

# Japanese and Norwegian Metapragmatic Perceptions of Contextual Factors in Intercultural Business Communication

*Kristin Rygg*

Norwegian School of Economics

## Abstract

National culture is frequently used as the dominant influential factor when intercultural business communication differences are explained. Leaning on theories about other contextual factors from the field of pragmatics, a dataset containing metapragmatic comments from interviews with forty-one Japanese and Norwegian business executives has been analysed in order to find what contextual factors are believed to influence Japanese and Norwegian communication with special attention to degree of directness and formality. The analysis indicates that the claim that the Japanese are less direct and more formal than Scandinavians (Norwegians) is highly dependent on contextual factors such as power, distance, the number of participants, message content, interactional/social roles, activity type, individual and organisation variation, language, the interlocutors' expectations, and business tactics. National culture as the sole explanatory factor is only used to a limited extent. Thus, a one-sided focus on national culture as the main contextual factor in intercultural communication should be cautioned and alternative approaches found.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural business communication, Japanese, Norwegian, metapragmatics, contextual factors, directness, formality*

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## Introduction

In textbooks often used in intercultural business communication (e.g. Lewis 2006; Varner and Beamer 2010; Jandt 2012), 'culture' in the meaning of a national culture is frequently used as the main influential factor when communication differences are explained. Typical theories that explain value preferences and communicative norms as a result of someone's national/regional culture are those of Hall (1976, 1987, 1990), Hofstede (2001 [1980]), and House et al. 2004 (the GLOBE project). In these theories, the Japanese and the Scandinavians (sometimes specified into Swedish, Danish, and Norwegians) are portrayed as cultural opposites. Areas with the highest potential for conflict between the two are the differences in directness and formality. The latter is often linked to *power distance* (Hofstede 2001). In countries with relatively high power distance, such as Japan, age and hierarchical status determine communication style. In contrast, the three egalitarian Scandinavian countries are marked by low power distance (Hofstede 2001:500). Ting-Toomey (1999) and Paige et al. (2006) also link formality to Hall's contextual model (1976), which portray Japanese communication as predominantly *high context* (i.e. less direct, more formal) and North-European and American (not specified but seem to mean US-American or Anglo-American) predominantly *low context* (i.e. more direct, less formal). In this framework, Scandinavians are ranked as some of the most low-context on the scale, below the Americans (Hall 1976:91).

In contrast to the literature above, newer empirical studies in pragmatics seem to focus more on factors other than national culture as influential in language use (cf. section two). For instance, people's communicative style may depend on the situation/activity where the communication takes place, how

well the interlocutors know each other, their social and interactional roles, the number of interlocutors present, the message content, and so on (see section two for a thorough description). Consequently, the Japanese may not be indirect in all contexts. This may seem obvious and, indeed, theories such as those of Hofstede and Hall are frequently criticised for their essentialist viewpoints (Cardon 2008; Warner-Søderholm 2010). However, since such theories continue to play an important role in major textbooks on intercultural business communication, they still need to be met by valid research in order to nuance their picture.

In this article, a dataset containing metapragmatic comments from interviews with forty-one Japanese and Norwegian business executives is analysed in order to find what contextual factors the interviewees believe influence Japanese and Norwegian communication styles the most. The concrete research question is:

*RQ: Is national culture perceived as the dominant influential factor when Japanese and Norwegian business executives communicate?*

Communication here is limited to comments concerning degree of directness and formality. If business executives do explain their business partners' behaviour and communicative norms as a result of contextual factors other than national culture, it might be time to look for alternative approaches in intercultural business education too.

In section two, I examine social/situational factors from the field of pragmatics and how studies that build on these factors vary from studies that explain intercultural communication only as a result of national culture. The various contextual factors from section two are then used as the conceptual and analytical framework for analysing the data. Section three discusses methodological issues before the results of the analysis are presented in section four and further discussed in section five.

## Contextual Factors in Literature on Pragmatics

A possible way of defining *context* in linguistics is “the total non-linguistic background to the text or utterance, including the immediate situation where the utterance is used, and the awareness of the speaker and the hearer of what has been said earlier and of any relevant external beliefs” (Crystal 2008:109). Gumperz (1982), in his seminal work on pragmatics, argues that communication often fails because people interpret the context in different ways. This is due to socio-cultural conventions affecting both production and interpretation of communicative events.

