

## Friendliness Does Not Make Friends in Japan

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### Abstract

When westerners attempt to develop friendships with Japanese they often rely on an outgoing style that exudes friendliness. Such direct, outgoing friendliness from foreigners may be viewed with suspicion by the Japanese. In all actions, Japanese prefer kindness over friendliness. Friendships form through kindness, and it is important that foreigners understand that they cannot speed-up the friendship process through friendly communication. Data from a focus group show how Japanese label and respond to communication styles which violate expectations of appropriate communication and inhibit the friendship formation process.

## Friendliness Does Not Make Friends in Japan

As we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, increased mobility, increased economic interdependence, and ever-expanding communication technologies create cross cultural interaction in ways we are just beginning to understand and appreciate. Global travel is at an all-time high. And global travelers, even if they are visitors only for a short time in host countries, will have to adapt to the communication expectations of those host countries.

U.S. travelers in Japan are often quick to observe the uniqueness of *the Japanese way*. Most realize that patience is needed when doing business in Japan. This need for patience is driven by cultural differences in style, not only for business decisions, but also for building friendships. As in other parts of the world, building friendships takes time. The U.S. traveler cannot speed-up the process of making friends in Japan with an outgoing, effervescent speaking style.

This paper considers the problem of American outgoing communication styles in Japan. After sharing some personal background information, it articulates how kindness and friendliness are valued in Japan and how the friendly American may actually retard the friendship building process. Then the pathways to Japanese friendships are explored. Next, the paper shows how Japanese handle violations to



proper communication behavior with data from a focus group discussion. The paper concludes that violations interfere with friendship formation.

### Background

Recently, I spent my sabbatical leave in Sendai, Japan (2 hours by train north of Tokyo). During my stay, I traveled to Tokyo 13 times and Nagoya 3 times. In addition, I visited 11 other smaller cities in the Tohoku region of Japan. Unlike Tokyo, which is a big city sprinkled liberally with international sojourners, Sendai is one-tenth the size of Tokyo and less influenced by the presence of foreigners. Tokyo is truly an international city; Sendai is not. Consequently, the traditions of Japan seem to stand out more clearly in Sendai than in more international cities such as Tokyo, Kobe, Osaka, and Nagoya. Yet, the long-standing traditions can be observed in any city if you look for them. I was fortunate to see Japan from many places, which gave me an understanding of Japanese communication styles that goes beyond the limited "Tokyo view" of Japan that so many tourists get.

While in Japan I was a card carrying immigrant, and because of this I was more than a tourist. I lived in a Japanese style apartment, not in a hotel. And yes, I took my shoes off before I entered my apartment. I commuted to work everyday, either on my bicycle or by bus or train. I washed and ironed my own clothes, shopped at grocery stores and cooked meals at home. I paid bills, answered the phone, and turned away solicitors at my door. In short, I worked and lived among my Japanese coworkers and neighbors. And, while not everyone was alike, there were identifiable cultural uniformities among my Japanese friends and associates.

One morning, at work, I was writing a script for a videotape that we were producing. The topic was asking for directions when you are lost in a city. Reading the script, my Japanese coworker suggested that I change the part where I wrote "you should look for a friendly person and ask for directions." He noted that looking for a kind person would be more meaningful to the Japanese. I made the change. I came to realize later how important the suggestion was. Overt friendliness and kindness are not synonymous, especially in Japan.

### Kindness and Friendliness

Kindness is more than friendliness, and how you understand it is related to how your culture conceives of it. In Japan, kindness (*shinsetsu*<sup>1</sup>) is evidenced by gift-giving, doing favors, working hard to help someone, and not embarrassing others. It has a rich history in Japan, going back to ancient times (Goss, 1999). Likewise, friends (*tomo*) are very important in Japan, as they are in America. In fact, friendship appears to be a worldwide concept. Thus, there are more commonalities in the dynamics of friendships across cultures than there are differences. This is especially true for more intimate relationships. Gudykunst (1993) reports that close friendships in both Japan



and the USA are characterized by togetherness, trust, warmth, and understanding—four concepts valued by both cultures. Friendship, in Japan, is something that must be truly earned. You don't become friends in Japan because you are friendly. You do it through acts of kindness.

The Japanese believe more in kindness than in friendliness. Kindness is that quality of caring for others in a genuine way, and it may not emanate from a happy outgoing person, but rather from a quiet dignified person. How we manifest kindness is largely related to what our culture values.

