese people's engagement with vagueness is highlighted in their attitude to express their politeness rules in Japanese discourse interaction. Lakoff (1975) categorises politeness into 3 areas: (1) Formality: keep aloof, (2) Deference: give options, and (3) Camaraderie: show sympathy. The first category comprises the elements observed quite often in both English and Japanese speaking contexts, while Japanese seems to contain more characteristics and striking features than English. Language is one of the mechanical functions to demonstrate people's attitudes including politeness, and at the same time, silence, which is not to display the emotion, sometimes demonstrates the indication of politeness (or at least not to suggest *impoliteness*) to others. This strategy is introduced in our daily public occasions. An example here could be seen in the case study of '*Communication Problems Between Japanese and Australians at a Dinner Party*', which is the observation of the Japanese participants having long periods of silence. 'Japanese tend to tolerate long periods of silence in conversation' (Asaoka, 1987, p. 25). The paper's author, Asaoka analysed the characteristic findings in Japanese usage which omit the terms please or thank you when requesting or offered something. This is due to the fact that it is not impolite in the Japanese system of etiquette to be quiet for a certain

time at the dinner table or on other social occasions (Asaoka, 1987). For the discovery of this phenomenon from all male Japanese participants, Lakoff (1975) comments;

Women are supposed to be particularly careful to say "please" and "thank you" and to uphold the other social conventions; certainly a woman who fails at these tasks is apt to be in more trouble than a man who does so: in a man it's "just like a man," and indulgently overlooked unless his behaviour is really boorish (Lakoff 1975, p. 55).

This statement shows that Japan can be seen as a male dominant country. Exclusion of particular terms by Japanese males in Japanese context is not impolite. Nevertheless, non-verbalised gratitude is monitored very often to both males and females.

The second category, Deference; to give options, may be seen as a union set of (1) and (3). A tag question produces a cause of vagueness and frequently viewed when interacting in Japanese as well as in English. Lakoff (1975, p. 18) wrote that 'it does not force agreement or belief on the addressee. A request may be in the same sense a polite command, in that it does not overtly require obedience, but rather suggests something to be done as a favour to the speaker.' Frequent use of the tag questions is the indication of the one's attitude to transfer the decisive judgemental responsibility to others, and non-specific individual perceptions are interpreted. Similar to this picture, omission is also a conspicuous element to promote vagueness. Omissions have two types; full-omissions which, for instance, I need to go, (to the toilet is omitted here), and quasi-omissions which replace some unfavoured term with non-lexical expression such as …., ----, **** and so forth (Allan & Burridge 1991). Unlike the observation of Allan and Burridge (1991) that quasi-omissions appear more frequently than full-omissions in English, full-omissions flourish in Japanese contexts. In the exchange of the utterances between addresser and addressee, the main essence of full-omission in Japanese is not only the sole lexical item of omission such as predicate, subject, which is apart from the characteristic feature of Japanese statement with no mention of the subject, and complement. *Nihongo Kyouiku Jiten* (1982) also develops the complement further to the cases including the nominative/objective case, and even the clause. When interlocutors' backgrounds are construed clearly by each other, communication problems seem not to occur so often. My perception, however, is that it is not quite an accurate description because it is feasible to notice that Japanese people repeatedly verify the message of the statement after misinterpretation and/or incomprehension of the statement. Even the information exchange within an intimate Japanese relationship may be easily disrupted by the omission, so that the case of the communication between unfamiliar people in Japanese would be more critical. Japanese politeness includes an absence of explicit statements, which enhances the creation of fruitful and various euphemistic forms.

Unlike category (1) and (2) above, Japanese language does not include various terms belonging to a third category, Camaraderie: to show sympathy including expletives. When focusing on lexical items and cliches, not so many alternatives are available and limited vocabulary is one of the defects of Japanese language (Miller, 1977). For example, there are a number of fruitful expressions seen in English when writing cards for different types of occasions. When verbal expressions of sympathy or personal empathy in situations such as a funeral or visiting a loved one in hospital, there is no way

to show personal feeling facing them. This occurs in both English and Japanese, but with no verbalisation of sympathetic expressions. This is because the terms to be appropriately employed in such occasions are remarkably limited in Japanese. In other words, an individual personal feeling is not often manifested in Japanese society.

In recent years, two of my Japanese friends' relatives in Australia passed away and my friends and I decided to send cards to them. After the others finished writing, the cards came to me and I discovered that statements in the cards were nothing but cliché. At the same time, however, it was infeasible for me to express truehearted and personal statements to my bereaved friends, as it seemed inappropriate within the (Japanese) context. My perception is that this difficulty might have derived from the unfamiliarity of these occasions to me, according to the advice of a couple of other Japanese friends living in Australia, who had experienced the same dilemma. For the purpose of expressing our sympathy, writing cards might already be considered as a unique perspicuity and this occasion demonstrated that aloofness, sometimes complete silence, leads to one of the most powerful politeness attitudes in the Japanese context. Even personal expressions will bring about the distance between an addresser and an addressee. Therefore, utilisation of cliché is often applied to formal/casual, and public/private situations for all types of interlocutors. Even a phrase, 'I am sorry to hear that' may not be proper enough to express sympathy in a Japanese close relationship. Lakoff (1975) wrote;

> Some forms of politeness are linguistic, some purely nonlinguistic, and many mixed; some are polite in some settings, neutral or downright rude in others; some are polite in some societies at one stage of a relationship, but rude in another society at a parallel stage, perhaps polite in the latter society at a different stage (Lakoff (1975, p. 53)).