A way to move forward might be to follow up on Gumperz above, and focus not only on cultural but also on social influential factors in intercultural communication. Within the field of pragmatics, national culture has not been given the same weight as in the intercultural business communication literature mentioned in the introduction. Seminal works on communication strategies such as e.g. Brown & Levinson (1987) have rather been criticised for deemphasising the influence from culture and overemphasising individual autonomy in choice of strategy (Spencer-Oatey 2008:13). Spencer-Oatey (ibid: 33ff.) lists contextual variables frequently used as explanatory factors in pragmatics studies. Being presented in a textbook on pragmatics, it is probably not intended as an exhaustive list, and will not be treated as such in this study either. However, it might act as a useful starting point when looking for other contextual factors than culture. Whereas the cultural explanation might be summed up as “what we say/how we say it is influenced (or determined) by the national culture we belong to”, Spencer-Oatey's list is as follows:

### 1. Participant relations:

- a. Power: What we say/how we say it is influenced by whether speakers and hearers status is equal/different
- b. Distance: What we say/how we say it is influenced by degree of familiarity/solidarity/length of acquaintance/like-mindedness/perceived similarity

- c. Number of participants: What we say/how we say it is influenced by the number of people present
2. Message content: What we say/how we say it is influenced by the message content
3. Social/interactional roles: What we say/how we say it is influenced by social or interactional roles
4. Activity type: What we say/how we say it is influenced by the type of activity

One might wonder what effect there is in using these variables instead of explaining communication differences solely based on the participants' national culture. The following examples aim to illustrate the point. The contextual factor in question is placed in bracket.

Writing from the essentialist-functionalist tradition in the field of intercultural communication, Yamada (1997) and Ting-Toomey (1999) explain silence as a typical trait of Japanese communication. Thus, one might get the impression that the Japanese in general are more silent than others simply because they are Japanese (culture). In contrast, Nakane (2006), who studies a group of Japanese students' use of silence in an Australian classroom, offers a variety of explanations for its use. The participants themselves explain silence due to lack of confidence in English (language), because they do not want to embarrass themselves in front of the class (number of participants), because they hesitate to contradict their lecturer (social/interactional roles, power), or because they are not sure they have enough knowledge about the topic (message content). We here see a multitude of influential contextual factors. The participants' choices may be affected by the norms (the culture) that the students bring with them from Japan. For instance, with a reference to Matsuda (2000), Nakane argues that there are more hierarchical power relationships between students and lecturers in Japan than in Australia. However, her study provides us with a much wider picture of Japanese silence than that of Yamada or Ting-Toomey, whose aim is to contrast Japanese silence to countries where people value silence less (in their case, the USA).

Other examples of pragmatics studies that take other contextual factors than national culture into consideration are as follows:

Aoyama (2002) observes that customers (social/interactional role) in a Japanese coffee shop (type of activity) use directness in 52.4% of the requests. She also finds that older/superior workers (power/social role) in the coffee shop use direct requests to younger workers twice as often as the opposite. On the other hand, those of equal age/status use more hints towards each other, which might suggest that they have more shared context, and therefore no need to spell things out (distance).

Takano (2005), Miller (2008) and Saito (2011) look at confrontational directives or disagreements (message content) uttered in the workplace (activity type). Although they do not contest that particularly female and subordinate Japanese employees frequently use indirectness, they find through discourse analysis that people in superior positions (power, social/interactional role), both male and female, can permit themselves to be direct toward subordinates. However, both genders are also found to change their style from a direct to a more mitigated one in order to make subordinates comply with their directives, to maintain good rapport, or in order to control the power dynamics.

In the examples above, the Japanese are not always indirect. On the contrary, there are examples of the Japanese using directness because they are in a customer position or because their status is higher than the interlocutor due to age and/or superior position.

Unfortunately, there are, to the best of my knowledge, very few similar studies on Scandinavians. Peltokorpi (2007) studies how some Nordic expatriates holding presidential/managerial positions in subsidiaries in Japan experience their Japanese co-workers. For lack of empirical studies of discourses in Nordic/Scandinavian workplaces, this study, which is based in fieldwork interviews, might shed some light on what work place culture the Nordic managers are used to at home.

First, the Nordic managers find it problematic that young Japanese employees do not vocalise their ideas in a direct manner. This might be because direct consultation with subordinates is common in Nordic work places (Smith 2003; Warner-Søderholm 2012). However, when ideas do not reach the managerial level, the managers do not only put it down to hierarchical power distance, but also to poor English

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proficiency on behalf of the employees or their own lack of Japanese language skills (language). In order to improve the information flow, the expatriate managers tactically hold meetings only with lower-level employees, which might be a reflection of Nordic work place egalitarianism (Smith et al. 2003; Grenness 2003). Further, frequent informal interactions with the local Japanese managers outside work aim to build trust and increase the information flow, because local managers have been observed to behave in a more relaxed, informal way in one-to-one interactions (activity type, number of participants). Fant (1989), too, observes that in business meetings versus after-hour socialising situations with Spanish and Swedish business executives, the Swedes act more informally after work than at work, whereas the Spanish communication style was found to be more or less the same regardless of activity.

