

## JAPANESE AND NON-JAPANESE PERCEPTIONS OF JAPANESE COMMUNICATION

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Perceptions of the communicative style of different languages can influence the way in which non-native speakers and native speakers of a particular language interact. For example, second-language learners of Japanese often believe that using a lot of honorifics (*keigo*) to introduce themselves to other students at universities in Japan is more polite. However, since Japanese students themselves tend to use only a limited degree of honorifics in this kind of situation, foreign students can end up conveying an impression of over-politeness or even aloofness (Ohashi et al 1992). The first step in dealing with these kinds of issues in Japanese language education is to determine what kinds of perceptions are held by Japanese and non-Japanese in regards to Japanese communication.<sup>2</sup>

The past 20 years has seen a phenomenal growth in both the number of non-Japanese studying Japanese throughout the world, and in the number of non-Japanese living in Japan. The number of students studying Japanese outside Japan has increased 9.5 times from 127,167 in 1979 to 2,102, 103 in 1998 (Japan Foundation Japanese-Language Institute 1998), while the number of non-Japanese residents has doubled from 774,505 in 1979 to 1,556,113 in 1999 (Immigration Bureau, Ministry of Justice, July 2000).<sup>3</sup> The subsequent increase in the number of non-Japanese who can speak Japanese has gone some way to changing the perception that Japanese is too difficult for foreigners to master (Haugh 1998), but the effect of the internationalisation of Japanese on perceptions of Japanese communication has received little attention to date.

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'communication' is used in this paper to refer not only to acts of communication, but also to communicative style in general (which includes phenomena such as politeness as well).

<sup>3</sup> See data at <http://www.moj.go.jp>. Figures accessed 18/06/01.

The results of a preliminary study of the perceptions of Japanese and non-Japanese about Japanese communication are reported in this paper, with the intention of laying a foundation for more comprehensive studies of perceptions of Japanese communication. Commonly postulated perceptions of Japanese communication are first briefly described, before previous studies of perceptions of Japanese communication are reviewed. The results of the current survey are then reported and discussed in order to ascertain what might underlie these perceptions.

## Perceptions of Japanese communication

Japanese communication is often described as vague and indirect (*aimaina*) (Akasu & Asao 1993; Doi 1996; Kitao & Kitao 1989; McClure 2000; Yamada 1997); as involving implicit or non-verbal communication, or what is termed *ishindenshin* (Itasaka 1978; Kagano 1999; Midooka 1990); as more emotional (*kanjooteki*) and less logical (*aimai no ronri*) (Day 1996; Itasaka 1978; Toyama, 1973); as involving a ‘spirit’ not found in other languages, or what is termed *kotodama* (Miller 1982; Watanabe 1974; Wehmeyer 1997); and as more polite (*teineina*), especially women’s speech (Fair 1996).

These perceptions can often be seen to be implicitly or explicitly related to one of the central claims of the *nihonjinron* that Japanese language and culture is somehow particularly unique. The *nihonjinron* is a genre of literature which “can be regarded as dealing with Japan’s identity, attempting to establish Japan’s uniqueness and to differentiate Japan from other cultures” (Befu 2001:2). For example, vagueness and indirectness is often linked to traditional Japanese values such as the importance of preserving harmony (*wa*) and group orientation (*shuudan shugi*) (Nakane 1970; Morita and Ishihara 1989), or to the highly contextualised nature of Japanese communication (Arima 1989; Ikegami 1989) and preference for non-verbal communication (Haga 1998).

The perception that Japanese is more vague and indirect than English enjoys particularly strong support. This perception is held by both Japanese and non-Japanese linguists in works ranging from communication handbooks for learners of Japanese (Kitao & Kitao 1989; McClure 2000; Yamada 1997), to academic papers (Akasu & Asao 1993; Clancy 1986; Doi 1996; Gudykunst & Nishida 1993; Ide 2000a; Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyuujo 1990; Midooka 1990; Nakai 1999; Nittono 1999; Okabe 1983; Rosch & Segler 1987; Ueda 1974), through to dissertations (Books 1995; Day 1996; Iwata 1999; Matsumoto 1994). Even those who argue that Japanese communication is not more vague than English, still hold to the notion that Japanese is on the whole more indirect than English (Black & Mendenhall 1993; Donahue 1998).

Commonly cited examples of Japanese vagueness and indirectness include phenomena such as the common omission of elements of Japanese utterances that would be made explicit in English (Akasu & Asao 1993; Donahue 1998; Okabe 1983; Sasagawa 1996); the frequent use of indexicals in

Japanese (such as *are, sore* ('that') and so on) in place of the topic of subject of an utterance (Akasu & Asao 1993); the frequent use of hedges such as *~to omou kedo* ('I think that ~') to convey hesitancy (Okabe 1983; Sasagawa 1996); the supposed tendency to use understatement rather than overstatement, such as the use of *tabun* ('probably') rather than *zettai* ('definitely') (Bruch 1989; Okabe 1983); and the use of opaque formulaic utterances such as *kangaete okimasu* ('I will think about it') or *asobi ni kite kudasai* ('Please come over some time') (Sasagawa 1996).

However, there are a number of problems with the perception that Japanese communication is characteristically vague and indirect from a linguistic perspective. Firstly, closer examination of the examples given above indicates that most of them are not actually examples of vagueness (that is, where what the speaker means by the utterance is not clear), or even of indirectness (that is, where the speaker means one thing by meaning something else). When these kinds of examples are considered in their contexts, the meaning the speaker intends is not unclear to Japanese speakers, and thus they are not actually valid examples of vagueness. This is not to say that Japanese communication is not vague at times, but examination of supposed examples of vagueness in Japanese indicate that the claim that Japanese communication is characteristically vague is over-stated.

