

Communication and Culture

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Introduction to Communicative Competence

- Speaking well goes beyond grammar: it includes situational language choices.
- Distinction between linguistic competence and communicative competence.
- Focus on East and Southeast Asian languages.
- Topics covered: proverbs, speech styles, honorific systems, communicative style.

Proverbs and Sayings

- Proverbs are central to communication, especially in Malay.
- Express social norms and values with cultural references.
- Examples encapsulate lessons or advice.
- Often used to depersonalize comments, presenting them as traditional wisdom.
- Culturally rich and expressive forms such as *pantun* quatrains. Pantun is a Malay poem with two parts, connected indirectly

Examples of Malay Proverbs

- (1) Ada hujan, ada panas, ada hari boleh balas.
There rain, there hot weather, there day can repay.
'Every action, good or bad, will be repaid in kind.'
- (2) Sedikit-sedikit lama-lama jadi bukit.
Little by little, become mountain.
'Small, patient actions bring big results.'

Examples of a Pantun

- (3) Pisang emas bawa belayar,
Masak sebiji di atas peti;
Hutang emas boleh dibayar,
Hutang budi dibawa mati.
- (4) The golden plantain carried on a voyage;
One ripens on top of the chest.
A debt of gold can be repaid;
A debt of kindness lasts until death.

See *Connecting the dots: The case of foreshadow and meaning in pantun*
By Nazima Versay Kudus and Melati Desa (2022)

Elaborate Expressions

- Common in Southeast Asia, with four-syllable compounds (ABAC, ABCB).
- Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, and Chinese use these expressions for fluency.
- Used to convey deeper cultural meanings and imagery.
- Chinese examples (chéng yǔ) reflect historical, literary roots.

Examples of Thai Elaborate Expressions

Expression	Literal	Meaning
hǔu-pàa-taa-thì phûut-yàang-tham-yàang	ear-forest-eye-forest speak-kind-do-kind	to be ignorant say one thing, do another

What are Chengyu (成语)?

- Chengyu are prototypically four-character, non-compositional phrases derived from historical lore or classical literature.
- Some are partly compositional
- Many are completely non-compositional
- They function as lexemes in sentences
- They are more vivid than normal lexemes
- There is no definitive list — different lexicons range from samples of a few hundred up to 50,000 or more
- Many excellent (paper) dictionaries exist

Some Examples of Chengyu

- (5) 守 株 待 兔
shou zhu dai tu
guard tree root wait rabbit

Lit: to wait by a tree for a rabbit

to expect fortune without putting in any effort

- (6) 分 崩 离 析
fen beng li xi
divide rupture leave split apart
to completely fall apart



Image from Yumcha Studios

Many come from stories

During the Spring and Autumn period, there was a farmer (农民 Nóngmín) who had a tree in his field. He would frequently rest under a tree after a long day of working.

One day, he was working in the field and saw a scared rabbit come running past him, crash into that tree, and die suddenly. The farmer was overjoyed! He had just gotten a free dinner without having to put in any work.

While eating rabbit stew that night, the farmer had a thought. “Why even bother farming, when I have a tree that rabbits just ran into?” The farmer really liked this thought and from that day forth, he abandoned his plow to simply sit by the tree and wait for another rabbit to run into it and die.

However, to the farmer’s surprise, no more rabbits crashed into the tree again ever again. Overtime, the farmer ended up with barren fields, impoverished, and the laughing stock of the village.

<https://www.tutormandarin.net/en/>

[holding-a-tree-and-waiting-for-a-rabbit/](#)

Distribution of Chengyu in different Genres

We looked at how many chengyu could be found in translations from English to Chinese in four different genres.

Genre	Sents	Chengyu		
		Types	Tokens	Tokens/100 Sents
Story	1,226	138	153	7.3
News	2,138	225	312	7.5
Essay	816	180	227	15.6
Tourism	3,280	538	962	11.8
Total	7,460	1,003	1,654	10.3

- The essay *Cathedral and the Bazaar* has the most, which fits well with its intellectual tone.