We see that there might be some truth to the claim that Scandinavians are more direct and informal than the Japanese, but, as noted by Fant (1989), not necessarily in all contexts.

The categories presented in this section act as the conceptual and analytical framework in order to find which factors are perceived as important when Japanese/Norwegian directness and formality are explained. In the following study, the category I call *culture* is used in the same way as Yamada and Ting-Toomey above, i.e. in cases where someone's behaviour is explained solely on the grounds of his/her national culture. Further, it is complemented by the categories from Spencer-Oatey's list above. However, her list is not specified as intercultural encounters or limited to a business context. There might therefore be other factors unique to situations where the participants perceive themselves as culturally different or are doing business with each other.

## Method and Procedures

### Research Design

*Metapragmatic* is a term that describes the self-reflective processes associated with contextualised language use (Spencer-Oatey 2008:333). During the last few decades, there has been much focus on discourse/conversation analysis of 'authentic' texts. The study of meta-discourses or metapragmatics might be said to have gained a lower status because the authenticity may be harmed by the interviewer's (active) presence, the speaker might not be consciously aware of his/her own habits, or may interpret other's behaviour from an ethnocentric point of view (Chang and Haugh 2011; Spencer-Oatey 2011). With these precautions in mind, Spencer-Oatey (ibid.), however, argues that there has been a too one-sided focus on authentic data and that a combination of methods could provide a 'fuller picture' of the participant's voice. That is, authentic discourses allow the researchers to study a wide range of discourse phenomena and the dynamics of discourses, but the interlocutors' expectations and assessments during conversation are left to the researcher to infer. Through metapragmatic comments, the participants can voice their own thoughts about effects and conditions of their own or others' language use. Another factor is that discourse analysis normally observes language use in one specific context. Metapragmatic comments, on the other hand, can provide information about how various contextual factors influence conversation. This is the reason why it has been chosen as the method in this study.

### The Corpus

The metapragmatic comments in this study are collected from a dataset first used in Rygg (2012). It consists of 19.5 hours of transcribed interview discourses from 21 Japanese (15 male, 6 female) and 26 hours and 15 minutes from 20 Norwegian (17 male, 3 female) business executives. The interviews were recorded in Tokyo. The original purpose of the interviews was to elicit the interviewees' experience of doing business with Norwegian/Japanese colleagues and business partners.

The interviews were recorded by a Norwegian researcher on linguistics and intercultural communication with experience from living, but not working in Japan. The interviews with the Norwegian informants were conducted in Norwegian and those with the Japanese informants in Japanese. Interview informants may not readily volunteer their views for fear of losing face or causing offence (Chang and Haugh 2011). Thus, one might suspect that the Japanese informants, in particular, would exhibit a certain degree of caution in criticising Norwegians in front of a Norwegian interviewer. The fact that many of them were

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 openly critical, somewhat surprised the interviewer. A possible explanation could be the interviewer's inferior position in age and status as Japanese superiors tend to be more direct to inferiors. However, even the participants of the same age did not seem to care. Thus, another explanation may be that because the interviewer spoke Japanese and was obviously familiar with Japanese culture coupled with the fact that she is not normally part of the business world, might have made them view her as partly an insider on the one hand, and as a neutral observer on the other.

## Analysis

For this particular article, the transcribed interview discourses were analysed by coding every metapragmatic comment relating to (in)directness and (in)formality with the labels presented in section two, that is, depending on: *culture* (because he is Norwegian/Japanese), *participant relations* (power, distance/familiarity, number of participants), *message content*, *social/interactional roles* and *activity type*. When a comment was interpreted as relating to more than one category, the respective categories have been placed in brackets behind the comment. The following categories were also found and labelled: *individual/organisational variation*, *language*, *expectations* and *tactics*. Naming these additional categories is in accordance with the traditions of content analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) where categories are not established prior to analysing the data; analysing is the process where the researcher goes back and forth between data and conceptualisation. The content of the categories is further detailed in section four. Metapragmatic comments that followed up on a leading question about language use from the interviewer were omitted.

## Presentation

The quotes used in this article have been translated from Norwegian/Japanese into English by the author with the aim of preserving as much as possible of the original nuances, but knowing that something is always lost in translation. Words in square brackets [ ] mark what is literally said in Japanese/Norwegian, and words in parentheses ( ) mark English words in the translations which are not in the original text. The latter includes adding the agent (e.g. Japanese, his colleagues etc.) when this is not stated explicitly in the quotes, but can be inferred from the text proper.