Secondly, examples which show Japanese communication is more explicit at times than English are not considered enough in analyses of Japanese communication. In fact, in terms of other aspects of communication, such as social cues indicating interpersonal relationships (Ide 2000b; Holden 1983), or *aizuchi*, back-channeling expressions (Hayashi 1987; Maynard 1997; McCarty 1997), Japanese communication tends to be much more explicit (and thus direct) than communication in English.

Thirdly, there is no empirical evidence to clearly support such an assumption. While a number of studies have found Japanese to be more indirect in some requesting and complimenting situations (Barnlund & Araki 1985; Takahashi 1987), just as many other studies have found the opposite, that Japanese are more direct in some requesting, complaining and conflict situations (Rose 1992; Sato & Okamoto 1999; Spees 1994).

It appears that to answer the question of whether Japanese really is more indirect and vague (than English, for example), there needs in-depth analysis of a large corpus of conversational data. The assumption that Japanese is more indirect and vague than English is questionable in light of the evidence that has been produced thus far to support it.

Perceptions about Japanese communication, even those held by many academics, thus seem to be based on factors other than objective, empirical evidence. Indeed, Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication in comparison to communication in English, or non-Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication may even be partially driven by a lack of competence in the second language or misunderstandings of Japanese. Nevertheless, these perceptions can influence non-Japanese attempts to communicate in Japanese and native speaker evaluations of these attempts to

communicate. For example, non-Japanese who believe Japanese communication to be extremely polite may overuse honorifics. In other words, whether perceptions of Japanese communication are based on objective linguistic analysis, or on more subjective (or even ill-informed) judgements, does not alter the fact that these perceptions exist, and that these perceptions can influence both language acquisition and intercultural communication. A number of studies have thus attempted to investigate the kinds of perceptions about Japanese communication held by native and non-native speakers of Japanese. These studies are not intended to clarify the linguistic features of Japanese communication *per se*, but rather to investigate Japanese and non-Japanese *perceptions* of Japanese communication.

### Previous studies of perceptions of Japanese communication

There have been only a very limited number of studies to date which have investigated Japanese and non-Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication. Nisugi (1974) surveyed 250 Japanese native speakers about the kinds of adjectives they would choose to describe the Japanese language, including polite (*teineina*) and indirect and vague (*aimaina*).<sup>4</sup> 76 per cent of respondents thought polite was an appropriate word to describe Japanese, and 73 percent thought vague and indirect was also appropriate. Nisugi also surveyed a small number of foreigners (n=20) and found that 90 per cent of them considered Japanese language to be vague and 79 per cent considered Japanese to be a polite language.

While Nisugi's sample of non-Japanese was small, her findings that Japanese is perceived as vague and indirect have been confirmed by studies by Haugh (1998), Iwata (1999) and Sasagawa (1996). Haugh (1998) found 73 percent of a sample of 70 Japanese believed that spoken Japanese is vague and indirect, with just 10 per cent disagreeing. Haugh also found that a sizeable proportion of respondents perceived Japanese as a unique language (45 percent agreement) with an equal percentage of around 40 per cent disagreeing. However, a majority of respondents disagreed with the notion that Japanese is good for expressing feelings, but is not so good for expressing logical arguments (56 per cent disagreement, 25 per cent agreement).

Iwata's (1999) study of business communication found that non-Japanese, in this case North Americans, believe Japanese employees are more indirect and nonverbal in their communication patterns. Iwata also found that Japanese employees believe themselves to be more indirect and nonverbal than American employees, although this perception was not held as strongly as it was by the North American respondents.

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<sup>4</sup> The words *teineina* and *aimaina* are not strictly equivalent to the English notions of politeness and vagueness despite commonly being translated as such. To avoid confusion I will use the terms *teineina* and *aimaina* when referring to results of surveys conducted in Japanese, and the terms 'polite' and 'vague and indirect' when referring to results from surveys done in English.

Sasagawa (1996) also found in a survey of 89 foreign students in Japan that 64 per cent thought Japanese often do not clearly say what they want to say. A smaller sub-group of 55 students were also asked if they thought there are many vague and indirect expressions in Japanese, and 76 per cent agreed that there are.

Another recent survey of Japanese (n=1346) in regards to vague and indirect expressions and politeness conducted by Chung (1999), found that 79 per cent of respondents thought that saying things plainly or directly (*hakkiri iu koto*) is impolite (*bushitsuke*). Interestingly, Chung's study also found that 60 per cent of the respondents believed that the use of expressions to avoid making clear judgements, such as *ki ga suru* (to feel..), reflects a recent movement in Japanese society towards a passive approach to life, where one desires a peaceful and uneventful life (*kotonakare shugi*). The frequent use of vague and indirect expressions in Japanese according to Chung is related to these recently evolving passive attitudes towards life, rather than the desire to avoid conflict and promote harmony (*wa*), which is what is traditionally assumed.

While previous surveys indicate that both Japanese and non-Japanese consider Japanese language to be vague and indirect, polite, and perhaps even unique, other aspects of Japanese communication have not been addressed (such as the notion that Japanese can communicate with words (*ishindenshin*) or that Japanese communication is more subjective or illogical than communication in English). In addition, there have been no surveys carried out which have allowed comparisons to be made between Japanese and non-Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication.<sup>5</sup> The preliminary survey reported in this paper is the first step towards making such comparisons.

