



AMBIGUITY IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

—Learning Cultural Background—



Li Yunhua

Shanghai Ganquan Middle School
Shanghai, China

PURPOSE

The students learn about the background, features, purpose, and usage of ambiguous expressions, and practice them in sample dialogues. This lesson gives students a grasp of some basic indirect/ambiguous expressions and, through recitation, allows them to deepen their appreciation of how those expressions are used. While helping the students to understand emotive expressions used in interactions among Japanese people, the lesson also fosters their overall open-mindedness through the study of expressions that show consideration for others.

POINTS TO BE STUDIED

LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES

TARGET FUNCTIONS	TARGET EXPRESSIONS	TARGET VOCABULARY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Expressing gratitude ❖ Apologizing ❖ Inviting ❖ Refusing tactfully 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ どうも(ありがとう, すみません) ❖ 特にないんですが..... ❖ ~たいんですが..... ❖ 実は~ようと思っていたのですが..... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ どうも, ちょっと, けっこう, いい

CULTURAL OBJECTIVES

- To learn about the social and cultural context of indirect/ambiguous expressions in Japanese
- To understand the Japanese linguistic custom of expressing things indirectly or ambiguously
- To develop an open mind and appreciation for the importance of showing consideration for others in interpersonal relations

SOURCE MATERIALS

Tape player
 OHP/OHP sheets
 Work sheet (Handout*)
 Textbook 『日語』, People's Education Press

PROCEDURE**Previous study**

In the previous lesson, OHP sheets were used to give the students some background information on indirect/ambiguous expressions in Japanese, and the words あいまい, どうも, 傷つく, スムーズ, and ちょっと were introduced and explained.

Content of OHP sheets

Native Japanese speakers tend to avoid using direct or bluntly negative expressions, opting instead for indirect or ambiguous expressions that will not offend others or adversely affect their interpersonal relations. Why do Japanese people thus refrain from conveying their true feelings clearly? Because they would soon fall out of favor with their peers if they said or did things that upset the group harmony. This is why their speech and behavior is often what might be called either (in a positive light) prudent or (in a negative light) vague. Japanese people tend to speak and act in such a way as will preserve group and social harmony.

1. Student's speech (5 mins.)

To open the lesson, one student delivers a five-minute speech on a Japan-related topic in Japanese. Most students gather information for their speeches from books. After the speech, the speaker and the rest of the class exchange questions and opinions about the topic.

2. Recitation (4 mins.)

The students recite from the textbook and the teacher corrects their pronunciation.

3. Practice of indirect/ambiguous expressions (5 mins.)

Ask students how to use the word どうも in the following situations.

Situation 1

A teacher presents a new workbook to a student who wrote a good composition.

Question: 生徒はどう答えますか。

Answer: どうもありがとうございました。

Situation 2

A teacher asks his/her students whether or not they have their workbooks and finds that one student

does not. The teacher tells the student to borrow a workbook from a classmate.

Question: 貸してもらった生徒はどう答えますか。
 (How would the student who borrows the workbook respond to the classmate who lends it?)

Answer: どうも.....。

Situation 3

A teacher accidentally knocks a pen from a student's desk to the floor.

Question: 教師はどうあやまりますか。
 (How would the teacher apologize to the student?)

Answer: どうもごめんなさいね。

Situation 4

A teacher accidentally bumps into the school principal.

Question: 教師はどうあやまりますか。
 (How would the teacher apologize in this instance?)

Answer: どうもすみませんでした / 失礼しました。

Situation 5

A family is grieving over a recent death in the family.

Question: 悲しんでいる遺族が気の毒で、なかなか言う言葉が見つかりません。このようなときどう言いますか。
 (You feel so sorry for the grieving family that it's difficult to find any words to say to them at all. What would you say in such a situation?)

Answer: どうも.....。

4. Handout (5 mins.)

Have two students perform a dialogue from handout and respond to target questions. Have the students repeat the dialogue pattern with different vocabulary. The class thus learns the meaning and usage of ambiguous expressions through examples of everyday conversation. They practice with further vocabulary substitutions until they have a firm grasp of the expressions.

5. Summary (5 mins.)

Summarize expressions of refusal. Have students introduce forms of refusal they already know (いいえ, 結構, ちょっと). Summarize indirect/ambiguous expressions and have students answer the following questions.