From Ho et al. (2014).

Used more in Chinese, then Korean, then Japanese.

Comparison with the West

- These are not so different from Western proverbs (IMHO)
 - Many of which come from classic works
Aesop's fables, the Bible, Homer, ...
 - Using them correctly is a sign of erudition
- Chéngyǔ often require a degree of interpretation, as their literal meaning may differ from the figurative message they convey. For example, the chéngyǔ 画蛇添足 *huà shé tiān zú*, “to draw legs on a snake”, means “to add something superfluous”, warning against unnecessary embellishments. But this is also true for the English expression “like lipstick on a pig” or an expression like “sour grapes”, ...
- Because of their semi-fixed form (normally 4, sometimes 5 characters) they are more distinct from normal text.

Auspicious and Inauspicious Words in Cantonese

Auspicious Words

八 (eight)	baat	≈ 發 (faat) “prosperity”
橙 (tangerine)	daaih gāt	≈ 大吉 (daaih gāt), “great fortune”
魚 (fish)	yú	≈ 餘 (yùh), “abundance”
金 (gold)	gām	Symbolizes wealth and prosperity
生菜 (lettuce)	sāang chòih	≈ 生財 (sāang chòih), “making money”

Inauspicious Words

四 (four)	sei	≈ 死 (séi), “death”
書 (book)	syū	≈ 輸 (syū), “to lose”
空 (empty)	hūng	Associated with emptiness or misfortune
鞋 (shoe)	hái	≈ 孩 (hái), associated with failure
舌 (tongue)	siht	≈ 失 (siht), “to lose”

So we give and receive tangerines on New Year's Day!

Auspicious and Inauspicious Words in Japanese

Auspicious Words (縁起の良いことば)

松 (pine)	まつ	Longevity; evergreen resilience
竹 (bamboo)	たけ	Strength, uprightness
梅 (plum)	うめ	Renewal; the first flower of spring
鯛 (sea bream)	たい	≈ めでたい, “auspicious, happy”
福 (fortune)	ふく	Good luck, prosperity

Inauspicious Words (縁起の悪いことば)

四 (four)	し	≈ 死 (death)
櫛 (comb)	く(し)	≈ 苦 (suffering)
切る (to cut)	きる	Not at weddings: “to sever a relationship”
別れる (to part)	わかれる	Not at weddings, in gifts and speeches
落ちる (to fall)	おちる	Avoided around exams (implies “to fail”)

So at weddings and New Year, we prefer 松竹梅 (pine, bamboo, plum) and avoid “cutting” or “separation” words or gifts of combs or knives!

Introduction to Speech Styles

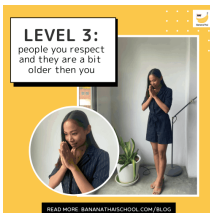
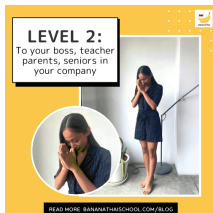
- Many East and Southeast Asian languages use different speech styles (registers).
- Speech styles convey respect, social distance, and familiarity.
- Marked by pronunciation, vocabulary, particles, morphology, and syntax.
- Styles are often culturally codified, such as in Javanese and Korean.
- Speakers are mindful of using appropriate styles in various social situations.

Speech Styles in Thai

- Thai has styles like public, consultative, and personal (informal).
- Consultative style uses particles *khráp* (male) and *khâ* (female).
- Particles show respect and are used at sentence ends or alone.
- Requires careful pronunciation and elevated vocabulary.
- Politeness demands avoiding abrupt or negative expressions.

Thai Greeting Styles

- Physical greetings also reflect social hierarchy.
- The traditional Thai *wai* has variations based on social rank.
- Higher-ranked individuals may have more relaxed gestures.
- Verbal and non-verbal etiquette combine to convey respect.



