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Japanese key words and core cultural values¹

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ABSTRACT

Every language has its own key words, which reflect the core values of the culture. Consequently, cultures can be revealingly studied, compared, and explained to outsiders through their key words. But to be able to study, compare, and explain cultures in terms of their key words, we need a culture-independent analytical framework. A framework of this kind is provided by the natural semantic metalanguage developed by the author and colleagues over the last two decades. In the present article, the author explores and analyzes six Japanese concepts widely regarded as being almost more than any others culture-specific and culturally revealing – *amae*, *enryo*, *wa*, *on*, *giri*, and *seishin* – and shows how the use of the natural semantic metalanguage (based on universal semantic primitives) helps to make these concepts clear and how it facilitates better insight into Japanese culture and society. (Japanese language, Japanese culture, cross-cultural semantics, key words, core values)

The basic thesis of this study is that every language has its own key words and that these key words reflect the core values of the culture to which this language belongs. A concomitant second thesis is that cultures can be revealingly studied, compared, and explained to outsiders through their key words. A third thesis is that to be able to study, compare, and explain cultures in terms of their key words, we need a culture-independent analytical framework, and that such a framework is provided by the natural semantic metalanguage developed by the author and colleagues over the last two decades (see Boguslawski 1966, 1970, 1975, 1981, 1989, 1990; Goddard 1989a, 1989b; Wierzbicka 1972, 1980, 1985, 1987, 1988a, 1989a, 1989b, 1991a, 1991b).

For example, it has often been pointed out that certain crucial features of Japanese culture and society are reflected in Japanese words such as *on*, *giri*, *amae*, or *wa*, and that one cannot understand Japan without understanding the concepts encapsulated in these words. But when commentators try to explain these concepts in terms of English words such as *gratitude*, *justice*, *honor*, *dependence*, or *harmony*, they are in fact obfuscating them rather than clarifying.

Of course, English words of this kind are usually offered as approximate glosses, not as exact equivalents, and the use of such glosses is often unavoidable, or at least quite understandable, as a first approximation. But if one does not move from these approximations and vague analogies to something more precise, one remains locked in one's ethnocentric perspective and cannot achieve a true insight into the conceptual artefacts of a foreign culture.

The point is that English words such as those mentioned are culture-laden too – no less so than the Japanese words they are supposed to explain. One cannot clarify culture-laden words of one language in terms of culture-laden words of another. It is interesting to note in this connection Japanese scholar Ono's (1976:26) protest against what she saw as Western misinterpretations of Japan due to the uncritical reliance on Western words.

Each Western word is loaded with cultural and historical meanings, associations. A word such as "hierarchy" means automatically an order of power relationships. It has a connotation of oppression, denial of individualism, its rights and freedom which should lead to equality of men. In Japan, hierarchy simply signifies ritual order. It defines neither the location of power nor responsibility. Thus Western words as such are not appropriate for describing non-Western reality.

Many Western students of Japan are aware of the dangers involved in the use of Western words, but even when they are, they often get tangled in these words and leave their readers bewildered and confused. For example, Zimmerman (1985:74) wrote: "The Westerner is often puzzled by the Japanese use of the word 'sincerity', because to the Japanese sincerity is not open-hearted truthfulness but a complex amalgam of ideas. The basic theme in this is that a 'sincere' person is one who fulfils obligations no matter what and avoids giving offense . . . , or, to put it another way, one who strives for harmony in all relationships. . . ."

The Western reader may well wonder what all this has to do with *sincerity* and how Japanese people can use the word *sincerity* in those complex and unfamiliar ways. And yet it should hardly need to be pointed out that Japanese people do not use the word *sincerity* at all, because this is an English word, not a Japanese one. What Zimmerman was really trying to say was that Japanese does not have a word corresponding in meaning to the English *sincerity*, and that the Japanese word often glossed as 'sincerity' really means something different and something culture-specific. But he does not say what.

A similar confusion regarding the value of 'sincerity' is in fact evident in Benedict's (1947) discussion of this subject, despite her keen awareness of the problem, evidenced in other chapters of her book. For example, she wrote (1947:217): "A basic meaning of 'sincerity' as the Japanese use it, is that it

is the zeal to follow the ‘road’ mapped by the Japanese code and the Japanese spirit.”

The concept Benedict really had in mind was not ‘sincerity’ but *makoto*.

When modern Japanese have attempted to make some one moral virtue supreme over all the “circles,” they have usually selected ‘sincerity’. Count Okuma, in discussing Japanese ethics, said that sincerity (*makoto*) is the precept of all precepts; the foundation of moral teachings can be implied in that one word. Our ancient vocabulary is void of ethical terms except for one solitary word, *makoto*. (Benedict 1947:212-13)

But if *makoto* is a uniquely Japanese concept, very different from the English concept of ‘sincerity’, then one cannot explain the former by means of the latter. (The same applies to another Japanese key concept, *magokoro*, also usually glossed as ‘sincerity’.)

How can one, then, explain Japanese key concepts to cultural outsiders? It is all very well for Ono to insist that “Western words . . . are not appropriate for describing non-Western reality,” but for Westerners, “Western words” are all they have and all they can rely on. If Japanese culture could not be explained to Westerners “in Western words,” then it could not be explained to them at all.

My own solution to the dilemma is this. Japanese – or any other non-Western – culture *can* be explained to Westerners, but not in terms of culture-specific English words such as *sincerity*, *harmony*, *dependence*, and so on. What we need is English words that do have their semantic counterparts in Japanese and in any other language of the world. In other words, we need a semantic metalanguage based on lexical universals. I propose for this purpose the natural semantic metalanguage based on hypothetical semantic primitives such as SOMEONE, SOMETHING, DO, HAPPEN, WANT, SAY, KNOW, THINK, GOOD, BAD, and so on.

