
Language Structure as a Reflection of Cultural Schema

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1. Introduction

Wa, which is usually translated as ‘harmony’ or ‘concord’, is the key concept of this paper. As Wierzbicka (1997: 248) states, *wa* is of vital importance in Japanese culture and I will show that structural properties of the Japanese language are linked to the importance of this concept in Japanese culture.¹ The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 deals with the historical origins of the importance of *wa*. Section 3 reviews the Principle of Cultural Elaboration as widely observed in vocabulary. Section 4 attempts to show that the relevance of the Principle of Cultural Elaboration is not limited to vocabulary and that the Principle can cover wider areas such as syntactic and discourse structures. The grammatical elements analyzed here are interactional particles. Section 5 compares Japanese with Korean, a language which is, at least grammatically, quite similar to Japanese. Section 6 briefly discusses the relevance of the present study to the long list of *nihonjinron* ‘japanology’ studies. Section 7 is a conclusion.

2. The Historical Origins of the Importance of *Wa*

The historical origins of the importance of *wa* in Japanese society go back to one of the most popular historic figures in Japan: Prince Shotoku (573–621), a strong proponent of Buddhism in the period when its status was not yet stable. There are many legends about him, the best known one being that he could listen to what ten people said simultaneously. This Prince Shotoku is said to have authored the Seventeen-article constitution, a document stating the morals and virtues that government officials and aristocrats serving the emperor should observe. The source is *Nihon Shoki* or *The Chronicles of Japan* written in Chinese, which was finished in 720. The relevant part is preserved in the manuscript called Iwasaki bon, which was written in the 10th or 11th century and is in the possession of the Kyoto National Museum.² The first part of the Seventeen-article constitution reads:³

1 For the “exact” translation of *wa*, see Wierzbicka (1997: 249–254).

2 The URL of the museum is: <http://www.kyohaku.go.jp/>.

3 (1) is based on the manuscript of Kyoto National Museum and Ienaga et al. (1975).

- (1) 一日以和貴為 (一に曰く、和らぐを以て貴しと為)⁴
Iti ni iwaku: Yawaragu o motte tootosi to su
 ‘Article 1: Yawaragu is to be valued.’

Thus, in the constitution, the first and most valued moral is “和,” which is read here as *yawaragu*. Adopting its Chinese pronunciation, “和” can also be read as *wa*. This first article has come to be widely known and often used like a proverb or common saying with the form *Wa o motte tootosi to su/nasu* ‘*Wa* is to be highly valued.’

3. The Principle of Cultural Elaboration

According to Hymes (1964: 167), “anthropologists have taken elaboration of vocabulary as an indication of the interests of particular cultures and of differences among them.” This “principle of cultural elaboration in vocabulary” will be noticed by anyone who is familiar with more than one language. For example, to Japanese learners of English it is surprising that the English language has so many independent words denoting “牛” or *usi* such as *bull, calf, cow, heifer, and ox*. To English speakers learning Japanese it might be surprising that the Japanese language has at least four independent expressions for *rice*: *ine* ‘rice-plant,’ *kome* ‘uncooked rice,’ *gohan* ‘cooked rice,’ and *raisu* ‘rice served at a Western-style restaurant.’ These differences reflect the importance of the animal and the plant in English(-speaking) and Japanese cultures respectively.

I would like to propose that this principle of cultural elaboration can be extended to cover areas much wider than vocabulary. Thus, the principle is changed from “Culturally prominent concepts are reflected in the vocabulary of the language” to “Culturally prominent concepts are reflected in the structure of the language,” where “the structure” includes “syntactic structure” and “discourse structure.”

The culturally prominent concept taken up here is *wa wo motte tootosi to su* ‘*wa* is to be valued,’ which has originated from the seventeen-article constitution by Prince Shotoku as we have seen in the preceding section. “The structure of the language” dealt with here is constructions with interactional particles.

4. Interactional Particles in Japanese

4.1 Particles in Japanese

Particles in Japanese are divided into two categories. The first is grammatical particles which “play a primarily grammatical function, marking grammatical relations within a sentence” (Maynard, 1997: 87).⁵ In (2) the four particles *ga, de, to, and o*, respectively, function as nominative, locative, comitative, and accusative markers.

- (2) Taroo *ga* gakkoo *de* Hanako *to* hanasi *o* sita.
 Taroo nominative school locative Hanako comitative talk accusative did
 ‘Taroo talked with Hanako at school.’

The second type of particles in Japanese are interactional particles which express “the speaker’s judgment and attitude toward the message and the partner” (Maynard, 1997: 87).

