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## Concerns about Vagueness of Japanese Students: Possible Effects on their Answers as Informants in Questionnaires and/or Interviews

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### Abstract

In this paper I discuss how vagueness of expression among Japanese students might affect research data/results, in particular regarding their responses to questionnaires/interviews. In the first section, some examples of the vagueness are described and discussed, and the second section considers how Japanese culture is related to such vagueness. In the final section, I discuss the necessity of being cautious about possible impreciseness of answers from Japanese informants.

**Keywords:** Vagueness, Japanese Students, Japanese Culture, Cultural Effects

日本人学生の曖昧さが与える研究データへの影響について

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## Introduction

When a researcher uses Japanese students as informants for self-completed questionnaires and/or interviews, there might be some concerns about the tendency for Japanese students to give vague (or imprecise) answers which could affect their answers when they are respondents to a questionnaire (The explanation for this is provided below). In other words, their answers could probably be too reticent, modest, or neutral, which means that they would not show their actual or real feelings and the full scale of possible responses would not be represented.

In this paper I will discuss how vagueness of expression among Japanese students might affect research data/results. In the first section, some examples of the vagueness will be described and discussed, and the second section will consider how Japanese culture is related to such vagueness. In the final section, I will discuss necessity of being cautious about possible impreciseness of answers from Japanese informants.

### 1. Vagueness of expression among Japanese students

Vagueness among Japanese people frequently happens in their chat or small talk. In particular, in conversations between students in a university, we can see that they tend to avoid ‘definite expressions’ of almost anything; accordingly, they usually use *tabun* or *kamo* (which mean ‘probably’ or ‘maybe’) even for things which will undoubtedly happen. For example, one student asks his/her friend ‘Are you going to attend the psychology class today?’ [*kyō no shinrigaku no kurasu deru*], and the friend answers, ‘Maybe [*tabun*]. (Because) I received a warning mail (about my attendance rate) from the professor last week.’

In another way, there is an interesting example to indicate Japanese students’ tendency to be modest or avoid showing off their abilities (or their superiorities). As a researcher, I interviewed some of the freshman students in my ‘basic English’ class<sup>1</sup> in a university in Japan, and the interviews were administered at the beginning and the end of one semester. One of the interviewees, whose name is Fumi (anonymous name is used), later changed one of her answers on the questionnaire which was conducted at the beginning of the semester. In this research pre-post designed questionnaires (self-completed semi-structured type) and interviews were conducted<sup>2</sup>. The interviews were basically based on the self-completed questionnaires; and also the interviewees had not known that they

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1 This ‘basic English’ class is mandatory for all freshman students in the non-language related faculty they belong to.

2 The questionnaires and interviews involved four steps: 1) the first self-completed questionnaire → 2) pre-interview → 3) the second self-completed questionnaire → 4) post-interview. This research has also included other data collecting procedures and has been administered from 2015 to 2016.

would be interviewed at the time they answered the self-completed questionnaire at the beginning of the semester. At the pre-interview I asked about one of her self-completed answers and the related-question was as follows:

*Which one do you think is the most appropriate to indicate your level of English at present?*

*In this class: extremely low • relatively low • average • relatively high • extremely high*

(The original version of this question was written in Japanese and has been translated by the author of the present paper.)

Fumi's answer to this question was 'average'. I had observed her for one semester before this questionnaire (the first questionnaire) was administered<sup>3</sup>. Considering her mark for the class in the semester and my observation, she appeared to have a higher level of English compared with most of the other classmates at that time. In the class, students had been divided into small groups (three to five per group) and she had often taught other members in her group.

Since I knew her level of English, I needed to make sure if her answer 'average' (level of English) was her true perception; so I asked her whether or not the answer was correct and she said 'yes' at that time (in the interview at the beginning of the semester). I also asked her if there was some possibility of hesitating to tell me her true feelings/perceptions because I was her teacher and she said that there was "no such possibility"<sup>4</sup>.

However in the post-interview at the end of the semester she said that she had rated herself as 'extremely high' in the earlier interview, even though, in fact, she had rated herself as 'average'. This happened when I asked about her written-answer on the second-questionnaire: her perceived level of English was 'relatively high'. At the post-interview she said that her perceived level of English had lowered compared to her perception at the beginning of the semester because she felt that a friend of hers had a much higher level of English than hers (In other words, the 'friend' made her feel 'less-able'). This means that her perceived level of English had been 'extremely high' at the beginning of the semester and then lowered to 'relatively high' at the end of the semester, although her former answer had been 'average' (not 'extremely high') as described above. I told her what she had answered (about her perception of her level of English) at the beginning of the semester and she was surprised at the answer and corrected it. Additionally, I asked her if there had been some possibility of hesitating to tell me her true perceptions because I had been her teacher; in particular at the time when she had answered 'average' (at the beginning of the semester); she said "... there had been no such possibility

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3 I taught this class for two semester (spring and fall) and the students in the class have been the same through both semesters. The first questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the fall semester.