These hypothesized primitives have been given here in capital letters to signal that what is meant is not the English words *someone*, *something*, and so on, but the concepts encapsulated in these words, as well as in their closest semantic counterparts in other languages of the world (such as, e.g., *dareka*, *nanika*, *suru*, *okoru*, *ii*, *warui*, etc., in Japanese).

No doubt some readers will want to argue that concepts of this kind are not truly universal, nor truly culture-independent, either. I do not wish to dispute this. For the present purposes, it is enough to agree that concepts of this kind are *relatively speaking* more universal and more culture-independent than *honor* or *giri*, *sincerity* or *makoto*, *harmony* or *wa*, *dependence* or *amae*.

It is essential to point out that primitives of this kind, and the universal minigrammar in which they are embedded, have not been postulated on an

a priori basis, but have emerged from two decades of intensive empirical work, and that the natural semantic metalanguage based on these primitives has proved itself as an effective tool in the description of large bodies of data in English (see, e.g., Wierzbicka 1985, 1987, 1988a, 1991a, 1991b) and in many other, very diverse languages of the world, including Chinese (Chappell 1986a, 1986b, in press), Ewe (Ameka 1987, 1990), Australian Aboriginal languages (Goddard 1985, 1990; Harkins 1986, 1990; Hudson 1985; Wilkins 1986), and the Austronesian languages Mbula (Bugenhagen 1990) and Ifaluk (Wierzbicka 1988b).

In the present article, I explore and analyze six Japanese concepts widely regarded as being almost more than any others culture-specific and culturally revealing: *amae*, *enryo*, *wa*, *on*, *giri*, and *seishin*.

The existing literature on these concepts is quite rich and often very insightful, but it lacks methodological sophistication and rigor and does not aim at articulating semantic invariants. Nor does it examine minimal pairs, try to determine the role of context, or investigate unacceptable sentences (as a source of insight and evidence, etc.). The relationship between the goal of the present article and those of the existing literature can be compared to that between phonology and phonetics. My goal is not to collect new data but to analyze the data in a way that would make sense of it all.

LINGUISTIC UNIVERSALS AND THE UNIQUENESS OF EVERY LINGUISTIC SYSTEM

Every language is a self-contained system, and, in a sense, no words or constructions of one language can have absolute equivalents in another. The idea that there might be some linguistic elements that are universal in the sense of having absolute equivalents in all the languages of the world is, of course, all the more fanciful.

However, as soon as we abandon the notion of absolute equivalents and absolute universals, we are free to investigate the idea of partial equivalents and partial universals; and if the former is sterile and useless, the latter one is fruitful and necessary.

What I mean by "partial universals" is this. Within a particular language, every element belongs to a unique network of elements and occupies a particular place in a unique network of relationships. When we compare two, or more, languages, we cannot expect to find similar networks of relationships. Nonetheless, we can expect to find certain correspondences.

To put it differently, although every language has its own unique structure and its own unique lexicon (embodying a unique semantic structure), there are certain areas of languages that can be regarded as mutually isomorphic. It is this (limited) isomorphism in grammar and in the lexicon that gives sense to the notion of language universals.

In what follows, I illustrate this idea of limited isomorphism, first with respect to the lexicon, and then with respect to grammar.

As all translators know, every language has words that have no semantic equivalents in other languages and draws semantic distinctions other languages do not draw. For example, in translating the classic texts of the Hindu cultural tradition into European languages, one must face the fact that these languages do not have words coming even near in meaning to key Sanskrit terms such as *nirvana*, *brahman*, *atman*, or *karma* (see Bolle 1979:219–58).

But even comparing languages that are genetically, geographically, and culturally very close – for example, French and English – one constantly encounters examples of profound lexical differences. For example, the French word *malheur* has no counterpart in English, as pointed out by the English translator of Simone Weil's meditations on this concept, who finally decided to use, throughout his translation, the totally inadequate English word *affliction* (Weil 1972:63). One might add that the French *bonheur* does not have a counterpart in English either, as the English *happiness* is a kind of antonym of *sadness*, whereas *bonheur* can by no stretch of imagination be regarded an antonym of *tristesse*, the closest French counterpart of *sadness* (see Wierzbicka, in press, forthcoming).

In a sense, all words in all languages are like the French *malheur*, that is, unrenderable (without distortion) in some other languages of the world. In another sense, however, there are words that – unlike *malheur* – do have counterparts in all the languages of the world. At least such is my hypothesis. If somebody finds it inherently implausible and unacceptable, I am happy to offer it for consideration in a milder, less provocative form: some concepts are less language-specific than others; what we should search for is a set of concepts that comes as close as possible to the ideal (and perhaps unattainable) set of concepts that are lexically encoded in all the languages of the world.

Having searched for such a set for many years, by trial and error, I now propose a set of what I regard at this stage to be the most likely candidates. They are (putting them in groups of roughly comparable elements):

Pronouns: *I, you, someone, something*;

Determiners: *this, the same, two, all*;

Classifiers: *kind of, part of*;

Modals: *can, if/imagine, don't want/no*;

Predicates: *want, say, think, know, do, happen, good, bad, big, small*;

Place and time: *place (where), time (when), after (under)*;

Linkers: *like, because*;

Intensifier: *very*.

A Latin version of the same conceptual set would be:

Pronouns: *ego, tu, quis, quid*;

Determiners: *hic, ipse, duo, omnis*;

Classifiers: *genus, pars*;
 Modals: *potest, si, nolle/non*;
 Predicates: *velle, dicere, cogitare, scire, facere, fieri, bonus, malus, magnus, parvus*;
 Place and Time: *locus (ubi), tempus (quando), post (sub)*;
 Linkers: *sicut, propter(ea)*;
 Intensifier: *valde*.