4. Social Attitude Towards Ambiguity

Motivation of the ambiguous euphemistic expressions in the Japanese context is due to the fact that (1) an addresser has not acquired enough knowledge to comprehend the subject so that s/he subconsciously disguises the ignorance or (2) the vagueness is socially accepted and sometimes deemed a polite strategy. The first statement is associated mainly with the individual situation, and unfamiliarity with the subject in the context of English speaking countries is disadvantageous, whereas even this entity can be perceived positively in some Japanese contexts. When a new politician is elected, s/he often gives a speech including a statement such as, 'I am still in the first year of politics so there are various things to learn.' This statement can be considered as modest and humble, and has positive connotations in Japanese culture. This is a convention that aspiring politicians are expected to know prior to their candidature, whereas English speaking societies tend to elect more confident and outspoken candidates. Along with the picture of the positively connotative behaviour, positively connotative euphemisms abound such as Naiibu, which implies naivete, is the lexical item to describe the statement above. Naiibu in Japanese contains only positives in its expression rather than negative as in English. For example, if your counterpart is an Australian university student who has no idea about how to operate a fax machine, make a photocopy or pay bills by EFTPOS, s/he will be called naive in English, whereas if s/he comes from a dissimilated cultural background or different age group, their lack of ability and/or knowledge to apply this technology is observed as more acceptable.

The second element, social acceptance for vagueness, is widely observed in Japan. For example, the Japanese government publicly urged jishuku (to control or discipline yourself from going too far) from the nation after the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989. However the Japanese government did not express precise directions, as to exactly what people in Japan should or should not do. It was totally dependent on the individual value judgement of Japanese nationals. To observe, jishuku, most shops were closed, and no TV programs with funny, heart-warming, and cheerful issues, especially comedy shows, were on the air, only the Emperor's funeral on all channels.

In our daily life, euphemisms create ambiguous connotation. When driving a car in a country area in Japan, we find familiar connotatively dubious road beacons such as rakuseki chuui (Watch out for the falling rocks). Unlike warning signs of an animal habituated in a particular area who may cross over the road out of the blue, how can one get ready to avoid the falling piles of rocks and stones without any warning? If this at least can be interpreted that there are many rocky mountains and the sign might kindly help to prevent the danger, what about rakurai chuuii (Watch out for the lightning)? Is there any purpose or benefits to be gained from this sign? These are natural disasters and when they happen, it may affect you wherever you are and whatever you do at any time. The phrase soogyou 100 nen no dentouno aji (traditional taste which has not been changed since the shop opened 100 years ago) is also not indisputable at all. People are apt to consider these phrases positively, but our favour of the food must be changeable and different from ones in early 1900's due to the different eating habits and multicultural influences. Even your generation's eating habits differ from your parents', so that most could not be deemed as tasty as 100 years ago. Another example of vagueness can be observed within our field of academia. Unlike the English speaking countries, students in Japan are not usually informed about the aims, course content and recommended reading list of the unit. Assessment including marking students' assignments, and weight for the each assignment, quiz, and examination is also absent. Interestingly few complain about the system but take it for granted (and few even consider it important).

5. Conclusion

It is not incorrect to note that vagueness has been broadly accepted in Japanese society. It is not because of lexical failure but mainly due to the judgement of its pragmatic value. Japanese people utilise and accept it without major communication breakdown acquiring the intention of the addresser. Nevertheless, in fact, even within their society, miscommunication occurs because the structure of the sociolinguistic rules differs uniquely and individually. Therefore, whenever sociocultural interaction, not only among Japanese people but also other nationalities and ethnic groups, takes place, the function of the vagueness merged from euphemisms in the social context should be carefully considered. Oaks and Lewis (1998) remark that ambiguity is part of Japanese characteristic features so that it shouldn't be criticised if it is positive or negative. Ambiguity is part of mainstream sociolinguistic diversity. It is worth pointing out that inexplicit lexical items are not reflected in euphemisms that produce obscure statements, but those statements flourish especially when ambiguity is required. In other words, society evolves and adapts the language, not vice versa. Linguistic failure of ambiguous statements is not because of the language itself but more largely dependent upon social phenomena. Dissemination of the different pragmatic rules and

value judgements reinforcing unique register in styles should be the point in coping with dubious euphemistic interactions.

Note

According to Rosch and Segler (1987), order of high context countries/nations is as follows: Japan, Arabia, Latin America, Italy, France, America, Scandinavia and Germany. Germany is the lowest context country in the eight above areas/countries (introduced by Azuma, 1997, p. 175).

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