4 The method used for Romanizing Japanese examples is to use the Kunrei system for cited forms and the Hepburn system for proper nouns. This does not apply to examples from other studies.

5 For detailed descriptions of particles in Japanese, see Martin (1975: section 2.2 and chapter 15).

Interactional particles are further divided into two types: (i) Insertion particles which are phrase-finally inserted within a sentence and (ii) sentence-final particles which are attached sentence-finally. They are illustrated in (3).⁶

- (3) Taroo ga *ne* gakkoni *ne* itta
 Taroo nominative IP (insertion) school IP (insertion) went
yo.
 IP(sentence-final)
 ‘Taroo went to school.’

Some of the interactional particles can be used either as insertion particles or as sentence-final particles. Some of them have only one of the two usages. As for the choice of the interactional particles there are some dialectal, gender, and idiolectal variations. Interactional particles are very frequently used in conversations in Japanese. The following table is from (Maynard, 1997: 88), who has analyzed the total of sixty-minute conversation data consisting of three-minute segments of conversation among twenty pairs.

Table 1 Frequency of Interactional Particles in Three-Minute Segments of Conversation among Twenty Pairs

Interactional particle	Number	%
<i>ne</i>	364	42.18
<i>sa</i>	148	17.15
<i>no</i>	138	15.99
<i>yo</i>	128	14.83
<i>na</i>	49	5.68
Other	36	4.17
Total	863	100.00

The figures in Table 1 show that in Japanese conversations interactional particles are used on an average of once in every 4.20 seconds ($3600 (60 \times 60) / 863 = 4.17$).

4.2 Data: Sentence-Final Particles

Let us now have a look at some real data involving interactional particles, starting with sentence-final particles in this subsection (4.2) and turning to insertion particles in the next subsection (4.3). The data is from a DVD titled *Sailor Moon vol. 1*, which contains a natural conversation between two leading characters: SAWAI Miyu, playing the role of Sailor Moon and HAMA Chisaki, playing the role of Sailor Mercury.

- (4) Sawai: 1, 2 wa no toki wa mada sonnani syaben nakatta
 1, 2 episode GEN time TOP yet not-very-much talk not-PAST IP
yo ne
 IP IP
 ‘In the first or second episode we didn’t talk with each other very much, did we?’

6 The following abbreviations are used for the glossing of Japanese and Korean examples. ACC: accusative case marker; COMP: complementizer; COP: copular; DCL: declarative sentence; GEN: genitive case marker; IP: interactional particle; NOM: nominative case marker; NOMINAL: nominalizer; PAST: past tense marker; TOP: topic marker.

- Hama: Syabetta *yo*.
 talked IP
 ‘We DID talk.’
- Sawai: Chisaki-tyan tte itteta *yo* tabun watasi.
 Chisaki-tyan COMP was-calling IP perhaps I
 ‘I think I called you Chisaki-tyan.’

The functions of the sentence-final particles *yo* and *ne* are summarized in (5).⁷

- (5) a. *Yo* is used when the speaker assumes that he or she has more access to and/or possession of the information and wants to focus on the information conveyed in the utterance.
- b. *Ne* is chosen when the speaker assumes that he or she has less (or about the same amount of) access to and/or possession of the information and wishes to concentrate on feelings and attitude more than on information. (Maynard, 1997: 90)

A very rough approximation is that *yo* is used when the listener does not know what the speaker says and *ne* is used when the listener knows what the speaker says. In the first utterance in (4) the two sentence final particles *yo* and *ne* are used cumulatively. The speaker (Sawai) recalls what she remembers and presents the information as if she has more access to it than the hearer (Hama), which is indicated by *yo*. At the same time, since the memory is shared with the hearer (Hama), the speaker (Sawai) also adds *ne*, which reduces the strength of *yo* and at the same time evokes an emotional rapport between the speaker and the hearer.

In the second utterance the speaker (Hama) indicates that what she remembers is different from what Sawai has just said. Likewise, in the third utterance Sawai insists that what she remembers is the truth. In both cases the speaker assumes that she has more possession of the information so that *yo* is the appropriate sentence-final particle. The sentence-final particle *ne* used as an evoker of emotional rapport is well-illustrated in the following example.

- (6) Sawai: Rei-tyan hankooteki da *ne* ima omou to sugoi.
 Rei-tyan defiant be IP now reflect COMP very
 ‘On reflection, Rei was very defiant.’
- Hama: *Ne*.
 IP
- Sawai: Ima omou to sugoi kowai *ne*.
 now reflect COMP very scary IP
 ‘On reflection, she was very scary.’
- Hama: *Ne*.
 IP
- Sawai: Yoku Usagi-tyan anna atakku siteru *ne*.
 how-come Usagi-tyan that attack is-doing IP
 ‘How come Usagi-tyan keeps on going to talk to her?’
- Nakama ni nattyatta *ne*.
 friends to became IP
 ‘She has become friends with her.’