The Russian version:

Pronouns: *ja, ty, kto-to, čto-to*;
 Determiners: *ètot, totže, dva, vse*;
 Classifiers: *rod, čast'*;
 Modals: *možet, esli, ne xotet' (net)*;
 Predicates: *xotet', skazat', dumat', znat', delat', proixodit', xcrošij, ploxoj, bol'soj, malen'kij*;
 Place and Time: *mesto (gde), vremja (kogda), posle, pod*;
 Linkers: *kak/tak, iz-za (togo)*;
 Intensifier: *očen'*.

And, finally, the Japanese version:

Pronouns: *ore, kimi, dareka, nanika*;
 Determiners: *kore/kono, onaji, ni futa, mina*;
 Classifiers: *donna, bubun*;
 Modals: *dekiru/-rareru, V-eba, iie*;
 Predicates: *hoshii/-tai, iu, omou, shitte iru, suru, okoru, ii, warui, ookii, chiisai*;
 Place and Time: *tokoro (doko), toki (itsu), (V-te) kara, shita*;
 Linkers: *doo/yoo, (V-) kara*;
 Intensifier: *taihen*.

To anyone familiar with the four languages in question, it will be perfectly clear that the elements of the four sets can by no means be regarded as fully equivalent (if only because they can have different patterns of polysemy; the equivalence postulated here concerns only one meaning of each indefinable, not all its different meanings, if it has more than one). Nevertheless, I suggest that these four sets may be isomorphic in the way the vocabulary of emotions, kitchen utensils, cooking verbs, or speech act verbs is not. (For justification and further discussion, see Wierzbicka 1989a, 1988b, 1991a, 1991b.)

The isomorphism postulated here does not mean that the words realizing the primitives in different languages behave grammatically in the same way; in particular, that they have to belong to the same word classes.

For example, the primitive KNOW can be realized by means of an adjective, as in the Australian Aboriginal language Yankunytjatjara, rather than as a verb, as in English. In Yankunytjatjara, one says something like 'I [am]

knowing this', rather than 'I know this' (Goddard 1987:85). But there is no evidence that a sentence such as

ngayulu ninti *palumpa*
 I-NOM knowing-ADJ this-PURPOSIVE
 'I know this'.

means something specifically different from its English gloss.

Similarly, in Japanese, the primitive WANT is realized not as a verb but as an adjective (*hoshii*) or as an adjectival suffix added to a verb stem (-*tai*).

Watashi mo kasshi ga hoshii desu.
 (to) me, too, cakes are desirable
 'I, too, want some cakes'.

Watashi mo tabetai desu.
 (to) me, too, eating is desirable
 'I, too, want to eat'.

I am not saying that there is no difference between *want* and *hoshii/-tai* or that there is no difference between *know* and *ninti*. I am only saying that they occupy the same position within their respective versions of the natural semantic metalanguage, and that they can be semantically matched on this basis. Neither *want* nor *hoshii/-tai* (or *know* and *ninti*) can be further defined within the hypothesized minilanguages to which they belong. They can serve as extremely useful and versatile building blocks in terms of which hundreds (if not thousands) of other meanings can be analyzed in an illuminating and intuitively convincing way.

This is different, for example, from the nonequivalence of the English *you* and the Japanese *anata*, because the latter, but not the former, *can* be further defined within the Japanese semantic systems (roughly, along the lines of 'you; I want to say something good about you').

It should also be pointed out that the morphological complexity (or apparent complexity) of a word does not preclude it from being semantically simple. This is best illustrated with the English words *someone* and *something*, which from a semantic point of view are elementary and cannot be analyzed into *some + one* or *some + thing* ('something' ≠ 'some thing').

Likewise, as argued by Goddard (1990), the fact that the Yankunytjatjara word *mukuringayi* 'want' appears to include the inchoative suffix -*ri*, which is also included in all the Yankunytjatjara emotion words, does not preclude this word from being semantically simple and thus realizing the universal semantic primitive WANT. Similarly, the fact that in Japanese the verbal phrase *shitte imasu* 'know' is formally more complex than, and incorporates a form of, the verb *shiru* 'to get to know' does not preclude the former from being semantically simple and realizing the universal semantic primitive KNOW. To gloss the phrase *shitte imasu* as 'to be in a state of having found out', as its form would suggest, would be just as incorrect as to identify

something with *some thing*. To show this, one example suffices. When one says, for example,

Watashi wa sore ga doko ni aru ka shitte imasu – jibun de soko ni oitakara.

I know where it is because I put it there myself.

one can hardly mean ‘I am in the state of having found out where it is because I put it there myself’; one can only mean ‘I know where it is because I put it there myself’. Meanings cannot be discovered on the basis of formal relationships alone; their identification requires, above all, semantic tests and semantic evidence.

SEMANTIC EQUIVALENCE VERSUS PRAGMATIC EQUIVALENCE

If there are scholars who – like the ordinary monolingual person – believe that most words in one language have exact semantic equivalents in other languages, there are also those who believe that *no* words in one language can have exact equivalents in many other languages, let alone in all the languages of the world. For example, they say, there are languages that have no personal pronouns, no words for “you” or “I.” Japanese is sometimes cited as an example of this. However, this is a fallacy, not a fact. The truth of the matter is that, for cultural reasons, Japanese speakers try to avoid *the use* of personal pronouns (Barnlund 1975). It is customary not to refer overtly to “you” and “I” in Japanese, and the language has developed a wealth of devices that allow its speakers to avoid such overt reference, without producing any misunderstandings. For example, there are certain verbs in Japanese (so-called honorific verbs) that are never used with respect to the speaker; and there are “humble,” self-deprecating verbs that are never used with respect to the addressee. The use of such verbs often sufficiently identifies the person spoken about as to make an overt reference to “you” and “I” unnecessary. But the words for “you” and “I” do exist and *can* be used when it is necessary or desired.