4 The pre-post interviews were conducted in Japanese. Fumi's words in this paper have been translated into English by the author of the present paper.

but I don't know why I had said so."

One of the reasons why she had not answered her 'real' perception at the beginning of the semester appeared to have come from her modesty about not showing her perception of superiority compared with most of the other classmates. In addition, at the beginning of the class it seemed that there had not been a sufficient relationship of trust between the informant and the interviewer, and the informant might have been a bit nervous because the interviewer had also been the teacher of the class. In fact, the informant (Fumi) and I as the interviewer had had many conversations inside and outside of the classroom since the pre-interview. In other words, we developed a stronger relationship of trust and she appeared to have become more and more open and frank every time we had some chat or conversation.

## 2. Japanese culture which causes vagueness of expression

The following few paragraphs describe the elements in Japanese culture which cause vagueness of expression. Once the cultural uniqueness is appreciated, it becomes easier to understand the concern related to the vagueness among Japanese students as research informants.

One of the common and/or key features in Japanese society lies in its style of socialisation. Socialisation is "the means by which an essentially biological being is converted into a social one, able to communicate with other members of the particular society to which it belongs" (Hendry, 1987: 38).

The most important feature of socialisation or interpersonal relationships in Japanese society originates from the dichotomy of *uchi* and *soto* which can be roughly translated as 'inside' and 'outside', respectively (Libra, 1976 cited in Takemura, 1993). Libra discusses the fact that this distinction is a feature of human culture in general, but it is at the same time crucial for determining how Japanese people interact with others. According to Hendry (1987), the distinction in behaviour is equivalent to the difference between *tatemae* (public behaviour) and *honme* (one's real feelings). Japanese language has clear speech levels which are chosen to represent the relationship between the people involved in a conversation and/or their context. The ability to distinguish between public and real behaviour is also considered as a measure of maturity. Cook (1996: 193) describes the concept of *uchi* and *soto* as follows:

*In the uchi context the Japanese behave intimately, privately, and in a relaxed manner revealing their true feelings, whereas in the soto context they are public, concerned with surface appearance (i.e., omote) and with social obligations (i.e., giri, tatemae).*

She also confirms that Japanese people distinguish the two contexts by changing their speech mode about the self, having acquired the concept from childhood. Thus, Japanese people in general protect

their ‘inner feelings’ from the probings of outsiders (such as teachers) by using vague speech and neutral responses.

### **3. Necessity of being cautious about Japanese vagueness**

As described in the previous section, vagueness of expression is an important cultural element in Japanese society in general. Therefore, it is quite possible that some Japanese students give imprecise answers on questionnaires or in interviews due to their cultural habit. Thus, researchers should be cautious about preciseness of Japanese students’ answers to any survey or questionnaire/interview.

More importantly, self-completed questionnaires in particular might have much more risk (than interviews) of receiving inappropriate answers when Japanese students are among the respondents. In self-completed surveys or questionnaires the preciseness of respondents’ answers is not ensured. There may be vagueness arising from the informants’ cultural backgrounds. For example, regarding structured self-completed questionnaires in a survey, their system or choices to answer are apt to be limited and rigid and are considered as “neglect[ing] the social and cultural construction of the ‘variables’ which quantitative research seeks to correlate” (Silverman 2000: 5) by many qualitative researchers. Even in open-ended (self-completed) questionnaires, from my experiences with Japanese university students as informants, students’ answers tend to be too short to figure out what a researcher wants to know. On the other hand, in interviews their choices to answer can be changed flexibly or new questions can be added when required.

In addition, although pilot studies are applied to self-completed structured-questionnaires, some Japanese students might not even recognize their vagueness when they answer as in Fumi’s case described above (in the first section). For the purpose of avoiding such vagueness it is crucial to establish a sufficient relationship of trust between informants and the researcher when collecting their responses as data. However, it is very difficult to establish such relationships between hundreds/thousands of students and the researcher.

As one possible remedy for the vagueness problem described above, using qualitative research methods, along with a quantitative survey, might be useful because observation and in-depth interviews, which are often utilized as a part of qualitative procedures, are flexible enough to find hidden feelings/beliefs (even though they are not perfect). For instance, after observing target groups of students, a researcher purposefully/randomly selects several key informants who represent the group, and then by interviewing the key informants may create a chance to find the vagueness among the target students’ answers. This observation may have an important role in discerning or grasping whether or not the vagueness exists among them or certain students.

In this paper I have discussed the vagueness of expression among Japanese students and its possible influence on research data/results, including a remedy for reducing the possibility of this

distorting influence. Although such influence might not always be present, we still do not know how much hidden feelings/perceptions of students exist and to what extent these feelings/perceptions affect the students' behaviours at present and in the future. This kind of hidden risk/influence may be present in all research data/results and we as researchers should be as cautious as possible when collecting data.

## Acknowledgement

Part of this paper is drawn from my doctoral dissertation (Tatsumoto, 2011).

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