

# Ways of Japanese Thinking: Presuppositions in a Japanese Petty Officer's Letter to His Parents

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## Abstract

By looking at the presuppositions in a Japanese petty officer's letter to his parents during World War II, this paper delineates the meanings embedded in the deep structure of the text. The essay begins with a discussion of International Relations experts Theodore A. Coulombis and James H. Wolfe's Hegelian analysis of the text, it points out the strengths and limitations of their analysis, and then it augments their analysis with a presuppositional linguistic examination. The combination of the two analytical approaches yields a fascinating explanation of the Japanese ultranationalism at the time at both the logical and psychological levels, taking into consideration the cultural level.

## Introduction

As an undergraduate student of International Studies in the early 1980s, I read a letter by a Japanese petty officer in the book, *Introduction to International Relations: Power and Justice*, written by two quite revered professors of International Relations at the time: Theodore A. Coulombis of The American University and James H. Wolfe of the University of Southern Mississippi. The letter, which is the basis of this paper, follows:

Dear Parents:

Please congratulate me. I have been given a splendid opportunity to die. This is my last day. The destiny of our homeland hinges on the decisive battle in the seas to the south where I shall fall like a blossom from a radiant cherry tree.

I shall be a shield for His Majesty and die cleanly along with my squadron leader and other friends. I wish that I could be born seven times, each time to smite the enemy.

How I appreciate this chance to die like a man! I am grateful from the depths of my heart to the parents who have reared me with their constant prayers and tender love. And I am grateful as well to my squadron leader and superior officers who have looked after me as if I were their own son and given me such careful training.

Thank you, my parents, for the twenty-three years during which you have cared for me and inspired me. I hope that my present deed will in some small way repay what you have done for me. Think well of me and know that your Isao died for our country. This is my last wish, and there is nothing else that I desire. (Coulombis & Wolfe, 1978, p46, derived from Inoguchi, Nakajima & Pineau, 1958).

For Coulombis and Wolfe, the preceding text reflects the spirit of organic nationalism that the Japanese petty officer, having chosen to die as a kamikaze pilot (*tokkoutai-in*), could write these words to his dearest ones on October 28, 1944. Drawing from George Sabine's work (1961, pp620-67), Coulombis and Wolfe suggest that the organic and mystical conception of the nation-state hinged substantially on the philosophical foundations provided by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), the German philosopher. Hegel, these scholars note, perceived human civilization as a succession of national cultures. And for him, the national state was the highest form of political unit, the embodiment of political power. The *Volksgeist*, or the genius and the spirit of the state, these authors add, imbued the nation with the qualities of a huge, collective, living, and growing organism. The components of this organism, individuals, groups, regions and political parties must be subordinated to the whole. The absence of such subordination would lead to anarchy and chaos. It is within the strict disciplinary lines of the nation-state that true freedom could be found. The state, as a government, then emerged as the embodiment of a nation's will and destiny. Consequently, Hegel viewed the state as having no higher duty than to preserve and strengthen itself.

Thus, Coulombis and Wolfe suggest that, according to the Hegelian conception of the nation-state, individuals are best understood as means of the state, their value to be measured in terms of what they contribute to the survival of the state organism. History then, according to these scholars, is perceived as proceeding according to organic laws that are beyond the control of individuals. This is the reason, they add, Hegel believed that true political genius hinged upon those individuals who knew how to identify with higher principles such as the survival, growth and prosperity of their nation-states.

As a graduate student of Linguistics in the late 1980s, I reread the Japanese petty officer's letter. What I discovered was that, while Coulombis and Wolfe's Western analysis of the text is useful, it is nevertheless quite limited because it conveys only the surface contents, not the auxiliary ones. The major thesis of this paper, then, is the following: Analyses of the letter and other written texts that fail to account for linguistic presuppositions (i.e. the background assumptions against which the main import of the texts can be assessed) risk ignoring relevant contents that may be central to the texts' meanings.

Consequently, this paper is also about the possibility that significant *functional* explanations of written texts can be evaluated using linguistic features. The essence of an approach of this nature is captured by Stephen Levinson when he suggests the following:

Most recent linguistic explanations have tended to be internal to linguistic theory: that is to say, some linguistic feature is explained by reference to other linguistic features, or to aspects of the theory. But there is another possible kind of explanation, often more powerful, in which some linguistic feature is motivated by principles outside the scope of linguistic theory (1983, p40).

