

**Sociocultural and Linguistic Components Within
the Japanese Student-Teacher Relationship**
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Introduction

Cultural tradition includes linguistic as well as behavioral aspects. Language is intrinsically connected to sociocultural patterns within a given culture. In turn, certain behaviors exist that underlie or correspond to linguistic acts. In Japanese society, particular behaviors and language underlie the relationship between the Japanese student and the teacher. The relationship parallels Japanese mentality and way of life in regard to class, title, age, and other sociocultural indicators. The components that are involved in this teacher-student relationship will be examined. These sociocultural components include hierarchy, title, age, and educational background. Linguistic aspects such as address forms and situational word usage will also be examined.

Characteristics of Student Behavior

Each country and culture has its own tradition and Japan is no exception in regards to the existence of tradition. However, Japanese also have a traditional way of thinking. This traditional way of thinking is exemplified by the behavior of a lower status person to a higher status person. In the case of a student's behavior towards a teacher, this means not speaking out of turn as well as the use of careful word choice and verb endings when being asked by the teacher to speak.

Students in the Japanese classroom do not volunteer information or strive to be the first one with the correct answer as often as American students. Japanese students often

only speak when they are called upon by the teacher. To volunteer an answer without being called upon by the instructor could show disrespect to the relationship of rank. Also, a student who would take what Americans might call *initiative* would risk setting himself apart from his peer group.

"A man is classified primarily according to the group to which he belongs" (Nakane, 1970, p. 24). In school, students belong to the group of students. Those who set themselves apart risk being seen as different from the group. It is important to be part of the group because the society is set up in such a way that the group is like the family. One Japanese graduate student at Eastern Washington University mentioned, "You cannot do anything alone, you always have to be part of a group effort." This would suggest that if a teacher asks a question to the class and nobody answers, students are trying to preserve the feeling of the group.

Hierarchy/Socioeconomic Status

The relationship between the student and the teacher in Japanese society reflects the Japanese hierarchical system. For an individual to truly be part of Japanese culture, it is necessary to be a part of a group, or part of the whole. Nakane states that, "Established ranking order is overwhelmingly important in fixing the social order and measuring individual social values" (Nakane, 1970, p. 25). Members of Japanese society will most likely belong to many groups throughout a lifetime. For example, a Japanese businessman is most certainly a member of his departmental group, a member of the greater company, perhaps a member of a golf club connected to the

company, and within his own family he holds a place or ranked position in a group. The businessman holds a rank in all groups he belongs to. In some groups he has higher status than in others. In groups where his status is high, those of lower status will defer to him through action and language use. When he is in a group among peers of the same status, his language and actions may be more casual than if he were either of lower or higher status.

The interpersonal relationships within the groups have a rigid organization and are of two categories: the hierarchically-based, vertical ranking, and the less status-based, horizontal ranking. A high school teacher may have colleagues in his department of the same age and position who have been with the educational institution for equal amounts of time--such a relationship would be horizontal. However, in relation to a student or school director, the teacher would share a relationship of the vertical sort because of the differences in status.

In Japanese society, title, age, gender, and educational background are all factors which play roles in the vertical, superior-inferior relationship such as the teacher-student relationship.

Title

Title influences the behavior within the teacher-student relationship. The title of the teacher is one factor which influences the student's behavior toward the teacher. One's title is possibly the primary determining factor of status within interpersonal relationships. Title is also an indicator

of class. "Class difference is a situation where more politeness is expected" (Martin, 1964, p. 412). Of titles, the title of teacher, or *sensei*, is very esteemed. A *sensei* is anyone who knows a great deal and uses this knowledge to share with, assist, or educate others. The title of *sensei* ranges from professors and medical physicians to people holding doctorate degrees or master's degrees in specialized fields such as engineering or mathematics. High school, junior high school and elementary school instructors are also *sensei*. With the title of *sensei* comes an expected mode of behavior on the part of the *sensei*, as well as on the part of those who interact with the *sensei*.

A student is always of lower status than a *sensei*, unless of course the student were the son of the Emperor, in which case the student's status would exceed the *sensei*'s status in terms of title. However, the title distinction implies a superior-inferior relationship.

Age

The age of a speaker and interlocutor is another factor which determines status within interpersonal relationships. Martin claims that situations where more politeness is expected (through behavior and language) are between the young and old (Martin, 1964).

Because a teacher is older than the student, the teacher automatically commands greater respect. Respect is shown through behavior and language. The linguistic actions are described through the form of address toward the teacher. Address forms will be discussed below. Generally speaking, the

age of the person has a positive correlation with the perceived status of the person.

Educational Background

An individual's educational experience and the status of the institutions they have attended help determine the status level he or she will attain. The Japanese educational system is rigid and rigorous. Thus, those who have successfully completed college and have attained occupational success are more esteemed than those who have not yet reached that level. To graduate from a university means that the individual has passed the crucial and very difficult college entrance and exit examinations. Thus, a *sensei* who has years of academic experience has greater status than the student by virtue of his educational background. The difference in educational level demands that the lower achiever defer to the higher achiever. Behaviorally this is evident in the teacher-student relationship. Students are on a very formal basis with the teacher. The difference in educational background between teacher and student fits into DeVos' "mastery versus incompetence" dimension in that the student, who has not yet reached mastery, is striving for it (DeVos, 1985). The student must strive for competence by following what the person who has achieved mastery (the teacher) instructs or advises.