7 For the semantics and functions of *yo* and *ne*, see also Kamio (1990), Kamio (2002), and Kinsui (1993).

Hama: Ki ga kawatta n daroo *ne*
 mind NOM changed NOMINAL perhaps IP
 ‘Perhaps she has changed her mind.’
 Sawai: *Ne.*
 IP

In (5) two of Hama’s utterances and one of Sawai’s consist of only *ne*.

It is to be noted that a number of researchers on language acquisition report that sentence-final particles are acquired at an earlier age.⁸ Ito (1990: 59) reports that he has heard a one year and eight month old child utter sentences with the sentence-final particle *ne*. Summarizing the overall course of language development of Japanese children, Clancy (1985: 381) states:

The first stage of grammatical development in Japanese is marked by contrastive use of certain verbal inflections, usually including at least the imperative and the past tense, and the appearance of the three most common sentence-final particles: *yo* (assertive/emphatic), *ne* (seeking/indicating agreement) and *no* (presupposed shared context). This initial stage of grammatical development is typically quite early, before 2 years-of-age.
 (Clancy, 1985: 381)

The baby book of the present author’s daughter says that, cocking her head, she repeatedly said the utterance in (7) when she was one year and 4 months old.

(7) Mita *ne.*
 saw IP
 ‘(We) saw (that), didn’t we?’

It was even possible to hold a “conversation” by repeatedly saying *ne* for a while as in (8).

(8) Daughter: *Ne.*
 IP
 Father: *Ne.*
 IP
 Daughter: *Ne.*
 IP
 Father: *Ne.*
 IP

The early acquisition of sentence-final particles shows their fundamental importance in the Japanese language. In this connection, it is worth noting that, as demonstrated in Clancy (1986) the Japanese communicative style of emphasizing empathy and conformity, which helps to preserve group harmony and group values, “can be found in mothers’ speech from an extremely early stage in their children’s development’ (p. 245). Clancy (1986) identifies two types of training children receive from their mother: (i) Empathy training and (ii) conformity training. The empathy training emphasizes “sensitivity to the needs, wishes, and feelings of others” (p. 232). In the following example, the mother tries to instill the fear of fire in her child.

(9) Yotchan achichi itazura shinai *no ne.* Kowai, kowai *ne,* kaji *ne.*
 Yotchan hot play don’t IP IP scary scarey IP fire IP

⁸ See Ohkubo (1967).

‘Yotchan doesn’t play with fire, does he? I/We fear fire.’ (1:11/Clancy, 1986: 233)

By the expression *kowai*, *kowai ne*, mother expresses her fear of fire, which she wants her child to share. (10) was uttered by the same mother when she saw her child repeatedly drop apples on the floor.

(10) *Sonna koto suru n dattara ringosan itai itteru wa yo*
 such thing do NOM COP-if apple-Mr. ouch is-saying IP IP
 ‘If you do that kind of things, Mr. Apple says “Ouch!”’ (1:11/Clancy, 1986: 234)

In (10) the child is asked to empathize with the apple.

The conformity training involves a strategy of “appealing to the imagined reactions of *hito* ‘other people,’ who are watching and evaluating the child’s behavior” (1:11/Clancy, 1986: 236). Consider examples in (11) and (12).

(11) *Osara tabeteru hito inai deshoo? Ne? Osara dare ga taberu no?*
 plate is-eating person no COP IP plate who nominative eat IP
 ‘No one eats plates, do they? Who eats plates?’ (2:1/Clancy, 1986: 237)

(12) *Dame nante yuu hito dare mo inai yo.*
 no such say person who ever no IP
 ‘There is no one who says things like “No!”’ (2:2/Clancy, 1986: 237)

It should be noted that these examples all include interactional particles: *Ne* in (9) and (11), and *yo* in (10) and (12).

4.3 Data: Insertion Particles

Let us now turn to interactional particles used as insertion particles. *Ne* used as an insertion particle is illustrated in (13).

(13) Sawai: 1, 2, 3, 4 *wa nakama-atsume datta kedo ...*
 1, 2, 3, 4 TOP finding-members COP-PAST but
 ‘(The main theme of) episodes 1, 2, 3 and 4 was to find members, but...’
 Hama: Uhn.
 Sawai: *Sono ... 1, 2, 3, 4 ...*
 well 1, 2, 3, 4
 Sawai & Hama: 5, 6, 7, 8 [together]
 ‘In episode 5, 6, 7, and 8 ...’
 Sawai: *... ga cho kokka(r)a ne*
 nominative a-little from-here IP
 ‘... from here ...’
 Hama: Uhn.
 Sawai: *minna (no) naka wo ne*
 everyone GEN relationship ACC IP
 ‘... everyone’s relationship ...’
 Hama: *Ne.*
 IP
 Sawai: *dandan utusiteru*
 gradually is-focusing

‘... is gradually focused ...’