### The Friendly American<sup>2</sup>

Many Japanese people feel that Americans are happy and friendly. There is evidence that Americans think so as well. For instance, Norton's widely used quantitative measure of communicator style includes friendliness as one of its components (Norton, 1983). For Americans, an outgoing, friendly style is desirable. Whereas Japanese may be stand-offish with foreigners, Americans are perceived as more outgoing with foreigners (Barnlund, 1989). Indeed Gudykunst and Nishida (1993) noted that at least four studies have shown that "North Americans self-disclose more to strangers than Japanese" and that "North Americans communicate more frequently with strangers than Japanese" (p. 152). Friendly Americans expect to be effective with foreigners if they are simply friendly enough. "Just be nice to them, and they'll like you" might be the mantra for winning over your Japanese friends. Unfortunately, this will not work in Japan. Japanese can be particularly wary of friendliness from strangers. Friendliness is an American thing more than a Japanese thing. Japanese may not be friendly even to Japanese strangers. Outgoing friendliness with either local strangers or foreigners is simply not common. For the American sojourner or tourist being openly friendly with Japanese may not break down the conversational barriers. One day, I was looking for a nearby shrine and, with a smile on my face, I approached an older Japanese woman asking for directions. She promptly waved her hands in front of her indicating that she didn't want to talk with me. I was trying to speak in her language, but I may have been way too forward (*narenareshii*). For many reasons, outgoing friendliness does not beget conversation.

All of this is not to imply that traditional Japanese are stoic, somber communicators. As with Americans, Japanese can "put on a happy face." When Americans do it, it is to denote happiness and perhaps to cover-up some unhappiness. When the Japanese do it, it is to take care of the relationship with their conversational partners. I noticed a lot of "happy face" talk when I was in Japan, especially after I had been there long enough to be accepted by my Japanese co-workers. That I was included in the happy talk at the office was their kind way of taking care of me.

In order for foreigners to be seen as friends, they must be truly kind. When acts of kindness are insincere, they will be seen as transparent. Transparent kindness occurs



when someone is friendly for a reason, perhaps personal gain. Hornstein (1976) writing about a related concept (altruism) notes that "because altruism has so many cleverly disguised imposters, natural observation of behavior can be misleading" (p.72). What looks kind may not be. The stereotypical salesperson whose primary interest is the sale may treat customers quite kindly in order to secure their business. If they were not "potential customers" they may not merit such treatment.

The importance of kindness, over friendliness, is evidenced by a letter I received from one of my Japanese friends who came to the USA and stayed with us in our home for a couple of days. Among other things, we took her sightseeing, and enjoyed a number of local restaurants. After returning to Japan, she wrote thanking us for the "kind treatment" she received. We were honored by her comment. A similar letter from an American might say something like "Thanks for a great time." For sure, both letters are gratuitous, but I like the Japanese one better because kindness advances friendships.

### Building Friendships, Japanese Style

In Japan, calling someone "tomodachi" is not a casually awarded term. Derived from the base word "tomo" the label "tomodachi" is given to those who have earned it. Table 1 shows how friendships in the business world and in one's personal life have different labels. *Yuujo* is a category of friends in one's personal life. *Yuukoo* refers to one's business friends. Within each category there are intimate friends. A close personal friend would be called "shitashii tomodachi." A close business relationship would be called "shitashii kankee."

Tomo (friend)	
Yuujo	Yuukoo
personal	business
shitashii tomodachi	shitashii kankee
(intimate friend)	(close relations)

Table 1: Categories of Friends Among Japanese

For outsiders, developing friendships with Japanese can be a slow process. One starts out as a "chijin," an acquaintance. If the relationship is to be short-term, then "chijin" is all that a foreigner can accomplish. If, on the other hand, a relationship has the potential for long-term standing, then the foreigner can move toward "tomodachi" by showing kindness and drawing others in a friendly way (*shitashimi*). In between time, "shitashimi yasusa" describes the state of becoming friends, maybe, but it will take time. Table 2 shows the path outsiders take to move from being an acquaintance to becoming a true friend with a Japanese cohort.



"Outsider" starts as Chijin  
 (acquaintance)  
 then by showing kindness  
 Shitashimi - adj.  
 (drawn by my friendly way) leading to Shitashimi yasusa - n.  
 (We can become friends but it will take time)  
 which will result in Tomodachi

Table 2: Going from an acquaintance to a friend, as an outsider

As you can tell, friendships take time to develop, especially for foreigners. How successful one is at becoming a friend in Japan is a matter of style. A more positive style is often more quiet and less boisterous than Americans are used to. Likewise, a more negative style would be one that is too loud and too assertive. The issue is more than politeness, it is matter of showing kindness towards others by not being too much, too soon.

### Violations

As in all parts of the world, friendships form when people are attracted each other and treat one another with kindness. This is accomplished by what people say and do. Negative actions tend to stifle friendship formation. This is particularly true when one's actions are too imposing on the other person, such as communication behavior that is too strong. What happens when someone violates expectations and comes on too strong? In Japan, two responses are possible. One is a direct response wherein the violators are confronted for their offensive behaviors. A direct response might be an admonition, or a vocalized complaint. The direct response is usually reserved for friends and family, and handled privately. In public situations, such as dealing with business associates and foreigners, indirect responses would be more prevalent. An indirect response to an infraction might be to suggest doing something else, or changing the topic of conversation, or not saying "no" when it would be the truthful answer, or remaining silent. The indirect response is for face-saving purposes, so that neither the offender nor the offended are embarrassed. In this way, it also kind.