## Japanese and non-Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication

### 3.1. Methodology

Two written questionnaires were distributed to a range of Japanese (n=109) and non-Japanese (n=65) in order to investigate the perceptions of non-specialists about Japanese communication. The questionnaire included nine different items related to Japanese communication. These items were chosen from the perceptions of Japanese communication typically found in the *nihonjinron* literature. The survey distributed to Japanese from January through to May 2000 was originally written in English and then translated into Japanese. This survey was then back-translated into English (to ensure greater

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<sup>5</sup> Although both Japanese (n=250) and non-Japanese (n=20) were surveyed in Nisugi's (1974) study, he did not attempt to make any comparisons between these two groups (perhaps due to the large difference between the sample sizes making statistically valid comparison difficult).

equivalence with the survey written in Japanese) and distributed to non-Japanese from July through to October 2000. The survey distributed to non-Japanese was written in English, so as to not exclude those non-Japanese with more limited Japanese reading proficiency. It also enabled the researcher to concentrate on the perceptions of Japanese communication held by non-Japanese who can speak English, to allow for more consistent analysis. Both surveys were in a format where respondents indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement on a Likert-like scale to a number of statements about Japanese communication.<sup>6</sup> The social network approach, whereby contacts of the researcher distributed the survey to Japanese living throughout Japan and non-Japanese living in Japan and Australia, was used to gather responses. The response rate for both surveys was high at around 90 per cent.

The sample of Japanese was comprised of 109 respondents living in Japan. 60 of the respondents were female while 49 were male. There was a range of age groups covered by this sample: 39 were in their twenties, 26 were in their thirties, 15 were in forties, 21 were in their fifties, and seven were over 60, with just one respondent less than 20. The respondents also came from a range of different areas in Japan, although more than half came from the Kanto region where the researcher was based: Hokkaido and Tohoku = 2, Kanto = 62, Chubu = 14, Kinki = 16, Chugoku = 6, Shikoku = 5, Kyushu = 4. The respondents were in predominantly 'white collar' occupations (72 respondents) such as company office workers (*sarariiman* or *OL*) or professions (teaching, medicine, engineering and so on). Three of the respondents were in 'blue collar' jobs, with the remaining 27 being mainly housewives or students. The level of education of the Japanese respondents was fairly high as 66 had completed university level courses and 20 had done postgraduate study. The remaining respondents had graduated either from senior or junior high school (21).<sup>7</sup>

The sample of non-Japanese consisted of 65 respondents, 42 of whom were resident in Japan at the time of the survey, the remaining 23 respondents living in Australia. The respondents were mainly in their twenties: four were between 15-19 years of age, 33 were between 20-24, 18 were between 25-29, and ten were over 30. The bias towards younger non-Japanese in this sample was due to the 'boom' in Japanese language studies being only a recent phenomenon, and thus the majority of non-Japanese who can speak Japanese tend to be younger. 43 of the non-Japanese were female and 22 were male. The respondents came from a range of different countries, although 46 were

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<sup>6</sup> Respondents were asked to indicate strong agreement (*hijoo ni soo omou*), agreement (*soo omou*), neither agreement nor disagreement (*dochira demo nai*), disagreement (*soo omowanai*), strong disagreement (*mattaku soo omowanai*), or don't know (*wakaranai*) to the statements.

<sup>7</sup> The English proficiency level of the Japanese respondents was not surveyed as it is difficult to obtain objective estimations of proficiency level in a written survey such as this. In any case, the survey aimed to find out perceptions of Japanese communication (in relation to English), not objective truths, so whether or not the respondents actually had sufficient proficiency in English to make such evaluations was not the focus in this study.

from countries where English is the major language.<sup>8</sup> The remaining respondents came from a variety of countries around the world.<sup>9</sup> 40 of the respondents answered that their native language is English, although all of the respondents said they could speak English (which was implicitly required in any case since the survey was written in English).<sup>10</sup> Most of the non-Japanese had spent more than one year living in Japan. While 17 had spent less than a year living in Japan, 23 had spent between one and two years, 15 had spent between two and three years, and 10 had spent more than three years living in Japan. The respondents had lived in various areas throughout Japan, the majority had spent time in Kanto (38), but 27 had lived in various other parts of Japan. The proficiency level in Japanese of the non-Japanese was difficult to objectively estimate, but was probably fairly advanced on average. While eight respondents had spent less than three years studying Japanese, 22 had spent between three and five years, and 35 had spent more than five years studying Japanese (both in Japan and in their home countries). 17 of the respondents evaluated their proficiency in spoken Japanese as advanced, 23 claimed an intermediate-advanced level, 21 claimed an intermediate proficiency level, while only four respondents said they were of beginner-intermediate proficiency level in spoken Japanese.<sup>11</sup> The respondents were mainly students (45) or teachers (13). The education level of the non-Japanese respondents was also fairly high with 34 having university-level undergraduate qualifications and a further 14 having postgraduate qualifications, while the remaining respondents had finished secondary school (17).

### 3.2. Survey results and discussion

The results of the survey of Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication are summarized in Table One, while the results of the survey of non-Japanese perceptions are summarized in Table Two. The results indicate that Japanese and non-Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication reflect a mixture of beliefs, some of which suggest notions related to the *nihonjinron*.

The perceptions of Japanese communication held by the Japanese respondents were not consistent with many claims that have been made in the literature as can be seen in Table One below, although there was strong support for the idea that Japanese is vague and indirect.

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<sup>8</sup> Australia = 25, United States = 9, New Zealand = 6, Canada = 5, United Kingdom = 1.