By employing a presuppositional approach to analyze the Japanese petty officer's letter, the ideas underlying the text can be illuminated. This is possible because in the study of linguistic texts, as in the study of physics, special instruments, formulae, and laboratories beyond the grasp of the uninitiated can be utilized. Since one trained in linguistics possesses analytical skills and tools, and concepts that permit insights into the nature of language in general, s/he is in a better position than other analysts to explain

the formal linguistic structures which constitute cues as to how the writer intended her/his text to be interpreted.

Thus, the major question probed in this paper is as follows: What salient linguistic presuppositions are embedded in the Japanese petty officer's letter? In exploring this question, the systematic application of discovery procedures well known in linguistic pragmatics will help to uncover presuppositions that will illuminate the letter for current readers.

## **Presuppositions in the Letter**

The rhetorical tactic of presupposition is by now familiar to linguists and other keen observers. A paradigm example is the candidate's query: "Did my opponent cheat on his wife again". Without explicitly making the assertion, the candidate implicates that his opponent has indeed cheated on his wife before in light of the iterative again. Less contentious presuppositions can be suggested as well: that the candidate is an opponent and that the opponent is a male. This example illustrates the fact that speakers/writers often express more than they assert. Their utterances or scripts convey not only their surface contents, but a great deal of auxiliary content as well.

However, for the sake of brevity and simplicity, the technical aspects of presuppositional analysis—bottom-up versus top-down processing, constancy under negation, Frege-Strawson-Russellian debate, bivalence, *Modus Tollens*, *Modus Ponens*, topicality, presuppositional defeasibility, presuppositional triggers, and the projection problem—care not discussed in this paper. The interested reader will be well served by reading the works of Stephen Levinson (1983), Irving Copi and Carl Cohen (1983), and Abdul Karim Bangura (1996 & 1997).

The Japanese petty officer chose to die like the legendary Mishima did to continue his life in a way that is impossible if one just lets things take their course and dies from natural causes. This kind of suicide affirms an understanding of death as inseparable from life, rather than an event that simply comes after. That is why the officer wrote in his letter AI have been given a splendid opportunity to die at. It is hard for many of us to be philosophical about the officer's suicide. But if we try to think clearly about this man who saw his life and death as embodying traditional Japanese ideas, we stand to learn some things about the way the Japanese have traditionally thought about life and death. Death is not to be feared to the traditional Japanese; the only thing that was fearful about death was not having an honorable death (Parkes, 1992). To the Japanese officer, this death was a very honorable one; he was not only honored, he was also excited to have this opportunity. He also wrote, "How I appreciate this chance to die like a man!" , which only supports the original idea to have an honorable death.

The next line from the letter that catches the eye is the following: "I shall fall like a blossom from a radiant cherry tree". This particular part of the letter exemplifies the Japanese strong belief in beauty and art. In Japanese society, everything has to be as close as possible to perfection. Traditional Japanese foods are very decorative; their dance, music, art, everything, are concentrated on physical beauty. This is why the ideas of Zen have traditionally embodied themselves in such activities as archery, swordplay, tea ceremony, Noh drama, painting and calligraphy (see Yasuo, 1987, Suzuki, 1959, Soho, 1986, Herrigel, 1953, Hammizsch, 1980, Sadler, 1933, Keene, 1966, Waley 1921, Pound & Fenollosa 1959). The officer saw his honorable

death as beautiful as blossomed cherry falling from a tree. He was not afraid of his certain demise; instead, he was looking at it like one of the most beautiful experiences on earth.

Another important idea in Shinto (literally, "the way of the divine spirit") is that the Japanese nation is one large, extended family, with the emperor--as high priest and "father"--at the head. This notion began to be literalized in the so-called nativist philosophies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which held that the Japanese imperial family was directly descended from the gods of the primeval period. The idea of the Japanese nation as a family whose forefathers were of divine origin tends to give rise to a belief in the inherent superiority of the Japanese to all other races--a belief that formed the basis of the ultranationalist movements of the 1930s. This was also responsible for Japanese involvement in World War II (Varley, 1973). And as a devoted Second World War soldier, the Japanese petty officer was delighted to be a part of the family chosen to save the country and the emperor. That is why he wrote the following: "I shall be a shield for his Majesty and die cleanly."