A language may not make a distinction that would correspond to that between the words “he” and “she,” and many languages (e.g., Turkish) have just one word for “he” and “she,” undifferentiated for sex. But no known language fails to make a distinction between the speaker and the addressee, that is, between “you” and “I.”

This does not mean that the range of use of the words for “you” and “I” is the same in all languages. For example, in Japanese, the word *ore*, which Japanese–English dictionaries gloss as ‘I’, has a range of use incomparably more narrow than the word *I* has in English. Thus, in a recent study of the use of the first and second person pronouns (Kurokawa 1972), it was found that none of the women in the sample used *ore*, whereas 90 percent of the men did – along with *boku* (100%), *watashi* (80%), *watakushi* (50%), and *atashi* (80%). It was also found that

the pronoun *ore* ‘I’ is often used among male adult speakers only in such very informal occasions as between two close friends and at home. It is not an exaggeration to say that in many elementary schools the use of this pronoun *ore* is discouraged by the teacher. . . . This pronoun is almost never introduced in texts for an elementary, or an intermediate, Japanese course for English speaking students. (Kurokawa 1972:231)

The survey also shows that “men use *ore* more frequently when talking with their wives than when talking with their parents: 44% versus 33%” (1972: 232).

What does *ore* mean, then? It may be considered rude for a child to use *ore* to other children at school, but *ore* cannot mean ‘I + disrespect’, because if it did it would not be permissible for a man to use it when speaking to his parents. This suggests that *ore* means simply ‘I’ – and that there are no invariant semantic components that could be always attributed to it other than ‘I’. The heavy restrictions on its use must therefore be attributed to cultural rather than semantic factors. In a society where references to oneself are in many situations expected to be accompanied by expressions of humility or deference, a bare “I” becomes pragmatically marked, and it must be interpreted as either very intimate or very rude. But this pragmatic markedness should not be confused with demonstrable semantic complexity.

Above all, it should be pointed out that words such as the Japanese *ore* ‘I’ or *kimi* ‘you’ (or French *tu* or German *du*) cannot be further defined within the languages to which they belong. Even if someone insisted that words of this kind could be defined via English, for example, along the following lines:

<i>ore</i>	‘I’	I don’t have to show respect for you
<i>kimi</i> (<i>tu</i> , <i>du</i>)	‘you’	I don’t have to show respect for you

explications of this kind could not be translated into Japanese, French, or German without regressus ad infinitum (what words would be used for “you” and “I” in the explication?). We have to conclude, therefore, that words of this kind are semantic primitives of the languages in question. To say that they are not semantic primitives but that their inherent complexity can be shown only via definitions phrased in English, not in the languages to which they belong, would be a case of blatant ethnocentrism. However, because these primitives (of the Japanese, French, or German language) can be matched semantically across language boundaries, we can acknowledge their analogous (indefinable) position within the language systems to which they belong by calling them universal semantic primitives and by equating them in semantic explications – despite the huge cultural differences reflected in their different frequency and different range of use. (For further discussion, see Wierzbicka 1989a, 1989b, 1991a, 1991b.)

If we were asked, then, if there is a culturally neutral medium of expres-

sion, we would have to reply: no, there is not. But if the question was, Is there a culturally neutral medium of semantic analysis? we could reply in the affirmative, because the natural semantic metalanguage provides such a medium. For example, Goddard (1990) and Ameka (1990) offered explications of Yankunytjatjara (Australian) and Ewe (West African) emotion terms, phrased in the Yankunytjatjara and Ewe versions of the natural semantic metalanguage, as well as isomorphic explications in English (or rather, in the English version of the same metalanguage). It is this direct intertranslatability of explications that is the ultimate guarantee of the language-independent and culturally neutral nature of the natural semantic metalanguage.

AMAE

According to Doi (1981:169), *amae* is “a peculiarly Japanese emotion,” although it has “universal relevance.” It is “a thread that runs through all the various activities of Japanese society” (1981:26). It represents “the true essence of Japanese psychology” and is “a key concept for understanding Japanese personality structure” (1981:21). It is also a concept that provides “an important key to understanding the psychological differences between Japan and Western countries” (Doi 1974:310).

But what exactly is *amae*? Doi was convinced that there was no single word in English (or in other European languages) equivalent to it, a fact that “the Japanese find . . . hard to believe” (1974:308). Nonetheless, in his writings, Doi offered innumerable clues that enable us to construct an English version of the concept of *amae* – not in a single word, of course, but in an explication. Doi devoted an entire book (Doi 1981) to the elucidation of this concept and its ramifications, and in the decade that followed the publication of this book, numerous other authors tried to elaborate on Doi’s analysis.

Doi (1974:307) explained that “*amae* is the noun form of *amaeru*, an intransitive verb which means ‘to depend and presume upon another’s benevolence’.” It indicates “helplessness and the desire to be loved” (1981:22). The adjective *amai* means ‘sweet’, both with reference to taste and with reference to human relations: “if A is said to be *amai* to B, it means that he allows B to *amaeru*, i.e., to behave self-indulgently, presuming on some special relationship that exists between the two” (1981:29).