<sup>9</sup> Thailand (5), Italy (4), Bulgaria (2), and India (0), with one respondent coming from each of the following countries: Czech Republic, France, India, Iran, Macedonia, Israel, Russia, Turkey.

<sup>10</sup> The survey was written in English rather than in Japanese, because a survey in Japanese would have required a more advanced level of reading comprehension in Japanese thus making it difficult to collect responses from non-Japanese of intermediate level or less. This did, unfortunately, mean that few responses were collected from Koreans or Chinese.

<sup>11</sup> In any case, the aim of this survey was to find out perceptions of Japanese communication, not to ascertain objective truths, so whether or not the non-Japanese actually had sufficient proficiency in Japanese to make such evaluations was not the main focus in this study.

**Table One: Summary of Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication**

Stimulus statement		Percentage of respondents					
		SA	A	N	DA	SDA	DK
1. Japanese is a unique language and there is no language like it in the world.	-	5	16	10	37	16	17
2. Japanese is the only language which has ' <i>kotodama</i> '.	-	0	2	10	47	27	15
3. Japanese can guess the feelings of the person they are talking to more than non-Japanese, so they often communicate without words ( <i>ishindenshin</i> ).	-	4	17	16	39	17	8
4. Japanese is a more subjective, emotional and non-logical language than English.	-	5	14	17	44	13	7
5. Vague and indirect ( <i>aimaina</i> ) speech is a special characteristic of Japanese people.	+	20	37	12	21	2	8
6. Japanese has more indirect expressions than English.	+	11	54	15	8	1	13
7. Japanese are more polite ( <i>teineina</i> ) than non-Japanese.		2	8	40	28	12	11
8. Japanese is a more polite ( <i>teineina</i> ) language than English.		6	18	33	25	9	12
9. Non-Japanese show more consideration ( <i>ki o tsukau</i> ) to the person they are speaking to than Japanese.		3	24	37	24	3	11

The figures given in the table are percentages rounded to the nearest whole number. The following abbreviations are used in the table: SA = strongly agree, A = agree, N = neither agree nor disagree, DA = disagree, SDA = strongly disagree, DK = don't know. In addition, symbols to mark overall



agreement or disagreement with various statements were assigned using the following cut-offs:

- + = > 50 per cent agreement
- = > 50 per cent disagreement
- = > 70 per cent disagreement

The majority of respondents did not believe that “Japanese is a unique language” (*Nihongo wa dokutoku na gengo de, sekai chuu de Nihongo no yoo na kotoba wa nai*), as 53 per cent disagreed with the statement, although a sizeable minority of 21 per cent did agree Japanese is a unique (*dokutoku*) language. This level of rejection of the notion of uniqueness contrasts with an earlier study carried out by Haugh (1998), where 46 per cent agreed that Japanese is unique and only 40 per cent disagreed, although any comparisons should be done in light of differences in the backgrounds of respondents of these two surveys.<sup>12</sup> This marked difference between the two surveys cannot be explained easily, as the current survey had a greater proportion of older respondents, and yet a smaller proportion of respondents agreed with the notion that Japanese language is unique (in the following section it is suggested that there is a positive correlation between age and belief that Japanese is unique). Thus, it could be indicating a shift in perceptions of the uniqueness of Japanese in the past few years.

There was strong rejection of the notion that Japanese is the only language with a ‘living spirit’ or ‘word spirit’ (*Nihongo dake ga kotodama o motte iru gengo da to ieru*). 74 per cent of the respondents disagreed that Japanese is unique in possessing *kotodama* (word spirit), with just 2 per cent agreeing with this statement.

The notion that Japanese often communicate non-verbally because they can guess the feelings of others more easily than non-Japanese (*Nihonjin wa gaikokujin yori mo aite no kimochi o sassuru koto ga dekiru node, kotoba o tsukawazuni komyunikeeshon ga dekiru*), or what is commonly called *ishindenshin* (tacit communication), was also rejected by the majority of respondents. The degree of disagreement was similar to that for the notion that Japanese is unique, as 56 per cent disagreed, while a minority of 21 per cent agreed with the statement.

The characterisation of Japanese communication as subjective, emotional and non-logical in comparison to English (*Eigo to kuraberu to, Nihongo wa shukanteki de, kanjooteiki de, ronriteki dewanai gengo da*) was also rejected by the majority of respondents. With a pattern of responses similar to perceptions of uniqueness and non-verbal communication, 57 per cent of respondents did not perceive Japanese as subjective, emotional and non-logical in comparison to English, while a minority of 19 per cent did hold this perception. This result is consistent with the level of disagreement with a similar item surveyed in Haugh (1998) where 56 per cent of respondents did

<sup>12</sup> For example, there was a greater proportion of *shakaijin* (working adults) in the current survey than there was in the previous survey (92 per cent versus 67 per cent).

not perceive Japanese as good for expressing feelings but not good for expressing logical arguments while a minority of 25 per cent agreed.

The lack of support for the four items above indicates that many of the perceptions of Japanese communication popularised in the *nihonjinron* are no longer held by the majority of Japanese sampled in this survey.<sup>13</sup> Two items in the survey did, however, receive significant support amongst the Japanese respondents. 57 per cent believed that vague and indirect communication is particular to Japanese people (*Aimai na hanashikata wa Nihonjin no dokutoku no mono da*), while only 23 per cent disagreed. Even more strongly supported was the perception that Japanese communication is more indirect than English. 65 per cent of respondents agreed Japanese is more indirect (*Nihongo wa Eigo yori kansetsuteki na hyoogen ga ooi*), with only a small number percentage of respondents disagreeing (9 per cent disagreement). These results thus confirm the studies cited earlier (Chung 1999; Haugh 1998; Iwata 1999; Nisugi 1974), where Japanese respondents believed Japanese to be more vague and indirect than English.