In (13) *ne* is twice used as an insertion particle by SAWAI. The first occurrence is attached to the postpositional phrase and the second occurrence is attached to the accusative NP. In both cases the use of *ne* triggers the listener’s (Hama’s) back channels, *uhn* in the first instance and the interactional particle *ne* in the second instance. From the observations in this and preceding subsections, we can say that the Japanese conversational style is schematically illustrated in (14).

(14) A: IP IP IP
 B: BC BC BC

The interactional particles (IPs) in (14) are either sentence-final or insertion particles. They tend to trigger the listener’s back channels (BCs).

In actual conversations insertion particles can be empty but in such cases, they are usually compensated by the prolonging of the last syllable of the relevant phrase with the falling intonation accompanied by vertical head movement. Back channels in (14) can be interactional particles, or other responding expressions such as ‘hai,’ ‘un,’ ‘hee,’ etc. or non-verbal vertical head-movement. Thus, in Japanese conversations the speaker and the listener are constantly interacting with each other. It seems that the speaker is constantly taking care of the listener and the listener is constantly encouraging the speaker to go on. I assume that this conversational style is linked to the Japanese inclination of valuing *wa*.

4.4 Disturbing Situations

The speaker may feel it difficult to continue his or her talk when supports from the listener through back channels are not given. There are two such disturbing situations. One is when the speaker talks with a non-native speaker of Japanese. Especially disturbing is a conversation over the telephone as illustrated in (15), which is cited from Mizutani (1979: 96).

(15) Japanese: Mosi mosi.
 Hello
 Non-Japanese: Mosi mosi.
 Hello
 Japanese: Ee, kotira, anoo, Yamamoto desu ga
 uh this well Yamamoto is but
 ‘Uh, this is Yamamoto speaking....’
 Non-Japanese:
 Japanese: Mosi mosi.
 Hello
 Non-Japanese: Hai.
 Yes
 Japanese: Kotira, Yamamoto desu ga, Johnson-san wa ...
 this Yamamoto is but Johnson-Mr./Ms. TOP
 Non-Japanese:
 Japanese: Mosi mosi.
 Hello

In (15) the Japanese speaker does not receive any back channels from the listener and begins to worry about whether the listener is listening to what he or she says. The “correct” response should be something like the following.

- (16) Japanese: Mosi mosi.
Hello
Non-Japanese: Mosi mosi.
Hello
Japanese: Ee, kotira, anoo, Yamamoto desu ga
uh this well Yamamoto is but
'Uh, this is Yamamoto speaking....'
Non-Japanese: *Hai*.
yes

The second disturbing situation is when the speaker presents a speech in public. There is an interesting historical episode concerning the “difficulty” of presenting a speech in Japanese. In 1873, six years after the Meiji Restoration, a statesman MORI Arinori, who later became the first Minister of Education, proposed to found an academy Meirokusha to promote civilization and enlightenment. Meirokusha was officially formed in the next year and started to play the leading role in introducing Western ideas and practices.

One of the founding members, FUKUZAWA Yukichi, whose portrait is now on the 10,000 yen bill, proposed to hold a speech meeting. But the other members were skeptical about the success of such a meeting and MORI Arinori is reported to have even said that a speech could not be made in Japanese since the language was only good for a conversation and inappropriate in making a speech in public (cf. Kaganoi, 2002: 114). In his extremely popular book *Gakumon no susume* (*An Encouragement of Studying*), Fukuzawa (1876: 13) criticizes this idea as shown in (17).

- (17) Aru syosei ga nihon no gengo wa
certain student/person NOMINATIVE Japanese GEN language TOP
Hubenri ni site bunsyo mo enzetsu mo dekinu yue
inconvenient writing as-well speech as-well cannot-do because
eigo o tukai eibun wo motiiru nazo to
English ACC use English ACC use such COMP
torunimotaranu baka o iu mono ari. Anzuru ni kono
worthless stupidity ACC say person is thinking this
syosei wa nihon ni umarete imada zyuubunni nihongo o
student/person TOP Japan in was-born yet enough Japanese ACC
motiitaru koto naki otoko naran. Kuni no kotoba wa
used thing not-was man will-be country GEN language TOP
sono kuni no zibutu no hantanaru wariai ni sitagaite
that country GEN things GEN various propotion to according-to
sidai ni zookasi gou mo huziyuu naki hazu no mono nari.
gradually increase not-any inconvenience not-is should GEN thing is
Nani wa sateoki ima no nihonzin wa ima no nihongo wo
before-anything-else now GEN Japanese TOP now GEN Japanese TOP

takumini motiite benzetu no zyootatusen koto wo hagemu beki nari.
 skillfully use speech GEN develop thing ACC strive should