Amaeru can also be defined “by a combination of words such as ‘wish to be loved’ and ‘dependency needs’” (1974:309). The Japanese dictionary *Daigekan* defines *amae* as “to lean on a person’s good will” (Doi 1981:72) or “to depend on another’s affection” (1981:167). Other dictionary glosses include ‘to act lovingly towards [as a much fondled child towards its parents]’, ‘to presume upon’, ‘to take advantage of’ (*Brinkley’s*); ‘to behave like a spoilt child’, ‘be coquettish’, ‘trespass on’, ‘take advantage of’, ‘behave in a caressing manner towards a man’; ‘to speak in a coquettish tone’, ‘encroach

on [one's kindness, good nature, etc.]' (*Takenobu*); 'presume on another's love', 'be coquettish', 'coax' (*Kenkyusha's*), and so on.

Morsbach and Tyler (1986), who analyzed 15 passages from Japanese literature referring to *amae*, used in their translations of these passages the following English glosses: 'take advantage of', 'play baby', 'make up to [someone] and get their sympathy', 'coax', 'act spoilt', and so on. Morsbach and Tyler (1986:300) commented on the use of *amae* in these passages as follows: "As these fifteen examples illustrate, *amae* has a variety of meanings centering around passive dependency needs in hierarchical relationships." But the term "hierarchical relationship" seems misleading. For example, it does not seem to fit the popular song (quoted by the authors) in which a female singer is asking her lover to permit her to *amaeru* to him: On the day / we are finally one / hug me, / hug me, / and you'll let me play baby, won't you? Morsbach and Tyler pointed out "that at the time this song was popular there were no less than three pop tunes in which the word *amaeru* was used" (296).

Many scholars link the importance of *amae* in Japanese culture with specific features of Japanese social structures. For example, De Vos (1985:160) wrote:

In the traditional Japanese system there were no "rights" on the part of the subordinate. The only recourse for subordinates in the past, since they had no contractual relationships, was to hope to induce kindness and benevolence in their superiors. These feelings were induced by invoking potential feelings of nurturance and appreciation from them. This capacity to induce kindness and benevolence in superiors in a manipulative manner is called *amaeru* in Japanese.

This is helpful, but not entirely satisfactory either. In particular, the term "superior" has all the disadvantages of the term "hierarchical," and the term "manipulative" carries with it a negative value judgment and reflects a Western perspective.

But the most useful clue to the concept of *amae* is provided by the reference to the prototype on which this concept is based – a prototype that is not difficult to guess. "It is obvious that the psychological prototype of *amae* lies in the psychology of the infant in its relationship to its mother"; "not a newborn infant, but an infant who has already realized "that its mother exists independently of itself." "As its mind develops it gradually realises that itself and its mother are independent existences, and comes to feel the mother as something indispensable to itself; it is the craving for close contact thus developed that constitutes, one might say, *amae*" (Doi 1981:74).

This is the prototype. But – according to Doi – in Japan, the kind of relationship based on this prototype provides a model of human relationships in general.

The Japanese term **AMAE** refers, initially, to the feelings that all normal infants at the breast harbour towards the mother – dependence, the desire to be passively loved, the unwillingness to be separated from the warm mother-child circle and cast into a world of objective “reality.” It is Dr. Doi’s basic premise that in a Japanese these feelings are somehow prolonged into and diffused throughout his adult life, so that they come to shape, to a greater extent than in adults in the West, his whole attitude to other people and to “reality.” (Bester 1981:8)

Gibney (1975:119) elaborated on this theme as follows:

The Japanese have their own word for extreme dependency, which has a simple equivalent in no other language. The word *amaeru* is related to the word *amai* (“sweet”). It means literally, “to presume on the affections of someone close to you.” When the Japanese say someone is *amaete iru*, or in extreme cases, an *amaembo*, they mean that the person in question has an excessive need to be catered to, protected, or indulged, but not by just anybody. The person you depend on, the object of your passive *amae* is invariably your senior. He may be your father or your older brother or sister (the case of the dependent member of the family, who sponges on his relatives from cradle to grave, is familiar enough in any society). But he may just as well be your section head at the office, the leader of your local political faction, or simply a fellow struggler down life’s byways who happened to be one or two years ahead of you at school or the university. . . . The *amae* syndrome is pervasive in Japan.

But although *amae* is by no means restricted to family relationships, it is generally agreed that extrafamilial *amae* relationships are perceived in terms of a metaphor based on the relationship between parent and child.

The leader’s responsibility for attending to the needs and wants of those under him is indeed great. In return for the *amae* he satisfies and indulges, he exacts strong loyalty. He gets a big press, in a society which prefers people to principles more than most. He is constantly deferred to. One goes back again to the prototype of the *oyabun* (“the boss,” “the parent”) and the *kobun* (“the child,” “the follower”). (Gibney 1975:164)

The *kobun* depends on and counts on the *oyabun*’s goodwill – a goodwill that is expected to be unconditional, like a mother’s love.

De Vos – who compared the role of the *amae*-senior to that of a rabbi in Jewish society – emphasized in particular the unconditional character of *amae*.

