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The Linguistic, Social, and Societal Impacts of Ingroup and Outgroup in Japanese

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JAPN 3100: Readings in Contemporary Japanese Culture

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Culture penetrates every aspect of living - from language usage to interactions with others. *Uchi/soto*, the ingroup/outgroup distinction in Japanese, is reflective of a deeper pattern and plays a frequently underestimated role in everyday life. The psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic expressions of culture are reflected in vocabulary, views of self, and interactions with others. Analyzing it on each of these levels - micro-analysis made possible through vocabulary and syntactical expressions and macro-analysis through patterns of relations with others - enables one to have a broader perspective on the role that *uchi/soto* plays in the Japanese experience. Combining data from native speakers as well as language learners also identifies the portions embedded in the syntax of the language and the aspects of it that require deeper cultural awareness. As a high-context dependency language, much understanding of Japanese requires more than a fundamental understanding of the translation of words and grammar rules. Understanding the fundamental concept of *uchi/soto*, its linguistic reflections, the role it plays in one's view of self and others, and societal impacts, provides depth and a culturally competent appreciation of Japanese language and culture.

Uchi内/Soto外

Prior to developing a deeper understanding of the significance of *uchi* (ingroup) versus *soto* (outgroup), one must understand the role it plays in the Japanese experience. Described as a “deeply established orientational habit (Makino et al., 1996),” *uchi/soto* refers to the concepts “inside” and “outside” in Japanese. While the spatial distinction “permeates the behavior of every species,” people have spread it to create fluid and culturally dependent social dynamics (Makina, Bachnik & Quinn, 1995). While this context exists across languages, it has a particularly prominent role in Japanese. Linguistic analysis argues that there is a need to depart

from a rigid view of Japanese as a purely hierarchical language focused exclusively on vertical structure. While the levels of formality play an undeniable role, true understanding of Japanese requires more indexical awareness of the “axial coordinates of inside/outside orientation (Shea, 1994)”. The larger concept of *uchi/soto* informs the indexicality, or way that words and phrases signify larger context and place themselves relationally, and the social deixis, or way the language depends on broader social norms (Bachnik, 1994, a.). Rather than referencing social status as neatly stacked rings on a ladder, the Japanese language maps out relationships using both level and proximity to the speaker.

Exploring situated meaning, the way in which outside influences like context and cultural and social knowledge add meaning beyond the syntax and semantics (Gee, 2014), is essential to understand language on a level more profound than translation between word meanings and grammar patterns. When viewing language as a means to communication rather than an isolated object of study, the inclusion of additional variables provides a more applicable and meaningful analysis. Gee (2014) goes on to describe the way that the multifaceted nature of language exposes more about its nature; there is always a reason that a speaker says a phrase one way instead of an alternate yet equally syntactically correct choice. Moving from sentences to conversations shows these patterns persist and create conversational flow. The development of the language itself and what it prioritizes in its base grammar patterns also reflects back on the needs and history of the overall society. *Uchi/soto* is the overarching concept held as situated meaning, expressed through the use of keigo (very formal language), polite form conjugations, and a differing set of vocabulary.

The simplest example is levels of speaker formality. It is important to note that within *uchi/soto*, who is *uchi* (ingroup) and who is *soto* (outgroup) is very context dependent (Bachnik,

1994, b.). In the workplace one's own company is considered in-group and other companies they work with are considered out-group, but in the home family is the in-group and coworkers are even friends are out. Even in such a context it varies, with the roles changing depending on who one is talking to (a coworker, client, subordinate) as well as who they are talking about. An employee would speak to their boss using a great amount of honorific language (indicating *soto*) but when speaking about their boss to someone outside of the company, they would speak far more humbly (showing *uchi*). Family is the ultimate in-group and rarely strays from it, regardless of who else is present (Bachnik, 1994, b.). The overall conceptualization also falls along a continuum - the further from one's ingroup their conversational partner is, the more ways that this separation is expressed.

Linguistic Reflections

The language of Japanese itself is permeated with the overarching concept of *uchi/soto*. The structure expresses this in the patterns available, frequency of use, and variety of levels. In even an introductory Japanese course, students are introduced to *plain form* and *polite form*. Many English to Japanese learners express exasperation at the necessity of learning "two different languages" as they learn how they have to modify their speech based on who they are and who they are talking to. Even the formal description of these two speaking styles reflects these concepts; in research the polite form is called distal-style. Webster's Dictionary (2024) defines distal as, "situated away from the point of attachment or origin or a central point," connecting formality back to this orientational based language pattern. While such a distinction is present in English, it is primarily limited by formality of language and vocabulary choice. In Japanese it has a far more ubiquitous impact. The copula (equivalent of the verb *to-be*) changes

form or even presence based on this hearer and speaker relationship (Mills, 1974). The conjugation of verbs also follows an independent pattern between the two speech styles, with distal requiring more complex verb endings like *ではありませんでした* (*dewa arimasen deshita*), with the informal equivalent being *なかつた* (*nakatta*).