It should be noted that for all of the above items there was a significant minority of respondents of around 20 to 25 per cent who did not hold any particular perceptions about those items in question (that is, their response was either 'don't know' or 'cannot say either way'). However, one would not expect all Japanese to be clear about their perceptions of Japanese communication. Some level of non-response is to be expected, especially since the response rate to the survey itself was so high, and thus respondents may have been opting out at the level of individual items rather than opting out of the whole survey itself. It is worth noting that the overall response rate for a recent survey (n=2212) of perceptions about Japanese carried out in Japan by the National Language Research Institute was around 74 per cent (Bunkacho 1995), which means around 25 per cent of those surveyed opted out of responding to that survey altogether.<sup>14</sup>

While Japanese respondents appeared to hold fairly clear beliefs about six out of the nine items in the survey, there was a less clear pattern of responses given to statements about politeness in Japanese. A large proportion of between 45 and 51 per cent of the respondents did not give a response (either don't know or can't say either way) for these three items. This high proportion of non-response cannot be attributed to a lack of contact with non-Japanese, as 91 per cent of respondents reported having spoken Japanese with a non-Japanese, and 70 per cent of respondents had had more than a passing acquaintance with at least one non-Japanese. The non-response level must therefore be considered a reflection of the equivocal nature of perceptions of politeness in Japanese in relation to English.

There was little support for the notion that Japanese people are more polite than non-Japanese (*Nihonjin wa gaikokujin yori teinei da*), with only 10

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that the *nihonjinron* literature itself is disappearing, as other ideas supported in the *nihonjinron* may still be prevalent in Japan.

<sup>14</sup> Some of the non-responses may have also been due to a lack of confidence on the part of respondents in regards to their level of English, especially items four, six, and eight.

per cent of the Japanese holding this perception, while a significant minority of 40 per cent disagreed Japanese are more polite. There were less clear responses for the perception that Japanese language is more polite than English (*Nihongo wa Eigo yori teinei na gengo da*) and the belief that non-Japanese show more consideration to those they are speaking with than Japanese (*Hanashite iru toki, gaikokujin no hoo ga Nihonjin yori aite ni ki wo tsukau*). 26 per cent of respondents agreed with the perception that Japanese is more polite than English, but a slightly higher percentage of respondents did not agree (34 per cent disagreement). Likewise, while 27 per cent of respondents agreed that non-Japanese show more consideration than Japanese, an equal percentage disagreed (27 per cent disagreement). Although the pattern of responses to these items is not easy to interpret, it does appear that there is only minimal support amongst Japanese for perceptions that Japanese communication is more polite, or that it involves more consideration for others than communication in English. This contrasts with the results of Nisugi's (1974) study where 76 per cent of Japanese thought polite (*teineina*) was an appropriate word to describe Japanese in comparison to English. Although it is hard to make comparisons between these two results because of the differences in methodology employed, it does appear that there may have been some kind of shift in the perception that Japanese communication is polite in the past twenty or so years. This may be due to changes in the usage of Japanese language itself in the past two or three decades, such as the decrease in the usage of honorific forms (in particular deferential honorifics – *sonkeigo* and *kenjoogo*) (Okamoto 1999).

Overall Japanese respondents did not perceive Japanese communication as unique, particularly tacit or non-verbal, subjective, emotional and non-logical, polite, or as involving *kotodama* (word spirit). The Japanese sampled did however, perceive Japanese communication as vague and indirect. The perceptions of Japanese communication held by the Japanese surveyed are thus characterised by the belief that Japanese communication is vague and indirect.

Non-Japanese appear to hold fairly similar perceptions of Japanese communication to Japanese according to the results of this survey, although there were some variations in the degree to which various perceptions of Japanese communication were held by non-Japanese, as can be seen in Table Two below. The majority of non-Japanese did not believe Japanese is a unique language with 51 per cent disagreeing and only 26 per cent agreeing. These figures are similar overall to those found for Japanese respondents (where 53 per cent disagreed and 21 per cent agreed) and no statistically significant difference was found between the samples at the 0.05 level of significance ( $X^2 = 6.87, df=5$ ).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The critical  $X^2$  value at the 0.05 level is 11.07 for five degrees of freedom. The chi-square test was chosen to test for possible differences between responses in this study since the sample sizes are not the same, and patterns of frequencies are involved (Hatch and Lazaraton 1991). Chi-square is essentially an estimate of whether differences between two sets of frequencies are simply due to statistical variance rather than constituting a real difference.

**Table Two: Summary of non-Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication**

Stimulus statement	Percentage of respondents						
		SA	A	N	DA	SDA	DK
1. Japanese is a unique language and there is no language like it in the world.	-	8	18	15	28	23	8
2. Only the Japanese language has a “living spirit” ( <i>kotodama</i> ).	-	2	2	11	25	32	29
3. Japanese can guess the feelings of the person they are talking to more than non-Japanese, so they often communicate without words (tacit communication: <i>ishindenshin</i> ).		2	17	26	34	6	15
4. Japanese is a more subjective, emotional and non-logical language than English.		2	15	23	29	17	14
5. A vague style of speech is characteristic of Japanese.	+	20	43	18	12	2	5
6. Japanese has more indirect expressions than English.	+	12	57	6	11	5	9
7. Japanese are more polite than non-Japanese.		11	25	22	22	18	3
8. Japanese is a more polite language than English.		12	35	26	15	8	3
9. Japanese show more consideration to the person they are speaking to than non-Japanese.		5	23	28	28	12	5