Basically, a Japanese expects his rabbi (who can be an older relative, someone who graduated from his college a year or two earlier, a corporate superior or the leader of a political clique) to help him cope with all of life’s challenges – emotional, social and economic. The rabbi may well arrange

his protégé's marriage; he will certainly give counsel on all sorts of personal problems and, above all, intercede with the powers-that-be to get the younger man promotions and to advance his career ambitions generally. But in sharp departure from the usual situation in the United States, a protégé in Japan does not necessarily feel obliged to justify such intercessions in his behalf by performing his job with uncommon competence or even by effective office politicking in support of his rabbi. All he feels his rabbi can legitimately expect of him is that he be loyal, sincere and dutiful. Mama, after all, did what she did out of love and not – ostensibly at least – because she expected any payback. (De Vos 1985:169)

On the basis of these and other similar clues, we can explicate the concept of *amae* as follows:

amae

- (a) X thinks something like this:
- (b) Y feels something good toward me
- (c) Y wants to do good things for me
- (d) when I am with Y nothing bad can happen to me
- (e) I don't have to do anything because of this
- (f) I want to be with Y
- (g) X feels something because of this

Doi stressed that *amae* presupposes conscious awareness. The subcomponent “X thinks something like this . . .” reflects this. The presumption of a special relationship is reflected in the component “Y feels something good toward me.” The implication of self-indulgence is rooted in the emotional security of someone who knows that he or she is loved: “it is an emotion that takes the other person’s love for granted” (Doi 1981:168). This is accounted for by the combination of components: “Y feels something good toward me,” “Y wants to do good things for me,” and “when I am with Y nothing bad can happen to me.” The component “I don’t have to do anything because of this” reflects the passive attitude of an *amae*-junior, who does not have to earn the mother-figure’s goodwill and protection by any special actions.

What are the reasons for “the prominence of *amae* in Japanese society” (Doi 1981:173)? According to Doi himself (1981:16), and to a number of other observers of Japanese society, this is linked with an “affirmative attitude toward the spirit of dependence on the part of the Japanese.” Murase (1984:319) pointed out that “Unlike Westerners, Japanese children are not encouraged from an early age to emphasise individual independence or autonomy. They are brought up in a more or less ‘interdependent’ or *amae* culture. . . .” He contrasted the Western culture, which he called “ego culture,” with the Japanese culture, which he called “*sunao* culture,” where *sunao* – like *amae* – symbolizes “trustful relationships” fostering “openness and dependence” (1984:325). He also cited some other key words (besides *amae*) that “have been proposed as representing the essential nature of Japanese cul-

ture" and noted that they all point in the same direction: "empathy culture" (Minamoto 1969), "maternal principle" (Kawai 1976), "egg without eggshell" (Mori 1977), and so on.

According to Murase (1984:327), the Western ego culture is individual-centered, and the personality type it promotes is "autonomous," "self-expanding," "harsh and solid," "strong," "competitive," "active, assertive, and aggressive." By contrast, the Japanese *sunao* culture is "relationship-oriented," and the personality type it promotes is "dependent," "humble," "self-limiting," "mild and tender," "flexible and adaptable," "harmonious," "passive, obedient, and non-aggressive." The relationships fostered by the ego culture are "contractual," whereas the relationships fostered by the *sunao* culture are "unconditional." Murase linked this with the prevalence of the maternal principle in Japan as against the prevalence of the paternal principle in the West. He also stressed such specifically Japanese values as "adaptation through accommodation," "conformity, or the merging of self and other," "a naive, trusting and empathic relationship with others," "obedience and docility" ("without the negative connotation in English"), and – again and again – "dependence."

It seems that these features of Japanese culture are indeed highly consistent with the prominence of the feelings of trustful dependence elucidated by Doi (1974, 1981). I hope that the explication of this crucial concept proposed here can help to make it a little more intelligible to the cultural outsider (see also Hanrahan 1989).

ENRYO

Enryo is a word that expresses one of the greatest Japanese cultural values. It is frequently translated into English as 'reserve' or 'restraint', but Japanese–English dictionaries assign to it a bewildering variety of other English glosses. These include, in addition to 'reserve' and 'restraint', 'constraint', 'diffidence', 'coyness', 'discretion', 'hesitation' (*Takenobu*); 'reservation', 'deference', 'regard' (*Kenkyusha's*); 'ceremony', 'modesty', 'shyness' (*Takehara*); 'backwardness' (*Brinkley's*), and so on. On the other hand, the English words offered in such lists as suitable glosses for *enryo* themselves are hardly ever matched with *enryo* in the opposite direction, that is in English–Japanese dictionaries. (As a rare exception to this, Hyōjun Rōmaji Kai [1976] glossed the English phrase "stand on ceremony" as *enryo suru*, that is, 'do *enryo*').

It seems clear, therefore, that in trying to understand the concept of *enryo*, we cannot rely on any global English equivalents, because there simply are none. On the other hand, the literature on Japanese culture and society abounds in analytical comments on this concept, and these can be very helpful. For example, Lebra (1976:29) offered the following comment: "Pressure

for conformity often results in a type of self-restraint called *enryo*, refraining from expressing disagreement with whatever appears to be the majority's opinion." In a similar vein, Smith (1983:83) remarked: "Japanese children generally employ no self-referents at all in ordinary speech. It is also the case that a person is generally expected to call as little attention to himself as possible. The word most commonly used in this connection is *enryo*, 'restraint' or 'reserve'. One way to express *enryo* is to avoid giving opinions. . . ."

Many students of Japan have pointed out that this avoidance of giving opinions is often a major obstacle in business negotiations between the Japanese and Westerners. For example, Reischauer (1988:137) observed:

To Americans the Japanese style of negotiation can be confusing and even maddening, just as our style can seem blunt and threatening to them. An American businessman may state his case clearly from the start and in maximal terms for bargaining purposes. The Japanese may be appalled at this as an opening gambit, wondering what more the American may really have in mind. And the American in turn may feel that the cautious indirection of the Japanese is not only unrevealing but also smacks of deceit.

Reischauer (1988:138) also noted that the Japanese often find Westerners "immature" because of the frankness with which they express their opinions.

But whereas the Japanese tend to refrain from expressing their opinions in general, there is an even stronger tendency to refrain from expressing dissenting opinions – and not only when one disagrees with "what appears to be the majority's opinion," but also when one disagrees with one's addressee in general, whoever they might be.