Like any other Japanese, this officer also had a wish before dying. In his letter, he wrote: "I wish that I could be born seven times, each time to smite the enemy." So, even though he did have a wish, there was nothing ordinary about it. The Japanese Zen Thinkers speak of the "great death"; they refer to death experienced within life that leads to a rebirth in this world. The officer had nothing to wish for but a "great death" which would enable him to return to this world, so that he can have the same opportunity to kill the enemy and have the "great death" again. In order to see into the depth of one's true nature, it is necessary, according to Japanese Zen master Hakuin's quite existential understanding of Zen, to undergo the "great death." That is, one must "be prepared to let go one's hold when hanging from a sheer precipice" if one is to be able to "die and return again to life" (Kasulis, 1971). Obviously, the officer was also a strong believer of the Zen.

In spite of the brutal training an army personnel has to endure under the command of his squadron leader, this petty officer had a great deal of respect and honor towards his squadron leader. In the officer's words, "my squadron leader and superior officers who have looked after me as if I were their own son and given me such wonderful training". In most cases, the training is anything but "wonderful." But, again, the strong Japanese belief system led the officer to think the way he did. According to Confucius, the major task was to cultivate oneself as a human being in society by engaging in the ritual practices handed down from the ancestors. Tradition was in this way literally embodied. By disciplining the movements and postures of the body through ritual practice, one could refine the faculties and capacities of the whole being. This belief was incorporated into the Japanese form of Buddhism and made the officer to think of his trainers as his spiritual guides and fathers rather than some brute, heartless individuals (Watts, 1957, Dumoulin 1989).

One of the prominent Japanese ways of thinking that we see in the officer's letter is how he believed that at an early age of twenty-three he had reached the peak of his power, and that he had no wish to go on living a life of both physical and artistic decline. His suicide would thus be his ultimate aesthetic act. That is why the officer wrote: "for the twenty three years during which you have cared for me and inspired me". This also suggests his strong belief towards the salient feature of Shinto that illustrates the Japanese understandings of age and the reality of the past. The Great Shrine at Ise is

dedicated to the ancestors of the imperial family, the sun goddess Amaterasu. This most ancient shrine in the country is also the newest. In order to avoid the impurity that comes with the decay of aging, the Ise shrine is destroyed and built a new every twenty years.

## **Assessing Couloumbis and Wolfe's Thesis**

Couloumbis and Wolfe, who see an embodiment of the Hegelian ideal of *Volksgeist* in the letter of a young kamikaze pilot, attribute the unusual level of the petty officer's loyalty and patriotism to his identification with the state organism unfolding toward ultimate freedom for human civilization. The significance of their argument seems to lie in their projecting the narrative of enlightenment on an actual course of events in society, thereby demonstrating that individuals really can identify with the nation to such an extent that they believe their destinies synchronize with that of the nation. By applying the organic concept of civilization that history unfolds toward ultimate freedom catalyzed by the role of the intellectual mind, Couloumbis and Wolfe give a logical explanation to the rather abnormal level of patriotism in wartime Japan and the mystical relationship between the emperor and his Achilidren. It is well known that the militarism and nationalism in Japan brought about devastating effects to the neighboring countries as well as Japan itself. But the essence of the Hegelian contention is not in a quest for justice and peace in the process; its contribution to political philosophy lies somewhere apart from judgment on good and evil.

Thus, Couloumbis and Wolfe are quite logical when they see the mentality of the *Volksgeist* in the letter of the kamikaze pilot without questioning whether the actualization of the *Volksgeist* in Japan had led to progress or regress of society after all. Nevertheless, their interpretation of the text is limited to the narrow aspect of imperial politics under militarism and radical form of national identity in Japanese society. Couloumbis and Wolfe do not pay much attention to what made such individual and societal mentality possible in the particular country in the particular period of time. The proponents of *tokkoutai* (kamikaze) certainly took advantage of the logic of nationalism to encourage young men to die for their country, and many people bought it, except for a small number of dissidents, but that is far from explaining the whole story. In short, those young kamikaze pilots would have hardly volunteered to sacrifice themselves just for the purpose of realizing Aultimate freedom.

Quite a few studies so far have attributed the rise and spread of untranationalism in Japan to the political and economic crisis of the country and the Asian region during the early 20th Century. In contrast to such macro-political analyses, the presuppositional approach utilized in this paper takes a look at the auxiliary content of the text examined. Covert messages rooted in the profound background of Japanese culture and language are highlighted, from which a multi-dimensional profile of a typical suicide pilot would emerge.