The interviews were recorded using an IC Recorder and then transcribed using the ELFA transcription guide (see Rygg 2012 for a more thorough description). Transcription convention symbols that appear in the English translations in this article are:

Utterance begins	<J1>
Utterance ends	</J1>
Names of participants	Norwegian: <N + a number 1-20 > Japanese: <J + a number 22-42 >
Laughter	@ @
Laughter-talk	@text@
Brief pauses while speaking, 1-2 sec	,
Pause 3 sec	.

Some hesitation fillers and false starts from the original transcripts have been omitted because the main focus here is on the content, not on the linguistic manifestations of the utterances.

# Metapragmatic Comments about Directness and Formality

85 metapragmatic comments concerning directness or formality were found and labelled in the material. Below, the comments are categorised in accordance with the description in sub-sections 3.3 and 3.4 above.

## Culture

When national culture is used as the main contextual factor (all Norwegians/Japanese) without modification by any of the other factors, the general impression tends to be a simplified/essentialist picture of 'the other'. The statements labelled *culture* are:

- (1) (the Japanese) are a bit reserved and polite, to put it that way@@. Extremely polite </N14>
- (2) <N13>You never get a straight yes or no answer (from the Japanese) </N13>
- (3) <N03> If the Japanese do not understand what is going on, they often do not ask </N02>
- (4) <N10> To scold someone older than you is not accepted (in Japan) </N10>
- (5) <N06> A Norwegian typically says everything without mincing his words </N06>
- (6) <J22> Norwegians get straight down to business </J22>
- (7) <J41> Norwegians often do their best to explain things in a logical manner; "we are this and this company and the situation is this" </J41>
- (8) <J25> Norwegians state clearly what they want; "This is what I want". It is acceptable, but, [...] when the Norwegians only state their main points, there are times when the Japanese would have liked to get a fuller picture </J25>
- (9) <J22> Regardless of whether someone is a young newcomer to the company or a senior, all (the Norwegians) talk as if they are on the same footing </J22> ((equal) power)
- (10) <J35> All (Norwegians) have a very casual dress code </J35>
- (11) <J35> All (Norwegians) are fairly frank and open-hearted, people's positions and titles do not matter so much </J35> (culture, (equal) power)
- (12) <J25> (The Norwegian organisation structure) is flat, isn't it. Everyone can talk on equal terms. Everyone has the right to voice their opinions and no one thinks it strange. I think that is very good <J25> (culture, (equal) power)

All but one of the twenty-one Japanese interviewees compare the Norwegians to other Western cultures, especially to US-Americans, but also to other European cultures. That is, all Western nations that the informants have some experience with:

- (13) <J27> The Norwegians are Western and individualists, but still, how can I put it, have a fairly [soft] approach [...] They do not argue their opinions as forcefully as the Americans </J27>
- (14) <J30> If we compare Norwegians and Danes, the Danes are a bit more direct </J30>
- (15) <J37> I think Americans are more direct than Norwegians </J37>
- (16) <J28> Norwegians are rarely like Americans or the Spanish, not like them. A bit more reserved the first time </J28>
- (17) <J31> For instance, the Americans say "hi!" in a loud manner which is unsettling to the Japanese. It's easier to feel at ease with the Norwegians. </J31>
- (18) <J29> There are also many people, [...] in the south of Europe and so on right, they are scary we think, [...] when we do business with those people, if there is sort of trouble, [...] it quickly turns into this aggressive conversation right, compared to that, the Norwegians have a quite [soft] approach </J29>
- (19) <J24> Norwegians don't come dressed in T-shirts like the Americans </J24>

In these comparisons, Norwegian directness and level of formality is modified by comparing people from countries considered more direct/less formal than themselves. Further, the communication style is described as more similar to the Japanese:

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- (20) <J34> I feel Norwegians are between the Japanese and Americans (in communication style) </J34>
- (21) <J25> If we take the stereotypical American, I feel the Norwegians are closer to the Japanese (in communication style) </J25>
- (22) <J42> Compared to Americans, Latin countries and so on, Norwegians are very similar to the Japanese </J42>

The Japanese nuance their description of Norwegian directness and (in)formality by contrasting Norwegians to other Westerners. The Norwegians did not contrast the Japanese to other 'Easterners', probably because they had less experience with them. I also believe that the Japanese, with their long-standing leading position in the world, are not perceived primarily as 'Easterners' in the Norwegian mind in the same way as the 'lesser known' Norwegian is perceived as 'a Westerner' before being a Norwegian to many Japanese.

## Participant Relations (power, distance, number of participants)

When contextual factors other than culture are used, the answers are closer related to the informants' own experience of working with specific colleagues and business partners. In the examples below, directness/formality depend on work position (power), how well the participants know each other (distance), or how many are present when communication takes place (number of participants).