In order to learn more about how Japanese respond to communication styles which violate expectations of proper communication behavior, a dictionary search along with two interviews with a Japanese teacher in the USA produced four Japanese words which denote outgoing behaviors. The words were: *nonkimono*, *narenareshii*, *gouin*, *urusai*. While these words may refer to extremities in behavior they were



chosen because they represent expressive behaviors which would violate expectations of a kind style. They can also be seen as outgoing behavior carried too far.

These words were the basis of a focus group discussion with three Japanese students studying in the USA. The students were either 24 or 25 years old, from different parts of Japan (Iwaki City, Obama, and Osaka). One had been in the US less than 2 years, the other two more than 5 years. Each of them had sufficient proficiency in spoken English to be understood in a focus group conversation. The author-moderated discussion lasted 40 minutes. The session was videotaped. The participants were presented four Japanese words (one-at-time) and asked to explain aloud what each word meant and then talk about how a Japanese person would react to such behavior. Following is a brief description of their feelings about each word.

**Nonkimono:** After initially joking that *nonkimono* refers to a person who does not have a kimono, the group concluded that this refers to someone who is "laid-back," casual, and at times not prepared. In an interpersonal relationship it would be OK if it meant a happy-go-lucky person, whose actions have little consequence on personal commitments with friends. But in a business relationship, with important dealings, it would be unacceptable. Thus, it would be corrected more often in a business context than if it occurred with a personal friend.

Another word came up in the discussion that refers to a shallow person (*hitonatsukkosa*). Such a person is outgoing and open, but too much so. A glad-handing politician would be *hitonatsukkosa*. As with *nonkimono*, *hitonatsukkosa* can be an undesirable quality.

**Narenareshii:** This word refers to someone who is too friendly, acting too personal and being too familiar. Among Japanese friends, if someone were to enter your apartment and then opens your refrigerator to look for food or drink without asking permission, that would be *narenareshii*. While not likely, if a foreigner did this, the Japanese response would likely be indirect so as not to embarrass the foreign guest. If Japanese person was *narenareshii*, he/she would be dealt with more directly, especially in private settings. If a foreigner's public communication behavior (getting way too personal) becomes *narenareshii*, it would be embarrassing for the Japanese recipient but it would be dealt with indirectly.

**Gouin:** This refers to someone who is being too pushy. It reflects selfishness. Such overbearing behavior is not appreciated and if a foreigner does it, it would draw a polite indirect response, but if a friend does it, it



would draw a more direct admonition. If a businessman is *gouin* it might raise suspicions he is "in it just for the money." If friends are *gouin*, they are being self-centered and inconsiderate of others. Similar to *narenareshii*, *gouin* is too much. It is going too far, not respecting the other person, because it puts too much pressure on the other person's face.

*Urusai*: This is an adjective that refers not so much to a style or person but to behaviors or actions. It refers to loudness or noisiness. A passing train may be *urusai*. A neighbor may be playing her/his stereo too loud. That is *urusai*. When a person's speech is *urusai* is he/she is too noisy. In essence, when someone or something is this way, it needs to shut up. Such action is beyond tolerance. About the only time it is allowed is when someone is in "drunktown" partying with colleagues. At other times such loudness is inappropriate. In short, *urusai* is quite negative, thus if a foreigner or personal friend gets this bad, the direct response may follow. (When discussing *urusai*, one of the focus group members suggested that when "someone has a big mouth" and needs to shut up, he/she would be *shaberu*. In English this would one who gossips too much.)

In sum, *nonkimono* refers to a laid back person who might be simply careless. It is not necessarily a bad thing. It depends on the situation. On the other hand, if a person's communication behavior is *urusai*, it needs to stop. This is obviously an extreme condition, one that wouldn't be very common. On the other hand, *narenareshii* and *gouin* may be more likely. The first is impolite and imposing on people. In the foreigners case it could be "coming-on too friendly." *Gouin* is worse. It implies a person who is selfish, insisting on his/her own way. For both foreigners and Japanese, this flies in the face of group harmony, and violates expectations of kindness. All of these violate expectations of "kind" communication behavior, and when an American comes on too strong with friendliness, it could be just as bad.

### Summary

This paper makes the case that kindness and friendliness are not the same. Likewise, one cannot be kind just by being friendly. In the eyes of the Japanese, a friendly person may not necessarily be a kind one. Kindness is something that is demonstrated, and once you have demonstrated it, your friendliness will draw Japanese people toward you (*shitashimi*). Foreigners often try to be overly friendly, assuming that an outgoing style of communication will increase their attractiveness with their Japanese hosts. Such is not the case. In fact, if foreigners become too pushy or too friendly, they may be politely ignored or rejected. Establishing friendly relations takes time, and an overly outgoing style will not speed up the process of building friendships



in Japan. If one is too pushy (*gouin*) or too familiar (*narenareshii*) or is too loud or boisterous (*urusai*), he/she may be rejected as a friend but never realize it. Foreigners need to be careful, if they are to be effective communicators in Japan.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All references to Japanese words can be found in Shimizu, M. et.al. (Eds.) *The Kodansha Campus Japanese-English Dictionary*: Tokyo, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> In keeping with Japanese tradition, the word American is used to refer to USA citizens. They have other words for Mexicans and Canadians. North Americans then would be inappropriate.

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