The higher a chi-square value is, the greater the possibility that differences are only due to statistical variance

There was also little support amongst non-Japanese for the notion that only Japanese has a 'living spirit' (*kotodama*) as 57 per cent disagreed and only 4 per cent agreed. The degree of disagreement was lower for non-Japanese than for Japanese (where 74 per cent disagreed), but 29 per cent of non-Japanese respondents answered that they did not know, so the lower level of disagreement can probably be attributed to the greater proportion of non-Japanese who have not heard about *kotodama* before. This difference was not significant at the 0.05 level, but was found to be significant at the 0.1 level of significance ( $X^2 = 5.01$ ,  $df=2$ ).<sup>16</sup>

There was also a lower proportion of disagreement with the notion that Japanese often communicate non-verbally due to their ability to guess others feelings amongst non-Japanese (40 per cent disagreed), in comparison to Japanese respondents (where 56 per cent disagreed), but a similar sized minority of around 19 per cent agreed with this perception. This difference was not significant at the 0.05 level, but was found to be significant at the 0.1 level of significant ( $X^2 = 8.06$ ,  $df=4$ ).<sup>17</sup> Once again the lower level of disagreement with this perception is attributable to a greater level of non-response (either 'don't know' or 'cannot say either way') amongst the non-Japanese, which indicates that probably a significant number were unfamiliar with the notion of *ishindenshin* (tacit communication).

Most non-Japanese respondents did not hold the perception that Japanese communication is more subjective, emotional and non-logical with a similar small proportion of agreement as was found for the Japanese respondents (17 per cent and 19 per cent agreement respectively). The degree of disagreement was again lower for non-Japanese than for Japanese respondents (46 per cent and 57 per cent disagreement respectively), but this difference was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level ( $X^2 = 5.21$ ,  $df=4$ ). As for the previous items, this slight difference can be attributed to the greater proportion of non-responses, indicating a lack of familiarity with these perceptions amongst a large number of non-Japanese (37 per cent non-response).

Non-Japanese respondents may have held even stronger perceptions than Japanese respondents that Japanese communication is vague. 63 per cent of non-Japanese respondents perceived Japanese as vague with just 17 per cent disagreeing. It should be noted though that this is actually a stronger claim than that made by Japanese respondents. This is not because the degree of support was slightly less amongst Japanese respondents (57 per cent of Japanese agreed), as this was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level of

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<sup>16</sup> The critical  $X^2$  value at the 0.05 level is 5.99, while it is 4.60 at the 0.1 level for two degrees of freedom. The degrees of freedom varied for each test, as some of the categories were merged (in this case into agree/strongly agree, neither/don't know, and disagree/strongly disagree) to avoid any expected frequencies being too low (Hatch and Lazaraton 1991:409).

<sup>17</sup> The critical  $X^2$  value at the 0.05 level is 9.49, while it is 7.78 at the 0.1 level for four degrees of freedom (the categories of strongly agree and agree were merged to avoid the expected frequency in those categories being too low).

significant ( $X^2 = 2.31$ ,  $df=3$ ).<sup>18</sup> It can be said because *aimaina* Japanese communication refers not only to vague speech, but also to indirect and elliptical speech (which is not usually vague as such).<sup>19</sup> Japanese respondents were thus agreeing that they believe Japanese is 'vague and indirect', while non-Japanese respondents were agreeing that Japanese communication is vague. The reason why non-Japanese held the perception that Japanese is vague more strongly than non-Japanese is perhaps partially due to the fact that most of them are not yet of native-speaker level proficiency in Japanese. Therefore, they may perceive certain examples of elliptical or indirect utterances as vague, when Japanese in the same situation would be able to infer and clearly understand the speaker's meaning (Donahue, 1998; Sasagawa, 1996). In relation to this, a recent study of the comprehension of various implicatures by non-Japanese conducted by Yonezawa (2000) found that while non-Japanese could successfully interpret some implicatures, their rate of correct interpretation was only half that of Japanese in other cases. The fact that non-Japanese perceive Japanese communication to be more vague than Japanese do is understandable given their more limited ability to draw inferences successfully; inferences being required in order to bridge the gap between what is said and what is meant by speakers in communication.

Non-Japanese held similar perceptions in relation to the indirectness of Japanese communication. 69 per cent believed that Japanese is more indirect than English while only 16 per cent disagreed. There was no statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level of significance ( $X^2 = 4.09$ ,  $df=3$ ). The notion that Japanese communication is more indirect than communication in English was thus strongly supported by both non-Japanese and Japanese respondents in this survey.

Perceptions of politeness in Japanese communication were mixed among non-Japanese respondents, and the pattern of results was different to that found amongst Japanese respondents for two of the items. 36 per cent of non-Japanese perceived Japanese people to be more polite than non-Japanese while 40 per cent disagreed. While the level of disagreement was similar to that found for Japanese in regards to Japanese being more polite the level of agreement was much higher for non-Japanese (36 per cent for non-Japanese as opposed to only 10 per cent for Japanese). This difference was found to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance ( $X^2 = 20.03$ ,  $df=3$ ). Non-Japanese also had a higher degree of agreement with the perception that Japanese language is more polite than English than Japanese (36 per cent agreement for non-Japanese versus 24 per cent agreement amongst Japanese),

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<sup>18</sup> The critical  $X^2$  value at the 0.05 level is 7.82 for three degrees of freedom (the categories of disagree/strongly disagree were merged, as were the categories of neither/don't know to avoid expected frequencies being too low).