- (23) <N09> My (Japanese) colleagues are mostly direct </N09> (distance)
- (24) <N10> The Japanese I have worked with have been direct </N10> (distance, organisational variation?)
- (25) <N09> When visited by people they (my Japanese colleagues) do not know, customers and the like, they greet them very formally. Other times, when for instance people they know from Norway come to visit, they are very informal </N09> (distance)
- (26) <N12> The Japanese are indirect. But, as with all of us, when you get to know the Japanese, they say things more directly, but you often get that "well, that is a bit [...]" (instead of a 'no') </N12> (distance, message content)
- (27) <N02> It depends on how long you have known the (Japanese) person in question </N02> (distance)
- (28) <N17> When there are visitors present, for instance visitors from the Norwegian head quarter in the meeting, the Japanese do not necessarily state their true feelings </N17> (distance, power?)
- (29) <N17> When there are people who know each other well, such as colleagues, the Japanese can be relatively informal </N17> (distance)
- (30) <N08> They (my Japanese colleagues) are very formal, with customers, but also frequently with each other, especially when in large groups </N08> (distance, power, seller/buyer role, number of participants)
- (31) <N07> The longer collaboration, the less formal, especially when you go out for a drink </N07> (distance, type of activity)
- (32) <N09> When visited by unknown Japanese, customers or something, [they] (my Japanese colleagues) are very formal. But many times when people they know, from Norway for instance, come and visit, they are very informal </N09> (distance)
- (33) <J28> [they] (the Norwegians) are informal but not informal, they are more reserved the first time </J28> (distance, culture)
- (34) <J26> Norwegians are similar to people from *Tohoku* (Northern province of Japan) [...] In the beginning they are reluctant and shy and do not exchange many words with you, but as soon as we have become friends, the relationship deepens </J26> (distance)
- (35) <J32> Americans are very frank. Norwegians are much more [gentlemanly]. Maybe this would have changed if one had become closer and visited each other's houses and so on, but this rarely happened (when I was stationed in Norway). So, they were very formal </J32> (distance, culture)
- (36) <J22> The Norwegians I deal with are my colleagues, so everyone states their opinions freely </J22> (distance)

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In the comments above, Japanese are not always perceived as indirect and formal or the Norwegians as direct and informal. Further, several of the quotes are labelled with more than one category, which means that there probably often is more than one contextual factor at work when a communication strategy is chosen.

## Message Content

The following comments are about how negative message content affects degree of directness.

- (37) <N01>You should not say things too directly (to Japanese colleagues), and especially not something with negative content </N01>
- (38) <N01> Sometimes we do not receive clear answers from the Japanese (clients), if the answer is negative </N01>
- (39) <N17> If angry at someone, it is better to deal with it privately instead of in front of the group [...] To be criticised in front of others is generally very embarrassing to the Japanese </N17> (message content, number of participants, culture)

Norwegians report that both they and some Japanese they have had contact with put negative content forward in an indirect manner, but the Norwegians do it because that is what they think the Japanese prefer. Thus, comments 37 and 39 could also have been placed in the category named *expectations* (4.8).

## Social/Interactional Roles

In the following comments, the Norwegians are especially concerned with two social/interactional roles guiding degree of directness and formality; superior vs. subordinate role and buyer vs. seller role.

- (40) <N03> It's fun to meet these famous managers, they are incredibly nice people [...] These top managers have a tendency to be informal </N03> (power, superior role)
- (41) <N04> You often ask advice of those above you in the (Japanese) organization, but not downwards. That is a sign of weakness. I (being a Norwegian middle manager in a Japanese firm) do it all the time, so, they probably think me weak@@ </N04> (superior role)
- (42) <N06> Then they (the Japanese client) complain that I (the Norwegian project manager on a project in Japan) don't tell my subordinates exactly what they should do </N06> (superior role, seller/buyer role)
- (43) <N04> If they (the Japanese) are inferiors, they are not going to say that it can't be done. When I finally get a hint about it being impossible, I think, why didn't you say that at once? </N04> (subordinate role)
- (44) <N09> The (Japanese) inferiors are much quieter during meetings </N09> (subordinate role, activity type)
- (45) <N04> We have situations here (at the Japanese company where I am working) when a customer has an idea, and even though some of us think it is a stupid idea, no one says so </N04> (seller/buyer role)
- (46) <N06> Especially for the European workers it is ever so demotivating to be accused of doing a bad job by the (Japanese) client all the time </N06> (seller/buyer role)
- (47) <N02> As a seller, it was very easy to understand what the (Japanese) buyers wanted, it went: "cost down". Some of the buyers were very tough clients, yes, yes </N02> (seller/buyer role)

It seems that the Norwegians find Japanese managers and customers/buyers more direct than they are used to from home. At the same time, they seem to find Japanese subordinates and sellers surprisingly indirect.