For example, Smith (1983:44) commented: "the Japanese are at pains to avoid contention and confrontation . . . much of the definition of a 'good person' involves restraint in the expression of personal desires and opinions." This culturally endorsed restraint in the expression of opinions can be represented as follows:

X thinks: I can't say: "I think this, I don't think this"

The subcomponent "I think this" stands here for freely volunteered opinions, whereas "I don't think this" applies, in particular, to dissent.

But this is only one aspect of *enryo*. As the quote from Smith's discussion of this concept suggests, *enryo* concerns not only people's personal opinions, but also their desires, their preferences, their wishes. It calls for a self-effacement or an apparent self-effacement that would stop people from saying clearly not only what they think, but also what they want. As Smith (1983:87) pointed out, to show *enryo* one is expected not only to refrain from expressing one's opinions, but also to "sidestep choices when they are offered. As a matter of fact, choices are less often offered in Japan than in

the United States." In this connection, Smith quoted Japanese psychiatrist Takeo Doi's account of the strain he experienced on a visit to the United States, where he was constantly offered choices.

Another thing that made me nervous was the custom whereby an American host will ask a guest, before a meal, whether he would prefer a strong or a soft drink. Then, if the guest asks for liquor, he will ask him whether, for example, he prefers scotch or bourbon. When the guest has made this decision, he next has to give instructions as to how much he wishes to drink, and how he wants it served. With the main meal, fortunately, one has only to eat what one is served, but once it is over one has to choose whether to take coffee or tea, and – in greater detail – whether one wants it with sugar, milk, and so on . . . I couldn't care less. (Doi 1981:12)

Smith commented:

The strain must have been considerable, for in Japan, by contrast, the host, having carefully considered what is most likely to please this particular guest, will simply place before him a succession of an overwhelming number of items of food and drink, all of which he is urged to consume, in the standard phrase, "without *enryo*." It is incumbent on the guest to eat and drink at least part of everything offered him, whether or not he likes the particular item, in order not to give offence by appearing to rebuke his host for miscalculating what would please him. (Smith 1983:87)

A similar point was made by Morsbach and Tyler (1986:304), who linked the Anglo-American cultural emphasis on personal choice with the Protestant tradition, and who contrasted the Anglo-American attitude to personal choice with the Japanese one.

It is this particular insistence on individual choice (perhaps largely due to the basically Protestant heritage) that de-emphasizes emotional dependence in the Anglo-American culture which most readers basically accept as the norm. Whereas it is regarded as polite in Western society to present a visitor with as large a choice as possible when offering, say food or drink, it is thought far more polite for the Japanese host to pre-select what his/her guest is likely to want. A dialogue such as the one described in Kingsley Amis's *The Anti-Death League* (set in England) would tend to embarrass the guest if he were a Japanese, whereas in its Western setting it is a ritual absolved with ease by most hosts and guests:

"Now," said Dr. Best, "what's it to be? Sherry or Martini?"
 "Sherry, please," said Leonard.
 "Manzilla, fino or amontillado?"
 "Amontillado, please?"

JAPANESE KEY WORDS AND CORE CULTURAL VALUES

"Pedro Domeq or Harvey's?"
"Harvey's, please."
"A lot or a little?"
"A little please." (Amis 1966:156)

Dialogues of this kind go against the grain of Japanese cultural norms because they are inconsistent with *enryo*. Because Japanese culture places a taboo on direct expression of one's wishes, it is culturally inappropriate to ask other people directly what they want. "Brutal," direct questions such as "do you want X or Y?" force the addressee to violate *enryo*. In Anglo-American culture, they are "polite" and solicitous, but they are out of place in Japanese culture, with its emphasis on *enryo*. Thus, Mizutani and Mizutani (1987:48) stated:

Asking someone's wishes directly is also impolite in Japanese. Saying things like

*Nani-o tabetai-desu-ka. (What do you want to eat?)
*Nani-ga hoshii desu-ka. (What do you want to have?)

should be limited to one's family or close friends. . . . To be polite, one should ask for instructions rather than directly inquire into someone's wishes.

The same cultural constraint prevents people in Japan from clearly stating their preferences, even in response to direct questions. As Mizutani and Mizutani (1987:117-18) pointed out, many Japanese, when asked about their convenience, decline to state it, saying instead, for example, "any time will do," "any time will be all right with me." "In actuality, one cannot always agree to what another person wishes, and one will then have to state one's own convenience anyway, but it is regarded as childish to immediately start stating one's own convenience when asked" (ibid.).

To account for this aspect of *enryo* we add to its explication the following component:

X thinks: I can't say: "I want this, I don't want this"

The Japanese tendency to shrink from saying what one wants or what one does not want is sometimes attributed to excessive shyness and uneasiness in relations with nonintimates. For example, Reischauer (1988:147) wrote: "Each Japanese seems to be constantly worrying about what the other person thinks of him. He tends to be painfully shy in many of his personal relations and bound down by *enryo*, 'reserve' or 'constraint'. One of the commonest polite phrases is 'please do not have *enryo*', but it seems to have little effect."

Other writers interpret *enryo* as, above all, a form of social ritual. For example, Honna and Hoffer (1989:132) defined this concept as follows:

Enryo, or holding back, is a form of politeness, a device for maintaining a certain distance from those one does not know well or one considers as one's superiors. . . .

Since aggressiveness and frankness are considered rather negatively in Japanese social etiquette, it is graceful to behave in a "holding back" way. For example, when they are offered a drink or food, it is courteous to refuse what is offered at least once in order to show that they are "holding back," that is, they are polite.