Linguistic Aspects Of The Teacher-Student Relationship

Words are only one component of a language. The way the words are used to express a meaning or convey a message involves more than simply verbalizing an utterance. The way words are combined with other words, the choice of words a speaker uses toward the interlocutor, the status of the speaker and

interlocutor, and the actual situation that a speaker faces are all factors that play roles in conveying a message.

Address Forms

Forms of address are also directly related to the title, age, and educational background of the speaker and interlocutor, namely the student and the teacher. Social distinction is registered through language and action in very unique ways in Japanese society.

Title and Address Forms

The level of the social positions of teachers themselves in Japan is evident in the usage of address forms used with people with the title of *sensei*. The proper term of address toward a teacher is *sensei*. *Sensei* literally means "one of greater knowledge." To address a teacher as *-san*, the equivalent of Mr. or Mrs., would be an insult. Thus, the distinction of address of the teacher clearly delineates the superior rank of the *sensei* in Japanese society. The distinction of address of the teacher must strictly be adhered to. One of my own Japanese students recalled an incident in his junior high school years in which he was speaking to an instructor. He referred to another instructor at the school as *-san* rather than *sensei*. The student recalled, "My teacher hit me and told me always to use *sensei*." Though the disciplinary measures used by *sensei* in Japanese schools will not be discussed within this paper, the action of the teacher toward the student does suggest that the recognition of title is not something to be overlooked.

An address form for disciple or student does exist within the teacher-student relationship: *-kun*, *-chan*, or *-san*. The first two of these address forms mean "child," where *-kun* is

used for the male student and *-chan* for the female student. These address forms are optional rather than strictly adhered to.

The strict adherence to address form and recognition of title continues throughout life. If a person is a *sensei*, that person will remain a *sensei* even after retiring. "Usage of terms of address, once determined by relationships in the earlier stages of a man's life or career, remains unchanged for the rest of his life" (Nakane, 1970, p. 29). Addressing one by title is often somewhat casual in many American colleges and universities. Graduate students may be invited by their professors to call each other on a first-name basis. There is no place for such casual attitudes in the Japanese student-*sensei* relationship. Even if the student and teacher know each other very well, to call a *sensei* by first name would be disrespectful to the relationship. The cultural model of student-*sensei* assumes a respect through recognition of title.

Students also hold distinct ranking within their own group of peers. That is, it is understood within the student group who receives the highest grades in class and who performs the lowest academically. The ranking of students, however, does not affect the address form toward the teacher. A student of high rank (perhaps the smartest student in the class), as well as one of the lowest rank (perhaps the least academically inclined student in the class), would address the teacher as *sensei*.

Nakane states that an individual or a group always has one distinctive relation to the other. "This kind of ideal is also manifested in the relationship between the master and his

disciple, including the teacher and student today" (Nakane, 1970, p. 21).

For the Japanese, the established ranking order is overwhelmingly important in fixing the social order and measuring individual social values. The title or term of address is only one aspect contained with the cultural model of the teacher-student relationship. However, the term of address is one component that establishes and influences the behavior within the relationship.

Situational Word Usage

The Japanese language contains a variety of speech levels. These speech levels contain certain words or changes in word forms and are used in particular situations, depending on the status or title of the interlocutor. "The choice of plain, polite, or deferential style in Japanese depends on the speaker's attitude toward the person that he is addressing" (Martin, 1964, p. 412).

The student, in relation to the teacher, would choose the polite speech level. This level includes using the polite *-masu* verb ending, and using the humble copula *de gozaimasu*. Martin states that using *de gozaimasu* and the *-masu* verb ending "produces a neater, two-way opposition of plain versus polite, humble versus exalted, with the neutral form neutralizing the opposition between humble and exalted" depending on the status of the speaker to interlocutor.

Word choice within a teacher-student relationship requires the lower-status person to choose the polite word form for particular meanings. In Japanese, meanings may have three or four different word associations. Words may be referentially

the same but differ in their indexical function. Thus, word choice depends on the status relationship between the speaker and interlocutor. For example, the meaning "to give" can be expressed *sashi-ageru*, *ageru*, or *youtu*. Which word to use depends on the situation. For example, if a person of lower status (student) gives something to someone of higher status (*sensei*) the verb *sashi-ageru* (to give) would be used. If the giver and receiver were of the same status, the verb *ageru* (to give) would be used. If the receiver were an animal or a child, the verb *youtu* (to give) would be used. Any misuse of the words, for example, using *ageru* when speaking to one of higher status, would be an insult and a sign of great disrespect.

Conclusion

The sociocultural and linguistic aspects that have been described above are intrinsic to Japanese culture and thinking. Changes within the student-teacher relationship are possible, especially today as national borders are rapidly disappearing. However, the consistency within high-low status relationships from home to school to university to company provides the individual with a sense of "knowing what to expect" and thus harmonic transitions between the expected sequential stages of achievement.

References

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