## Activity Type

The Norwegians are particularly occupied with how different the Japanese are in directness/formality whether they are at work or in an after-hour setting.

- (48) <N11> The Japanese are even better at building personal relations than us Norwegians, I think. Conversations become very free, to put it that way, in a social setting where there is alcohol and

food involved, so it is like two separate worlds, one formal discussion at work and one informal one at the *sakaya* (bar) </N11>

- (49) <N02> Formal, informal, it depends a lot, *honne*[1] and *tatema* as it is called, how well you know them and, I must say some of the nicest and most informal people you can possibly meet are the Japanese [...] especially after work although even at that time important things go on when you go out for dinner etc., they are so, [...] one of those things that really fascinates me about the Japanese is that they are not at all pompous they are, [...] and how self-ironic they can be, and no, it is just terribly nice, when you are on the inside so to speak, [...] so that is one of the reasons why I so much enjoy staying here@@. But if you are on the outside of course they are formal </N02> (activity type, distance)
- (50) <N15> They (all Japanese?) are terribly formal, especially at work, in meetings and so on, out for a drink is an entirely different matter </N15>
- (51) <N06> They (the Japanese colleagues) like to be informal with us but not at work. Maybe in the elevator or on the way to a meeting room, if we are lucky </N06>
- (52) <J39> The Japanese talk fairly formally or politely to people they don't know, for instance, in a shop. When you go to a shop in Norway, the atmosphere is more informal </J39> (social/interactional roles, activity type)
- (53) <J32> Norwegian debates (during meetings) are long. Age and titles do not seem to matter </J32> (activity type, (equal) power)

There are no Japanese comments that indicate that the Norwegians are very different at work vs. after work. Their two comments are rather related to Norwegian customer service and meetings that are less formal than they are used to.

## Individual/Organisational Variation

The category named *individual/organisational variation* contains comments that put degree of directness/formality down to personal or generational differences, degree of international experience on both individual and organizational level, type and size of industry, and position of the industry in the market.

- (54) <N17> At the moment, if you look at our (Japanese) team here, you find a wide variation of personality types </N17>
- (55) <N19> There are Japanese who might have more international experience, who like to do things more efficiently, or efficiently in the Western sense </N19>
- (56) <N16> With some (Japanese) companies, we have a very rough type of communication, very Western, you talk directly, you may quarrel, but with other companies you have to shun quarrels because they will remember them for years. </N16>
- (57) <N16> Our main (Japanese) business partner is maybe a bit international but still, in a way, mainly Japanese, but they mostly state directly what they want </N16>
- (58) <N16> The fishery industry might have a somewhat rougher style than some others </N16>
- (59) <N16> We have a strong position in this market and therefore, the opportunity to force through decisions </N16> (organisational variation, power)
- (60) <N18> Large Japanese companies mostly state clearly what they want </N18> (organisational variation, power)
- (61) <J35> There are Norwegians who are direct and those that are indirect. It really depends on the person </J35>
- (62) <J27> Sometimes there were some really original types among the Norwegian workers. Types that you don't find in a Japanese staff </J27>
- (63) <J26> We have mostly worked in the shipping industry, and there people say clearly what they want </J26>
- (64) <J39> When the reform was introduced (at the University I worked at in Norway), I remember that the guidelines we were given were quite unclear </J39>
- (65) <J27> Norwegians in their forties have become more international than the older generation and are more like Americans </J27> (generational variation)

Clearly, personal and organisational variations like those above are never mentioned in intercultural literature that focuses on large categorisations. However, as we see from both the Norwegian and

## Language

Comments placed under the category named *language* deal with how the languages English or Japanese affect degree of directness and formality.

- (66) <N17> Hinting (to the Japanese), no, that should be avoided, especially if one speaks English because then the possibility for misunderstandings is even greater </N17>
- (67) <N08> Very often [they] (the Japanese I work with) do not understand what I say (in English), but they never say “excuse me, what did you say” </N08>
- (68) <N10> The Japanese who do not speak English very well, may become quite nervous when they have to speak to you </N10>
- (69) <N18> If it is someone I do not know, I use more formal Japanese </N18> (distance, language)
- (70) <N18> It depends on what you talk about, whether you put it formally or informally in Japanese </N18> (message content, language)
- (71) <J35> The Japanese language has more ways of saying “no” </J35>
- (72) <J37> When I talk to foreigners I feel I overstate/exaggerate [*oogesa*] my opinions and needs, and if I had done the same with the Japanese, it would have sounded too direct </J37>
- (73) <J27> I’m not rude towards others, but I don’t have to use that much excessive [*baka* ‘stupid’] politeness (when I speak English) to foreigners </J27>
- (74) <J42> In Japanese meetings there is often not so much of a two-way communication, but with English one can be more straightforward </J42>
- (75) <J32> English can state clearly “I agree, I don’t agree”. The English grammar suits science. In Japanese you have to listen for a long time before the final point arrives at the end of the sentence. </J32>
- (76) <J31> It is easier to write in English@@, erm, [...] in the Japanese language you have to be cautious about so many things, relationships and hierarchy and so on [...] English is more direct, I write whatever I like to write </J31>
- (77) <J42> I can be more direct in English because the English language is less formal </J42>