However, from a presuppositional perspective, the peculiar sense of life and death to the Japanese, which was cultivated through the infusion of Confucianism, Shintoism, and Zen Buddhism, nurtured the idea that one should die an honorable death for the whole to which s/he belonged to rather than living ignominiously. Having visited Japan many times, I still recall how people think of living in disgrace as shameful, and how parents are supposed to feel ashamed for what their children have done, regardless of their direct

or indirect responsibility for the children's deeds. Stories of self-sacrifice for a noble cause are also acclaimed in today's Japan, although the mentality of young pilots aiming to die Alike a blossom from a radiant cherry tree may seem quite odd to the young Japanese.

With respect to the statement, "Thank you, my parents, for the twenty-three years during which you have cared for me and inspired me, what can be felt is a straightforward expression of the officer's love and appreciation for his parents rather than the idea that he already reached the peak of his life so that there was no way to keep his life from declining other than letting go of it. Before this statement, he expresses his sense of honor, relief, and artistic satisfaction to be given a chance to "die like a man", by courtesy of his superiors. He certainly seems excited to serve himself for protecting the father/emperor and the beautiful land from the hands of the enemy.

At the same time, however, one notices the officer's concern about his parents after they lose their son for whom they have cared and inspired throughout the twenty-three years. Unlike other officers, kamikaze pilots were destined to die from the moment they were commissioned. There was no way for the officer to comfort his parents except by assuring them that their son would be happier than ever until the moment he died and even after that. The last words of the officer, "Think well of me and know that your Isao died for our country. This is my last wish, and there is nothing else that I desire....", seem to contain two different messages. First, the officer was proud to become a man by fulfilling the obligation for the country, its people, and his own parents. Second, however, these words imply the officer's deep sorrow and apologies for having to say goodbye to his parents. In Japan, as probably in many other countries, there is a widespread belief that dying before his/her parents makes a person the most ungrateful child. I am not certain whether this view is relatively new or traditional, but it is a longstanding one. Thus, the officer's statement could have been an attempt to cheer up his parents without looking a bit critical about the *tokkoutai* system.

Perhaps the preceding argument may not be strictly rooted in the text, as I recall a famous 1904 poem entitled "Prithee Do Not Die" by the dissident poet, Akiko Yosano, lamenting her younger brother called upon to to serve in the Russo-Japanese War. It begins as follows:

Oh, younger brother mine, for thee I weep,  
Prithee do not die.  
For you were born the very last,  
And our parents' love was all the more,  
Yet they made thee grasp a blade in hand,  
Taught thee kill a man you must,  
Kill a man, and die you too,

[Groomed you thus till twenty-four.](#)

Consequently, the presuppositional approach has helped to make the philosophy of the young kamikaze pilot imaginable, if not acceptable, by augmenting Coulombis and Wolfe's perspective on Hegel's theory of the *Volksgeist*. In my very limited knowledge of Japanese history and culture, the work of the late political theorist, Masao Maruyama, which attributes the untranationalism to the traditional political culture of Japan in his study of the logic and psychology of ultranationalism is instructive.

## Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, Couloumbis and Wolfe, following Hegelian thought, suggest that the Japanese nation-state was looked upon as a huge, collective, living, and growing organism. The parts of this organism (such as individuals, groups, regions and political parties) were to be subordinate to the whole. True freedom could be found only within the strict disciplinary lines of the nation-state. Finally, the state was seen as having no higher duty than to preserve and strengthen itself. According to this conception, individuals are best understood as "means" of the state, their value to be measured in terms of their contribution to the survival of the state organism. Thus, as Hegel noted, true political genius could be found among those persons who knew how to identify with higher principles such as the survival, growth, and prosperity of their nation-states. It is also obvious from the preceding discussion that the young Japanese petty officer chosen to die as a kamikaze pilot had a very strong Japanese philosophical faith. This belief turned him to such a great patriotic act that he was able to accept his suicide mission as an honorable and splendid opportunity to "great death".

What the presuppositional approach provides is the possibility to explain Japanese untranationalism at both the logical and psychological levels, taking into consideration the popular level of culture in the analysis of the text. Where conventional studies have tended to conclude that kamikaze pilots were either forced or followed the order blindly, or the combination of the two, the presuppositional approach made it possible to find a fascinating explanation of the historical event that has similarities as well as dissimilarities to today's Japanese culture.

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