Speech Styles in Javanese

- Javanese features highly developed vocabulary levels.
- Primary styles: *ngoko* (informal) and *krama* (formal, respectful).
 - *Ngoko* is personal and direct, typically for close relations.
used for thinking to oneself
 - *Madya* is a compromise between conflicting criteria of age, social standing, and familiarity.
it uses abbreviated krama words with ngoko affixes
 - *Krama* includes set phrases, indirect expressions, and formal tone.
used to address superiors or strangers, aiming for social smoothness.

Javanese Speech Style Examples

Ngoko	Krama	Meaning
omah	griya	house
wong	tiyang	person
lunga	késah	go
sapi	lembu	cow
mati	pejah	die

‘What’ is *apa* in ngoko, *napa* in madya, punapa in *krama*.

Speech Styles in Sasak (Lombok)

- Sasak has three main speech levels: low, mid, and high.
- High-level vocabulary reserved for addressing higher-status individuals.
- Style level choice depends on the addressee's social rank.
- Limited to around 180 words compared to Javanese's extensive system.
- Example phrase for “Have you eaten?” changes across levels.
 - Low** Wah-m mangan kamu?
 - Mid** Wah-m medaran side?
 - High** Sampun-m majengan pelinggih?

Speech Styles in Korean

- Korean speech styles, known as *che*, differ by verb endings.
- Five primary styles: plain, banmal, familiar, polite, and formal.
- Style choice depends on age, social rank, and relationship.
- Example: *haeyo-che* (polite) for general politeness.
- *Hapsyo-che* (formal) for respectful or professional contexts.

Korean Speech Style Examples

Speech Style	Example	Meaning
Plain	<i>bi ga o-nda</i>	It is raining
Banmal	<i>bi ga o-a</i>	It is raining
Familiar	<i>bi ga o-ne</i>	It is raining
Polite	<i>bi ga o-ayo</i>	It is raining
Formal	<i>bi ga o-bnita</i>	It is raining

Changing Speech Styles in Korean

- Moving to banmal signals closeness and familiarity.
- Expressed as "putting down the language."
- Verb endings change based on relationship status.
- Politeness levels can shift with changes in relationships.
- People are very aware of the levels

(7) *Uri neun seoro hage-haneun sai.*

We have a hage-speaking relationship with each other.

(8) *Nugu hante banmal eul haneun geo ya?*

Who do you think you're speaking banmal to?

Comparison of Speech Styles across Languages

- Javanese, Sasak, and Korean show structured speech level systems.
- Each system reflects social values (hierarchy, respect, and formality).
- Vocabulary adjustments often indicate respect or familiarity.
- Linguistic choices have deep cultural and social implications.
- Systems express respect for age, rank, and social distance.
- Politeness often involves elevated or indirect language.
- Common in stratified societies with established social roles.
- Reflects Confucian, Buddhist, and local cultural values.

Conclusion

- Speech styles are essential to communicative competence in Asia.
- Differences in language choice reflect respect and social dynamics.
- Knowing speech styles enhances understanding of cultural norms.
- Key for effective communication in diverse social contexts.

Introduction to Japanese Honorifics

- Japanese honorifics are a highly structured part of the language.
- Used to show respect, social distance, and group membership.
- Three main types: *teinei-go*, *sonkei-go*, and *kenjoo-go*.
- Teinei-go is addressee-related (politeness).
- Sonkei-go and kenjoo-go are referent-related (honoring and humbling).

Types of Honorifics

- *Teinei-go* (polite): verbs marked with polite suffixes (e.g., *-masu*).
- *Sonkei-go* (honoring): respectful forms for the addressee.
- *Kenjoo-go* (humbling): modest forms used for oneself or in-group.
- These categories reflect social dynamics and cultural values.
- Honorifics are essential in everyday Japanese.