Why the use of English leads to increasing directness and informality is given many different explanations. These are summed up and discussed in section five.

## Expectations

In this category, I placed those comments that relate to how others’ imagined or real expectations affect how directly or formally someone speaks.

- (78) <N11> When Norwegians visit us here in Japan; they have read a lot about these unwritten rules about how to act in Japan. They almost become too cautious, or too nervous, about how to sit, how to talk and how to act. So I have experienced that they appear a bit clumsy, sometimes </N11>
- (79) <N04> To me, the Japanese state clearly what they want, but I don’t know if that is because I am a foreigner. I don’t think they do it to everyone else </N04>
- (80) <N20> As a foreigner I can allow myself to be more ‘Western’, to be more direct </N20>
- (81) <J32> When I come close to someone, I really speak in friendly terms, but we didn’t get that close really. There was some difference in the way the Norwegians spoke to each other and the way they spoke to me. To me they spoke very politely, were friendly and gentleman-like, but as soon as they turned to someone else it was “hi Tom”. Well, until people know each other, that can’t be helped, I guess </J32>
- (82) <J22> Norwegians think that one cannot speak so directly to the Japanese, so therefore they try to speak as indirectly as possible. Then, what happens next is that the Japanese who hears it, thinks that the Norwegian does not have a very firm opinion about the matter since he puts it that indirectly </J22>

Thus, sometimes the Norwegians are indirect or the Japanese direct because that is what they believe the other party expects. These and other findings related to expectations are summed up and discussed in

## Tactics

The category named *tactics* contains comments about how (in)directness or (in)formality is used tactically.

- (83) <N18> In a (Japanese) company we have worked with, new employees are trained to be very critical and partly impolite to vendors, it's a tactic to make sure they get what they want </N18>
- (84) <N18> Another tactic (the Japanese client uses) is not to state clearly what they want so that they have the possibility to make complaints afterwards </N18>
- (85) <J25> There are Norwegians who pretend they don't understand the Japanese, even when they do. It's a tactic, I think </J25>

The comments above are especially related to the activity type that business is, and is further discussed in section five.

## Discussion of the Data

Among the total of 85 comments about one's own or others' language use found in the material, only 22 were labelled *culture*, meaning that Japanese or Norwegian behaviour was explained solely on the basis of being Japanese/Norwegian. Hence, national culture was not perceived as the dominant influential factor when the Japanese and Norwegians communicate with their respective colleagues and business partners.

In the intercultural communication theories presented in the introduction, Scandinavian, including Norwegian, communication was defined as direct and informal and Japanese communication as indirect and formal. Through the metapragmatic comments in the interviews, we see that the reality is perceived as much more context-dependent than the theories suggest.

The claim that the Japanese communication style is indirect and formal finds support when the speaker is the seller (e.g. quotes 45, 52), when the interlocutor is an unknown or has superior status (e.g. quotes 32, 43), in larger groups (quote 30), or when the message content is negative to the hearer (quotes 37, 38). However, Japanese customers, colleagues and superiors have been experienced to have a direct communication style (quotes 23, 40, 46-47). In fact, it does not seem to be that uncommon to have Japanese colleagues that are direct and informal both during and especially after regular work hours (quotes 23-24, 48-49), which is something not mentioned in previous studies (section 2). Directness is also reported to depend on personality type, type of business, and degree of international experience on the part of the Japanese (cf. sub-section 4.6). Further, even though directness is often praised, there seems to be frustration over Japanese customers' demanding directness (quotes 45-47).

Through the metapragmatic comments, we detect that the Japanese and the Norwegian informants have interpreted the question about formality differently. That is, whereas the Norwegians perceived the term *formal* as connected to communication style (quotes 25, 29-32, 48-51), the Japanese gave it many different interpretations from communication style (quote 33) to dress code (quote 10), status/position (quote 11), attitude towards strangers (quote 35), organisational structure (quote 12) and politeness/service (quote 52), which may have influenced how they commented on the Norwegians with regards to formality.