Q1: How many ways are there of using どうも and いいえ?

Q2: Why are such expressions used?

Q3: What should you pay attention to in order to use indirect/ambiguous expressions properly?

6. Conversation practice (19 mins.)

1. Play students the tape of the conversation in the 『日語』 textbook. Check the students' listening comprehension and help them improve their overall proficiency.
2. Show the students pictures and have them act out role-plays according to the teacher's instructions.

Role-play 1: A sample dialogue from the textbook

Role-play 2: Inviting someone to your home for a meal of pork dumplings (*gyōza*)

Role-play 3: Inviting someone by telephone to mountain climbing on Sunday. The person invited has already made plans with someone else and so politely declines the invitation.

Role-play 4: Asking someone to teach you how to use a computer. The person asked is too busy and so politely refuses the request.

3. The role-play activity is conducted as follows:
 - ❖ Have the students pair off, choose two of the four role plays, and practice them.
 - ❖ Select pairs to perform each of the four role-plays.
 - ❖ After the role-plays are performed, have the class evaluate them in terms of pronunciation and other aspects.

7. Assignment of homework (2 mins.)

Have the students:

1. write a dialogue using the words ちょっと, いい, 結構, and どうも;
2. write a short (100-200 characters) composition describing their thoughts on ambiguity in the Japanese language; and
3. look up indirect/ambiguous Japanese expressions other than those in the textbook.

8. Evaluation

- ❖ Writing a dialogue
- ❖ Writing a short essay

STUDENT RESPONSES

- Until now I wasn't sure how to invite people, politely decline requests, or respond in certain situations, so I'm glad we had this lesson.
- Being truly proficient in Japanese requires mastering indirect/ambiguous expressions.
- I had never given much thought to the feelings of the person I'm interacting with. I've now realized the necessity of paying close attention to the other person's feelings.

From the committee

In order to communicate smoothly with others, people employ language in accordance with certain established cultural practices. Using language without regard for these cultural practices can cause unpleasantness or offense, even if what we say is perfectly correct grammatically. In order to avoid such problems, it is essential to learn those cultural customs as part of the rules of communication. To that end, the teacher could use videos or other audiovisual materials to show students how Japanese people behave while speaking, as well as tapes or other audio material demonstrating typical Japanese tones of voice. Furthermore, the teacher should get the students thinking about the cultural background to such rules, and devise opportunities for them to truly empathize with and understand why such rules are adhered to. Finally, this lesson plan could be extended into activities in which students consider how to avert or overcome the kinds of cultural friction that may arise in actual conversations with Japanese people.

WORK SHEET

1

男の人：砂糖さとうとミルクをい入れましょうか。

女の人：砂糖は結構けっこうです。

男の人：あ、わかりました。

問：男の人は何なにがわかりましたか。

5

王ちや：お茶にしましょうか、コーヒーに
ましようか。

鈴木：いいえ、水みずで結構けっこうです。

問：何にしますか。

2

女の人：コーラ、塩しお、コーヒーをか買ってき
てください。

男の人：はい。

女の人：あ、コーヒーはいいです。

問：男の人は何なにがわかりましたか。

6

田村：私いっしょと一緒にパーティーに行きませ
んか。

原島：行きたいんだけど.....。でも、宿題しゅくだい
あるので、早くはや終わおったら行くわ。

問：原島さんは行きますか。

3

李り：ちょっとこのハンバーガー屋やで食たべ
ていきませんか。

田中：いいですね。

でも、今日きょうはちょっと.....。

問：ハンバーガー屋いに行きたいのはどちら
の人ですか。

7

李り：あのう、すみません。

田中：はい、あの、なにか。

李り：あのう、もうしわけありませんが、
あのう、ステレオですが、音おとが。

田中：あ、聞こえますか。

李り：ええ、すみません。じつは今いま、試験しけん
中ちゆうなんです、それで.....。

田中：あ、そうですか。すみません、気きを
つけます。

問：田中さんは何なにに気をつけますか。

4

李り：もういっぱいいいかがでしょうか。

田中：結構けっこうです(もうけっこうです)、
すみません(おねがいします/あり
がとう/おそれいます)。

問：「けっこう」というのはどういう意味いみ
ですか。「すみません」とは？