Illustration of Honorific Levels

- Plain vs Sonkei vs Kenjoo

Meaning	Neutral	Honoring	Humbling
say	<i>iu</i>	<i>ossharu</i>	<i>moosu</i>
go	<i>iku</i>	<i>irassharu</i>	<i>mairu</i>
do	<i>suru</i>	<i>nasaru</i>	<i>itasu</i>
eat	<i>taberu</i>	<i>meshiagaru</i>	<i>itadaku</i>
stay	<i>tomaru</i>	<i>o-tomaru-ni naru</i>	<i>o-tomari suru</i>

- Osaka-dialect also has a slightly weaker honorific *V-haru* (e.g. *tabe-haru*)
- Teinei-go is shown by the verb ending: *iu* vs *iimasu*

In-Group vs. Out-Group Distinction

- The concept of *uchi* (in-group) vs. *soto* (out-group) is central.
- Honorific language reflects whether someone is inside or outside one's social group.
- Family members are usually in-group; outsiders are out-group.
- Modest language is used for in-group members, respectful for out-group.
- Used extensively in school, workplace, and social settings.

Examples of In-Group Language

- (9) Chichi wa genkide ori-mas-u.
father topic healthy be:hum-pol-nonpast
'(My) father is healthy.'
- (10) O-too-san wa o-genki des-u ka.
resp-father-hon topic resp-health be:pol-nonpast ques
'Is (your) father healthy?'

Gender and Honorific Use

- Women are expected to use more elaborate honorifics.
- Men's speech is typically less formal to convey the same level of respect.
- Gender differences decrease at higher levels of politeness.
- Cultural expectations shape these linguistic choices.

Examples of Humble Speech

- (11) Sakai-san ga Suzuki-san ni chizu-o o-kaki
Sakai-hon subj Suzuki-hon for map-obj resp-draw
shi-mashi-ta.
do-past
'Mr Sakai drew a map for Mr Suzuki (with humility).'

Mechanics of Honorifics

- Lexical differentiation: verbs change form depending on honorific level.
- Morphosyntactic patterns: *o-verb ni naru* (honoring) and *o-verb suru* (humbling).
- Auxiliary verbs (e.g., “give” and “receive”) express additional respect.
- Many forms reflect Japanese cultural values around humility.

Giving and Receiving Verbs

- These are auxiliaries used for requests and to describe doing something for someone.

Meaning	Plain	Honorific
give to me	<i>kureru</i>	<i>kudasaru</i>
give to someone	<i>ageru</i>	<i>sashiageru</i>
receive	<i>morau</i>	<i>itadaku</i>

- (12) Tanaka-san ga imooto ni o-kashi o
Tanaka-hon subj younger.sister dat hon.sweets acc
tukut-te kure-ta.
make:ger give.to.me-past
'Mr Tanaka made some sweets for my younger sister.'

Social Situations and Language Choice

- Honorifics vary based on power dynamics in social situations.
- Customer–salesperson and doctor–patient exchanges show clear asymmetry.
- High-status individuals use casual forms; lower-status remain polite.
- Language changes reflect respect and courtesy.

Honorific Language is Long Winded

(13) 聞いていい？

Kii te ii ?

Ok to ask (a question)?

聞きかせていただけるとうれしいのですが。

Kikasete itadakeru to ureshii no desu ga .

I would, however, be delighted if I may be permitted to ask (a question).

(14) ご協力 ください。

Go kyōryoku kudasai.

Your cooperation, please.

ご協力 の程 お願ねがい申もうし上あげます。

Gok yōryoku no hodo o negai mōshi agemasu .

We respectfully request the favor of a measure of your cooperation.