‘There is a fool who says that he uses English and writes in English since Japanese is inconvenient, so inconvenient that you cannot write or make a speech in the language. I think that this person, although born in Japan, has never fully used Japanese. The language of a country increases as things in the country increases and there shouldn’t be any inconvenience. Japanese should now work hard so that we can make a speech by using the Japanese language skillfully.’

Of course, Fukozawa was correct and presenting a speech in public later became extremely popular and the next century saw a period of the Taisho democracy. Yet, I believe that there is a grain of truth in Mori’s remarks. For, in a public speech you cannot expect to receive continuous back channels, which the listener will give in an ordinary conversation, and this can be a cause of uneasiness for making a public speech in Japanese.

5. Japanese and Korean

It is interesting to compare what we have seen in Japanese with comparable situations in Korean. As the following statement of Martin (1991: 280–281) and the examples in (19) show, Japanese and Korean are grammatically quite similar to each other.

(18) The grammars of Japanese and Korean are remarkably similar, so that it is easy to make word-to-word and even morpheme-to-morpheme translations between the two. The dissimilarities turn out to be relatively trivial or to disappear when older varieties and dialects of each language are taken into account.

(19) a. Japanese

Taroo ga Ziroo ni hon wo age-ta.
 Taroo nominative Ziroo dative book accusative give-PAST

b. Korean

Taroo ka Ziroo ekey chayk u cwu-ess-ta.
 Taroo nominative Ziroo dative book accusative give-PAST-DCL

There even is a group of scholars who suggests their common ancestry based on the grammatical similarities.⁹

Despite this similarity, the sentence-final particles are not of frequent use in Korean, nor does the listener give a series of back channels as observed in Japanese conversations, as pointed out by Hong (2007) and Horie & Taira (2002). Hong (2007: 102) states that in Korean, especially when the speaker talks with his or her senior, giving frequent back channels will be taken unfavorably. Hong goes on to say that the frequent use of back channels observed in Japanese conversations reflects the cooperative attitude of creating a conversation together and the harmonious attitude of expressing a partial agreement even when the listener is not in agreement with the speaker.

9 See Martin (1991).

6. Nihonjinron ‘Japanology’

This section briefly touches on the link between the present study and the long list of the so-called *nihonjinron* ‘Japanology’ studies. Since the publication of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* by Ruth Benedict in 1946, a flood of books, and articles has been published on the theme of Japan and Japanese people (Benedict, 1946). *The Bibliography on Japanology 1945–1995* (Nichigai Associates, 1996) lists 3,000 books and 8,300 articles and *The Bibliography on Japanology 1996–2006* (Nichigai Associates, 2007) lists 4,920 books and 7,860 articles.

Examining representative books and articles on the topic between 1940s to 1980s, Aoki (1990) identifies two recurrent themes. One is the group-orientedness and the other is the shame-sensitivity. The evaluation of these features has changed over the period: The “negative evaluation” period (1945–1954), the “historically relativized evaluation” period (1955–1963), the “positive evaluation” period (1977–1983), and the “from uniqueness to universality” period, but these two have been constantly discussed in the literature. This suggests that these two characterizations are real and should be taken into consideration seriously when we try to study Japan and Japanese. Needless to say, the group-orientedness is directly linked to the concept of putting great emphasis on *wa*, which has been the central topic of the present paper. In this respect, what I have presented here can be situated in the long list of the post-war tradition of *nihonjinron*, the study of Japan and Japanese.

7. Conclusion

As amply demonstrated in the literature, human languages may differ considerably from each other and sometimes the differences seem to be of fundamental importance. Furthermore, differences often appear to be closely linked to the cultural characteristics of the speech community.¹⁰ I hope the present paper has shown another case of such a link between language structure and the culture of the community in which it is used.

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10 Linguistic relativism, which was and probably still is scorned by generative grammarians (cf. Pinker, 1994: 55–82), is coming under the spotlight again and a number of interesting cases have been reported (cf. Inoue (1998)). Michael Tomasello and his colleagues are developing a new approach towards human cognition and positioning language acquisition as culturally based (cf. Tomasello (1999, 2003) among others).

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