This being said, the claim that Norwegians predominantly apply a direct communication style finds support among the Japanese informants (quotes 6-8). However, when contrasted to other Westerners, the Japanese perceive the Norwegians as less direct and more similar to themselves (quotes 13, 17-18, 20-22). There are, however, also some comments that portray Norwegian managers as less direct than Japanese managers (e.g. in quotes 41, 42, 64). This flat Scandinavian management style is frequently mentioned within management literature (cf. section 2), and seems to cause some problems in the

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Japanese setting. Not surprisingly, vertical distance, i.e. concern for hierarchical status, is not thought to be important to the Norwegian businessmen (quotes 9, 11, 12, 52, 53). However, horizontal distance, i.e. shyness towards strangers, is something that has been noticed by several of the Japanese informants (quotes 16, 33-35). These are valuable contributions to the limited number of earlier studies on Norwegian business communication (cf. section 2).

The various contextual factors presented in section two; culture, participant relations, message content, social/interactional roles and activity type were all found in the data material and frequently worked simultaneously. As mentioned in section two, Spencer-Oatey's list was not made specifically for intercultural encounters. Thus, this study has found two categories that one might argue are specifically linked to situations where the interlocutors speak a language different from their own (labelled *language*) or when the other is someone perceived as culturally different from themselves (labelled *expectations*). Language was also mentioned as an influencing factor by Peltokorpi (2007) and Nakane (2006) in section two.

From the comments related to the category named *language* (4.7), we learn that the English language is perceived as intrinsically less formal and less indirect than the Japanese language. Further, the Norwegian concern about the Japanese English proficiency level may cause them to speak more directly (simple, clear). And, finally, some Japanese find it liberating to talk and write English because one can, in their view, be more direct and informal in English. Thus, it seems that the use of the English language itself guides the degree of directness and formality to a certain extent.

In the category termed *expectations* (4.8), I placed those comments that relate to language use as a result of others' expectations. Thus, sometimes the Norwegians are too indirect and formal because they think that is what they should be towards Japanese. This becomes a problem because the Japanese 'prototype' of a Westerner tends to be someone direct. Other times, a Norwegian may choose to act according to the Japanese prototype and be direct as a Westerner is supposed to be. There are also indications that some Japanese talk more directly than they normally would when talking to a foreigner (e.g. quotes 73 and 77). How expectations influence the speaker's style and how the hearer's expectations influence interpretation, is something that has occupied socio-pragmatic scholars for years (Labov 1972; Giles et al. 1987). In my view, this should be given more attention also in intercultural communication literature. An example is Rygg (2012) who found that those Japanese business executives who had worked the longest and closest with Scandinavians self-reported on having a generally more direct style than what they perceived as typically Japanese, and certainly were found to use more linguistic markers of directness and positive politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987) when talking to the Norwegian interviewer. She suggests that one reason for their style might be due to a feeling of familiarity with the Norwegian culture (distance).

Another factor not mentioned by Spencer-Oatey (section 2) is that the level of directness can be due to tactics related to a business context where gains and losses play their parts. This was also noted by Kobayashi and Viswat (2014) in business discussions/negotiations between Japanese and Americans. Thus, organisational variation (4.6) and tactics (4.9) are factors specifically related to the activity type that business is. Hence, I would like to stress that the lessons learnt from studying a business context are not necessarily transferrable to other contexts.

## Conclusion

One might wonder whether the one-dimensional focus on national culture in intercultural business literature is a reflection of the way members of the business community interpret their own or others' behaviour and communication style. The analysis found that this is not the case. The metapragmatic comments have demonstrated that the Norwegian and Japanese business executives perceive degree of directness and formality as highly dependent on contextual factors such as power, distance, the number of participants, message content, interactional/social roles, activity type, individual and organisation variation, language, the interlocutors' expectations, and business tactics. Thus, the idea that the Japanese are less direct and more formal than the Norwegians is only true in certain contexts, not in others. This implies that a one-sided focus on national culture as the main explanatory factor in intercultural

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communication literature should be cautioned, and one should look for alternative approaches that can provide more nuances in intercultural business education.<sup>13</sup>

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## About the Author

Kristin Rygg is Associate Professor at the Norwegian School of Economics, department of Professional and Intercultural Communication. She specializes in Japanese language and business culture, intercultural communication, and linguistics with special attention to socio-pragmatics.

### Author's Address

Kristin Rygg  
Department of Professional and Intercultural Communication  
Norwegian School of Economics  
Helleveien 30, 5045 Bergen, Norway  
Tel. +47 55595447  
Fax: +47 55959328  
E-mail: [kristin.rygg@nhh.no](mailto:kristin.rygg@nhh.no)

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[1] The Japanese concepts *honne* 'real feeling' and *tatemae* 'front' are often used to explain Japanese communication

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