<sup>19</sup> Japanese respondents were asked to respond to perception that Japanese is vague and indirect (*Aimai na hanashikata wa Nihonjin no dokutoku no mono da*) whereas non-Japanese respondents were asked to respond to the perception that Japanese is vague. It should be noted, however, that vagueness and indirectness are not synonymous. In other words, something which is indirect is not necessarily vague.

and a lower level of disagreement (23 per cent for non-Japanese as opposed to 34 per cent disagreement for Japanese). This difference, however, was only statistically significant at the 0.1 level, and was not significant at the 0.05 level ( $X^2 = 9.17$ ,  $df=4$ ).<sup>20</sup>

The perception that Japanese communication is more polite than English is more strongly held by non-Japanese than it is amongst Japanese. This stronger perception of politeness amongst non-Japanese may be partially explained by different conceptualisations of politeness by Japanese and non-Japanese. It may be that the conceptualisation of *politeness* in English involves aspects of behaviour that are not considered polite (*teineina*) from the perspective of the Japanese conceptualisation of politeness. In other words, non-Japanese may perceive some behaviours as *polite*, which Japanese do not necessarily consider *teineina*. Another possibility is that non-Japanese associate *teineina* with *keigo* (honorific forms) and *teineigo* (polite forms), and since there are none of these kinds of expressions in English, Japanese communication appears to be more polite (*teineina*). While these are not the only possible explanations, the differences between Japanese and English conceptualisations of 'politeness' are substantial, and thus they must have some kind of effect on the perceptions of 'politeness' in Japanese.

While non-Japanese on the whole did not perceive Japanese as more considerate towards those with whom they are speaking than non-Japanese (40 per cent disagreed with this item), a fairly large minority of non-Japanese did agree (28 per cent agreed that Japanese are more considerate). The difference between non-Japanese responses to this item and the other items relating to politeness indicates that conceptualisations of 'politeness' in English are not necessarily synonymous with 'consideration' (*ki o tsukau*). As this item was worded differently for the non-Japanese survey than for the survey written in Japanese, the conclusions that can be drawn are different: it appears that Japanese do not believe non-Japanese are more considerate, while non-Japanese do not believe Japanese to be more considerate.

In summary, it appears that Japanese and non-Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication are characterised by the belief that Japanese is more vague and indirect than English. On the other hand, perceptions that Japanese communication is more unique, subjective, emotional and non-logical, polite, and tacit and non-verbal are not held by the majority of Japanese and non-Japanese respondents. There were only a few minor differences in the patterns of responses between Japanese and non-Japanese respondents. Some of these differences can be attributed to a lack of knowledge about particular notions such as *kotodama* and *ishindenshin* (items two and three), while the significantly larger number of non-Japanese agreeing that Japanese are more polite than non-Japanese (item seven) may be due to the different conceptualisations of politeness held by non-Japanese in comparison to Japanese.

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<sup>20</sup> The critical  $X^2$  value at the 0.05 level is 9.49, while it is 7.78 at the 0.1 level for four degrees of freedom (the categories of neither and don't know were merged to avoid the expected frequency in those categories being too low).

### The relative homogeneity of perceptions of Japanese communication

Analysis of the relationship between background variables of the respondents and perceptions about different aspects of Japanese communication revealed that these perceptions were, on the whole, uniformly held across the variety of background factors surveyed in these questionnaires for both Japanese and non-Japanese. In the case of Japanese respondents, analysis of the influence of various background variables did not reveal any clear trends. Factors such as gender and degree of experience appeared to have some effect on native speaker beliefs about Japanese communication being vague and indirect, but these effects were not statistically significant according to the chi square test. In the case of non-Japanese, the only factor that had a statistically significant effect on beliefs about Japanese communication being vague and indirect was the length of time they had spent in Japan.

Factors such as gender and degree of experience with non-Japanese initially seemed to be somewhat related to support for the notion Japanese is vague and indirect amongst Japanese respondents. 63 percent of female respondents (n=60) agreed that Japanese is vague and indirect, while only 49 percent of males (n=49) agreed. The level of disagreement amongst males was also higher (33 per cent) as opposed to the level of disagreement amongst females (15 per cent). The higher degree of support amongst females could be related to the finding that Japanese females tend to be more vague and indirect in their speech than Japanese males (Shibamoto 1985: 65). Females may therefore more strongly support the notion that Japanese is vague and indirect, because they perceive themselves as being more vague and indirect in their own speech.<sup>21</sup> However, this was not a robust trend as it was not found to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level ( $X^2 = 4.79$ ,  $df = 3$ ).<sup>22</sup>

The degree to which Japanese respondents had interacted with non-Japanese also appeared to be related to the degree of support for the notion of vagueness/indirectness. Those Japanese who had no or minimal experience with non-Japanese (n=33), supported the notion that Japanese is vague and indirect more strongly than those with extensive experience, for example, those who have lived overseas or have close non-Japanese friends (n=29). 60 per cent of Japanese with minimal experience agreed, while only 12 per cent disagreed. In contrast, only 41 per cent of Japanese with extensive non-Japanese experience agreed, and 34 per cent disagreed with the notion that Japanese is vague and indirect. This finding seems to indicate that the more interaction Japanese have with non-Japanese, the less strongly they support the notion that Japanese is particularly vague and indirect. In other words, those who have less extensive experience in intercultural communication tend to support the ideas advanced in the *nihonjinron* literature more. However, this

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<sup>21</sup> Whether or not females are actually *aimaina* in their speech is an empirical question, but no matter what the objective reality may be, this may perception exist and thus may affect other related perceptions.