Japanese Honorifics and Their Uses

Honorific	≈	Used For
San (さん)	Mr. / Ms.	Adults of equal status,
Sama (様)	Sir / Ma'am	People of higher status including deities, guests, customers
Kun (君)	Boy, bro	Junior status, boys, among male friends
Chan (ちゃん)	Little...	Small children, cute things, close friends
Tan (たん)	Widdle...	Babies, moe anthropomorphisms
Senpai (先輩)	–	Senior colleague or classmate
Sensei (先生)	Mr./Dr./Prof	Authority figures teachers, doctors, lawyers, authors, ...
Gyou (行)		your own name

Often you will use someone's role (like engineer, director, ...)

You use *gyou*, for example, when posting tax documents and expecting stamped documents in return. The office will send the documents in the provided envelope, likely after crossing out *gyou* and replacing it with *sama*.

Educational and Social Importance

- Honorifics are seen as a mark of good education and upbringing.
- Mastery of honorifics is encouraged through language guides and training.
 - In my three week induction training at NTT, we had about 8 hours devoted to honorific language, and another 8 or so about who should sit where (in a room, in a taxi, in a train, ...), how to pass business cards, and more
- Many Japanese wish to improve their honorific command.

What are Cultural Scripts?

- Concept developed by Anna Wierzbicka and colleagues.
- Describes cultural norms in simple, universal terms.
- Uses semantic primes (basic meanings) like "people," "good," "bad."
- Avoids language-specific concepts, allowing cross-cultural understanding.
- Example: expressing regret without implying guilt.

Example of a Japanese Cultural Script

- (15) people think like this:
if something bad happens to someone because of me,
I have to say something like this to this person:
'I feel something bad because of this'
- Expresses common Japanese cultural practice of frequent apologies.
 - Avoids direct responsibility but shows empathy.

High-Level Cultural Scripts of Malay

- Influenced by Islam and *adat* (custom).
- Emphasis on knowing the "proper" behavior.
- Script: "It is good if a person knows what is good to do at all times."
- Values include patience, respect, and politeness.
- Encourages social harmony and moral behavior.

Concept of *Balasan* (Reciprocal Action)

- *Balasan*: idea of return in kind for deeds.
- Good deeds bring good, bad deeds bring bad.
- Found in proverbs: "Every deed, good or wrong, has its *balasan*."
- Encourages people to act with consideration of consequences.

Script for Reflecting on Actions (Malay)

(16) people think like this:
when I want to do something
it is good if I think about it for some time before I do it

- Emphasizes careful consideration of actions.
- Supports the value of patience and mindfulness.
- Encourages people to avoid impulsive behavior.

Avoiding Harm Through Speech

- Malays value careful and sensitive speech.
- Proverbs encourage “minding one’s mouth.”
- Script: “It is good to think about what to say before speaking.”
- Goal: prevent others from feeling hurt or embarrassed.

Sensitivity to Others' Feelings

- Sensitivity and empathy are highly valued.
- Expected to avoid blunt or critical speech.
- Western directness may clash with Malay indirectness.
- Example: Malaysian leaders advise avoiding hurtful comments.

Malay Cultural Scripts for Wanting

- Direct expression of self-interest is discouraged.
- Script: Avoid saying, “I want you to do this” for personal benefit.
- Emphasizes consideration for others’ autonomy.
- Malay interactions often avoid direct requests.

Example of an Indirect Request

- (17) Malay indirect request for dinner:
“Are you hungry?” instead of “Can you make dinner?”
Contrasts with “What would you like for dinner?”
- Shows the indirect approach common in Malay culture.
 - Reflects understanding that listener will infer the request.

Respect for Elders and Authority

- Concept of *menghormati* means "showing respect."
- Applied to parents, elders, and authority figures.
- Signs of respect include polite language, tone, and behavior.
- Importance of avoiding behaviors seen as arrogant or disrespectful.

Semantic Explication of *Menghormati*

(18) X *menghormati* Y:

X thinks good things about Y

X thinks things like this about Y:

Y is someone above me

I don't want Y to think anything bad about me

X wants Y to know this

because of this, when X is with Y

X does some things, X doesn't do some other things

X says some things, X doesn't say some other things

X says some words, X doesn't say some other words

- Reflects hierarchical respect in Malay culture.