Japanese is considered an indirect language; while all languages have examples of indirect usage, Japanese more frequently uses non-literal expressions to convey meaning. Even the simplest of conversational phrases reflect this. A dictionary will inform you that *はい* (*hai*) means *yes* and *いいえ* (*iee*) means *no*, but with one's ingroup it is far more common to hear *うん* (*un*) or *ええ* (*ee*) for *yes* and *ううん* (*unn*) for *no*. With one's outgroup the difference continues further - it is uncommon to hear a *no* directly; they often use phrases like *違います* (*chigaimasu*) mean *different* rather than directly contradicting their conversational partner. Each of these differences connect back to the base social rules of *uchi/soto*. To one's *uchi*, pleasantries can be dropped, slang can be used, and polite form can even feel rigid or disconnected. To one's *soto*, such behavior in speech is both rude and presumptuous. It is more than a conjugation difference - it is an expression of a broader cultural understanding.

The existence of some vocabulary further cements this as a robust pattern. A *玄関* (*genkann*) refers to the entryway of a Japanese home, usually a step down from the floor of the rest of the house. It is here that they remove their shoes and coats before entering the house. While American homes may have a similar concept, it rarely holds the same rigidity and consistency of cultural norms. Stepping past the *genkann* with shoes still on is more than a minor breach of etiquette. It is the physical separation of *inside* and *outside*. In some areas it is even considered socially acceptable to wait inside the *genkann* rather than out on the porch for the homeowner to come to the door, as it is considered more outside than in. While it serves a

cultural purpose, the existence of it as both a location and a word acts as an illustration of a physical aspect of this clear *uchi/soto* separation. It is particularly significant that this marks the start of the home, uniting the family within as consistently ingroup.

Taguchi (2009) studied the ability of Japanese learners at various levels of fluency to correctly identify the meaning behind three types of indirect speech: indirect refusals, conventional indirect opinions, and non-conventional indirect opinions. While the base finding that the more advanced students outperformed the beginning speakers was unsurprising, follow-up interviews added another layer to the story. More advanced speakers had greater pragmatic comprehension, or ability to understand meaning beyond what is literally said (Vershueren, 2008), because of their greater linguistic and cultural knowledge. Understanding the overarching concept of *uchi/soto* plays a necessary role in understanding not only when to use more indirect speech, but also how what they said indicates what they meant based on their relationships to the speaker. The inclusion of research on non-native speakers adds depth to the robustness of the conclusion that *uchi/soto* plays a vital role in the language comprehension itself.

Views of Self and Relationship with Others

Outside of its reflection in the linguistics fundamentals of Japanese, *uchi/soto* is reflected heavily in perception and view of self. One of the strongest examples of this is the contrasting forms of identification. In the United States, governmental identification is very based on the individual. A birth certificate lists the parents and a driver's license holds the individual's family name, but the focus is very much on the person himself. Each citizen is given a social security

number that has come to act as an identifier. Any connection from these to the family as a whole is vague at most.

The Japanese system stands in sharp contrast. Japan grants each family a 戸籍 (*koseki*) or family registry so they can record the Japanese population by household. This document holds all of the essential information for each member of the family (Chapman & Krogness, 2016). Only direct descendants may receive a copy of their *koseki* (Mackie, 2016). This is a physical manifestation of the overarching concept - the individual is identified not by who they are but rather by the larger family they are a part of (Mori, 2016). This is more than a method of record keeping; it is a true physical depiction of how Japanese people culturally view themselves within the context of their larger family unit. It is also an expression of the *uchi/soto* distinction of Japan versus foreigners. Foreign born individuals cannot create a *koseki* even if they marry a Japanese citizen; they are added more as a footnote to an existing Japanese family. Living in Japan and speaking Japanese does not make someone fully enter *uchi*. The concept of us/them remains intact.

The smallest unit of possession in English is the individual and it appears frequently - *my* car, *my* house, *my* classes, *my* family. While *my* is syntactically correct and is used in Japanese, it appears neither with the same frequency nor the same usage. When speaking of one's own family, it is far more common to say うちのお母さん (*uchi no okaasan*) which translates more directly to *the mother of my household* than *my mother*. Speakers refer to relationships in terms of the family whole rather than themselves because that is how they personally view it. This same pattern is repeated across family relationships, used when talking about grandmothers, fathers, cousins, and even beloved pets. This speech pattern reflects that they speak from the perspective from the family as a unit rather than themselves as an individual.