<sup>22</sup> The critical  $X^2$  required to reject the null hypothesis is 7.815 at three degrees of freedom.



trend was not found to be statistically significant either, so no firm conclusions can be drawn ( $X^2 = 8.87$ ,  $df = 6$ ).<sup>23</sup>

The only statistically significant difference amongst non-native speakers that Japanese communication is vague and indirect were found across the different periods of time which they had spent in Japan, as is illustrated in Table Three. 73 per cent of non-Japanese who had spent one year or less in Japan ( $n=40$ ) thought Japanese is vague, while only 48 per cent who had spent two or more years ( $n=25$ ) thought Japanese is vague. But this trend was not robust, as it was not found to be statistically significant ( $X^2 = 4.71$ ,  $df = 3$ ).<sup>24</sup>

However, there was a statistically significant difference between non-native speakers who had spent one year or less in Japan and those who had spent two or more years ( $X^2 = 12.12$ ,  $df = 2$ ).<sup>25</sup> 85 per cent of non-Japanese who had spent one year or less in Japan thought Japanese is more indirect than English, while only 44 per cent who had spent two or more years in Japan thought so (and 28 per cent disagreed), as illustrated in Table Three. Interestingly, these differences were not seen across the self-assessed proficiency level of the non-Japanese respondents.<sup>26</sup>

**Table Three: Non-Japanese perceptions that Japanese communication is indirect in relation to length of period in Japan.**

Stimulus statement	Group	Percentage of respondents					
		SA	A	N	DA	SDA	DK
6. Japanese has more indirect expressions than English.	1 year or less	15	70	2.5	5	2.5	5
	Two or more years	8	36	12	20	8	16

The fact that non-Japanese tend to hold perceptions that Japanese is indirect (and vague) less strongly as they spend more time in Japan, indicates that the degree of non-Japanese experience with Japanese influences their perceptions about Japanese communication.

The analysis of background variables indicated that both native and non-native speakers in this study hold fairly homogeneous perceptions about Japanese communication. Only in the case of the length of time spent in Japan could a statistically significant relationship be found between a background variable and perceptions about Japanese communication. Other trends were observed, but were found to not be statistically significant.

While no definitive trends can be established by this preliminary study, it does appear that perceptions of Japanese communication are not related to

<sup>23</sup> The critical  $X^2$  required to reject the null hypothesis is 12.592 at six degrees of freedom.

<sup>24</sup> The critical  $X^2$  required to reject the null hypothesis is 7.815 at three degrees of freedom.

<sup>25</sup> The critical  $X^2$  required to reject the null hypothesis is 5.991 at two degrees of freedom.

<sup>26</sup> One possible explanation is that the self-assessed proficiency levels may have been a less than accurate measure of the actual degree of proficiency in Japanese of the non-Japanese.

perceptions that Japanese is unique. There was very low degree of support for the notion that the Japanese language is unique. Only 21 per cent of Japanese and 26 per cent of non-Japanese respondents supported this assumption. The perception that Japanese communication is vague and indirect thus cannot be positively correlated with the presumption that Japanese is unique (a negative correlation would be, of course, *non sequitur*). The notion of uniqueness is the one of the most central tenets of the *nihonjinron*, and since there is little support for it found in this survey, it is difficult to maintain the assumption that perceptions of Japanese communication directly arise from the *nihonjinron*.

### Future research

The survey which has been reported in this paper is a preliminary study which indicates that perceptions of Japanese communication held by both Japanese and non-Japanese are a mixture: while Japanese communication is not perceived as particularly unique, subjective, emotional and non-logical, polite or tacit in nature, it is perceived to be vague and indirect. Closer examination of the background variables of respondents indicates that these perceptions are held fairly homogeneously across these native and non-native speakers, although the length of time spent in Japan did appear to influence perceptions of non-native speakers about indirectness.

The question still remains as to what kind of factors underlie perceptions of Japanese communication. It may be the case that traditional folk ideologies of communication strongly influence Japanese perceptions of communication. Being indirect and unclear about what one means is traditionally highly valued in Japanese communication folk ideology (Rose 1992: 47-48; Yamada 1997: 16-17), and the traditional Japanese view of communication is that it involves much more than words (Maynard 1997: 180-181). The roots of this particular value in the Japanese folk ideology of communication may extend even as far back as the Heian period when communicating by poetry was popular (Donahue 1998: 166); the inherent indirectness or vagueness of poetry being considered both aesthetically and emotionally appealing at that time. In the case of non-Japanese the perception that Japanese is vague may partially arise in some cases from a lack of sufficient proficiency in Japanese to be able to use contextual cues and infer clear, unambiguous speaker meanings. It may also arise partially from the evaluation of Japanese communicative practices from the perspective of English communication, where omission of units, for example, is considered vague (Kagano 1999; Sasagawa 1996).<sup>27</sup>

However, there needs to be more in-depth investigation of the ideologies underlying perceptions of Japanese communication to substantiate these suggestions. Furthermore, there are other aspects of Japanese

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<sup>27</sup> English speakers traditionally have a view of communication as a process of putting one's thoughts into words to convey them to the hearer, what is termed the "conduit metaphor" by Reddy (1979).

communication that were not touched upon in this survey, such as perceptions of differences between male and female speech or perceptions that recently the communicative practices of young Japanese differ markedly from older Japanese. More comprehensive surveys are therefore needed to definitively establish the nature of perceptions about Japanese communication held by native and non-native speakers of Japanese.

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