Interpersonal Relations and Humility

- Malay culture encourages humility (*merendah diri*).
- Avoids appearing arrogant (*sombong*).
- Encourages people to respect each other in public settings.
- Modernization has affected these traditional norms.

Implications of Malay Communicative Style

- Westerners often see Malay discourse as charming and respectful.
- Values like harmony, patience, and deference shape interactions.
- Despite similarities to Japanese culture, Malay norms rooted in Islam.

Conclusion on Cultural Scripts

- Cultural scripts frame cultural behaviors without enforcing them.
- They offer insight into shared social norms and expectations.
- Help decode behaviors in intercultural settings.
- Awareness of scripts aids respectful and informed communication.

Indirect Communication in Japanese Culture

- Japanese people generally communicate indirectly to maintain harmony.
- Responses may be intentionally ambiguous to avoid confrontation or politeness.
- Non-verbal cues (body language, posture, tone) are important for drawing meaning.
- Disagreements are often discussed privately and at a later time.
- It is common practice to try to reach consensus by talking to everyone ahead of time, before even proposing something:
根回し *nemawashi* “preparing the roots”.
- Avoids putting people in a position where they may lose face.
- My boss would ask me to do something by saying *kore-wo yaru to ii desu ne* “It would be good if this is done”. In effect, he was conveying the message “you do this”.

Refusals in Japanese Communication

- Japanese people avoid direct refusals and negative responses.
- Example: *kento-shimasu* “I will consider it” often implies rejection.
In fact in business, *maemuki-ni kento-shimasu* “I will consider it with a positive frame of mind” means “I will do nothing”
- Refusals are often conveyed with hesitation or ambiguous language.
- Indirect language allows for subtlety in declining requests.
- Helps maintain social harmony and politeness.

The Role of Silence

- Silence is valued and reflects politeness and respect.
- Interrupting others is considered impolite.
- People may remain silent to allow others time to think.
- Silence gives space for reflection during conversations.
- Silence is an intentional tool for politeness in Japanese communication.

Interjections (*Aizuchi*)

- Aizuchi are common interjections in Japanese conversations.
- Indicate active listening without being seen as interruptions.
- Used when non-verbal cues are unavailable, such as on the phone.
- Types of aizuchi:
 - Agreement: *Hai* (yes), *Sou desu ne* (so it is), *Sugoi* (wow)
 - Surprise: *Eeee?* (really?), *Honto desu ka?* (is that true?)
 - Back-channel grunts: *un, nnn* “neutral”, *oo, hoh, ooun* “new information”, *ee, ne, he* “agreement”, *aa, sa, ma* “stalling”
- It is polite to make some sounds when you are listening

I notice that Siri's back channel grunts are better than Google Assistant. Siri goes *aha* when you say something, so you know it has heard you, ... (2024)

Handling Compliments

- Humility is a common value in Japanese culture.
- People often politely deflect compliments rather than accepting them directly.
- Excessive compliments can cause embarrassment.
- Deflecting compliments is a polite way to express humility.
- Reflects the cultural emphasis on modesty and avoiding arrogance.

Culturally Appropriate Communication

- Part of speaking a language well is being able to use the appropriate language, not just convey the exact meaning
- We are normally not clearly aware of how different our own culture's way of communicating is from another cultures
- When you are a poor speaker, it does not matter
- The more fluent you get, the more people will expect you to also master the cultural arts, ...
- How do you think Czech communicative culture is different from
 - its neighbours
 - Asian cultures

Acknowledgments

- Heavily based on Goddard (2005, Chapter 7)
- Thai Wai illustrations from BananaThai!

- Cliff Goddard. 2005. *The Languages of East and Southeast Asia: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
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