This view of oneself and their family as one entity is far more than a point of linguistic intrigue - it also presents itself in how they view, see, interact with, and speak of their families. Expressions of love are subtler and almost never made in public. The phrase 愛している (*aishiteiru*), the most direct translation of *I love you*, is seldom used. Even in conversational scenarios where Western cultures may sprinkle it thoroughly - hanging up the phone, getting dropped off, departing on a trip - it is rarely said. While those looking from a United States-centric perspective may view this as sad or even unfeeling, cultural knowledge illuminates the ways it can be quite the opposite. If the individual and family are truly one, there is no need for verbal declarations of affection. Relationships are comfortable with far fewer large gestures because the enduring nature of the relationship is assumed and viewed as a given. Much as one does not have to continually reassure *himself* that his affection remains and he will continue to be supportive, they do not need to go to undue effort to display these things because it is the default. When the family unit is as much *uchi* as oneself, there is no need to put continual effort into helping them remain there.

The pattern of treating one's family as *uchi* remains robust in day to day life. There is no concept of 失礼 (*shitsureii*) or *rudeness* between a mother and a child. There is no strong emphasis on the need for the child to express gratitude or avoid over-dependence on the mother just as one does not thank themselves for providing breakfast. Aiding family or taking in aged relatives falls in this same category. Much as one would never leave an aspect of their own life to fall to ruin, aiding a family member is an extension of taking care of oneself. This has other social impacts, like the deep shame family members feel if a member of their family unit does something wrong - it is a similar level to if they themselves have done it (Hasada, 2006). Individuals speak humbly about their family just as they would about themselves, deflecting

compliments or shying away from praise. While English speakers also have the concept of *ingroup* and *outgroup*, understanding that the smallest unit of ingroup differs heavily between the two is a necessary aspect of understanding both the Japanese language and culture.

Societal Implications

Peppering language choice, and guiding familial relationships, *uchi/soto* also has a role to play in Japanese society and its broader culture. Japan is frequently described as a collectivist culture. While no one culture can be categorized by a single pattern of tendencies, *uchi/soto* is a major factor in this. Individualistic cultures focus far more on people's achievements and successes, praising accomplishments and innovation. Collectivist cultures, however, are more likely to prioritize the good of the overall group. They put far less value on individualism and focus more on how actions impact the larger majority. Understanding that Japan has both a strong sense of ingroup/outgroup and also is more liberal in ingroup inclusion than the United States is necessary in understanding other cultural reflections.

There are several aspects of Japanese culture that truly do not have a US equivalent. 勿体無い (*mottainai*) is the Japanese phrase referring to a sense of regret of waste, or a deep desire to make use of all one has been granted. 遠慮する (*enryo suru*) is the verb for *to hold back*, *to restrain* and refers to the concept of not taking more than one's allotted portion. Both of these are built on a base understanding that one is a part of the greater whole and actions do not exist in a vacuum. A combination of greater inclusion in one's *uchi* and a need for great respect for one's *soto* infuses these considerations in daily actions.

Japan made international news when, following the World Cup, photos of Japanese fans picking up trash around the stadium went viral. Decked in game day apparel, they went far beyond collecting their own wrappers and bottles; they made their way between rows and up and down aisles. Countries around the world applauded their efforts, but from a Japanese perspective this was no great act. The state of all being fans in the same stadium made their fellow fans *uchi*, thus giving them the responsibility to pick up after one another. As an ingroup, it was more of a shared responsibility than a selfless act (Keh, 2022, November 27).

Much as a state of *uchi* regulates fan behavior, the opposing *soto* regulates daily interactions with one's outgroup. Taguchi (2009) analyzed *uchi/soto* as a spectrum, gathering a large collection of data on use of directive speech in a variety of scenarios. This enabled him to draw conclusions about *uchi/soto* in actual speech situations. He gathered data from across the continuum by recording conversations at a train ticket window, post office window, neighborhood vegetable market, and a middle-class family having within-family conversations. Professional scenarios with virtual strangers, such as the train station and post office, were filled with almost exclusively *soto* language, whereas the vegetable market still differed markedly from the home, but had far more *uchi* language than the aforementioned two. This study illustrates how ubiquitous the influence of *uchi/soto* is on Japanese. From breakfast with one's family, to daily errands, to a doctor's appointment, evidence of this distinction is found in every interaction and permeates everyday life.

Conclusion

Language study requires far more than memorizing grammar patterns, using vocabulary, and practicing conjugations. As language is filled with situated meaning and pragmatic

comprehension, a level of cultural awareness is absolutely necessary to really use the language and interact naturally with native speakers. As a high-context dependent and indirect language, Japanese is exceptionally so. *Uchi/soto* is just one example of the role Japanese conceptualization plays on language use and relationships. Analyzing it thoroughly allows one to understand its prominence, prevalence, and pertinence. The micro-analysis on the linguistic level shows the role *uchi/soto* has played and continues to play in language patterns and vocabulary and grammar development. Looking at the role in the view of self and others shows the relational impact and how such an understanding is vital to intercultural communication. Finally, macro-level investigation shows the ways in which it has shaped larger cultural norms and societal expectations. Each of these add a piece to the existing understanding of the Japanese experience and are as important for a language learner to understand as the grammar and usage rules themselves. Culturally competent language education adds depth and legitimacy to the development of non-native language proficiency.

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