But whether in any particular case *enryo* is due primarily to culturally induced "shyness" or to "courtesy" or "politeness," it appears that the primary motivation implied by the word itself can be identified as a desire not to hurt, offend, inconvenience, or embarrass anybody. This can be generalized in the form of the following semantic component:

Someone could feel something bad because of this

Lebra (1976:71-72) commented on this aspect of *enryo* as follows:

the virtue of *enryo*, 'self-restraint', is exercised not only to respond to group pressure for conformity but to avoid causing displeasure for others, regardless of their group membership. . . . The imposition of self-restraint to avoid hurting Alter's feelings . . . can reach an extreme that reveals immaturity even to most Japanese. The individual may acquiesce in the face of an intrusion on his rights or autonomy only because he is reluctant to offend another person by claiming his right.

It seems that the term "Alter" used here by Lebra is perhaps too restrictive. The 'self-restraint' of *enryo* can be motivated not only by a concern for other people, but also by a concern for oneself. Refraining from saying what one wants one can protect oneself from embarrassment or from a loss of face (Zimmerman 1988:65-66). In fact, Lebra herself suggested in a different context that *enryo* can be aimed at preventing Ego's own "bad feelings," not just those of Alter's:

Enryo, social self-restraint, is a product of the suppression of individuality under the pressure of group solidarity and conformity, empathetic considerations for Alter's convenience or comfort, concern to prevent Ego's own embarrassment, and the wish to maintain Ego's freedom by avoiding social involvement without hurting Alter. Both achievement and *enryo* contain two mutually opposed motivations, altruistic and egoistic; the same style of behavior, in other words, can satisfy two or more, often contradictory, desires. (1976:252)

It seems that the formula “someone could feel something bad because of this” accounts for both the “altruistic” and the “egoistic” dimensions of *enryo*. It invites the inference that the speaker is concerned about someone else’s feelings, but it does not exclude the possibility that the speaker is really trying to avoid any “bad feelings” for himself or herself.

I think that this vague, open-ended phrasing (“someone could feel something bad because of this”) also accords well with the very wide range of situations to which *enryo* can apply, and with the wide range of its possible functions – features that are also explicitly emphasized in Lebra’s discussion. For example:

The more obtrusive Ego’s behavior is, the more liable Ego is to lose face or to injure Alter’s face. Cultural wisdom encourages Ego to be unobtrusive. Modesty and subtle refinement can thus be considered necessary qualities to display to defend face. Even shyness, bashfulness, or anticipatory embarrassment may be viewed as defensive in this light. Humility, besides being a virtue, is a social weapon to defend one’s own and another’s face. *Enryo* refers to the restraint Ego imposes upon himself in interaction with Alter when he is offered help, a treat, a gift, and the like. The same term describes both polite hesitation to accept a desired offer and polite refusal of an undesired offer. Thus, Alter does not always know how to take Ego’s expression of *enryo*. Since *enryo* refers to polite hesitation in most instances, Alter is generally supposed to keep insisting that his offer be accepted. (1976:125)

Another aspect of Lebra’s remarks has to do with her somewhat skeptical or even critical tone, highlighted by her use of the word *immaturity*. This is in contrast to her other comments on *enryo*, such as the following: “Lack of aggression . . . can be taken as the very sign of maturity and humanness if considered in the light of empathetic consideration and self-restraint practiced so as not to offend others” (1976:41). A number of other Japanese scholars have displayed a similarly ambivalent attitude toward *enryo* as a cultural value and pointed to the difficulties it creates for the Japanese in contact with Westerners. For example, Suzuki (1986:157) stated:

We, used to assimilation and dependency, expect to project ourselves onto the other, and expect him to empathise with us. We have great difficulty with the idea that so long as our addressee is not Japanese we can’t expect to have our position understood without strong self-assertion. But establishing our own viewpoint or position before our addressee has understood is not our forte. . . . So when Japanese, who aren’t good at foreign languages, don’t show their true ability in international conferences and scholarly meetings, it is less because of their language skills than because of the

weak development of the will to express themselves linguistically to sufficient degree. It lies furthermore in the underdeveloped ability to stand apart from the position taken by another and at least assert oneself to the extent of saying, 'This is where I stand at this moment'.

It seems, however, that the concept of *enryo* as such is neither negative nor positive, and that it lends itself to both negative and positive uses.

Dictionary glosses such as 'discretion' or 'modesty' suggest a positive evaluation, and so does the fact that the phrase *enryo naku* – literally, 'without enryo' – is often glossed negatively (e.g., 'boldly', 'bluntly', 'ruthlessly' (*Kenkyusha's*); 'boldly', 'bluntly', 'pitilessly', 'indelicately' (*Takenobu*)). On the other hand, the fact that people can be encouraged, cordially, to behave 'without enryo' (e.g., to eat and drink 'without enryo') suggests that a positive evaluation is not part of the semantic invariant.

To account for all these different features of *enryo*, I propose the following explication:

enryo

- (a) X thinks something like this:
- (b) I can't say to this person:
- (c) "I want this, I don't want this"
- (d) "I think this, I don't think this"
- (e) someone could feel something bad because of this
- (f) someone could think something bad about me because of this
- (g) X doesn't say things like this because of this
- (h) X doesn't do some things because of this

Component (a) shows that *enryo* is a conscious, or semiconscious, attitude, based on certain thoughts; (b) shows the perceived need for self-restraint in a particular relationship; (c) shows that this self-restraint can apply to one's wants; (d) shows that it can apply to the expression of opinions; (e) accounts for the fear of hurting or embarrassing someone; (f) accounts for the link between *enryo* and 'face'; and (g) and (h) show that *enryo* manifests itself in people's behavior, both verbal (g) and nonverbal (h).

Going back now to the list of dictionary glosses (while keeping this explication in mind), it is easy to understand their heterogeneity. They are different from one another because they do not capture the concept as such, but, for the most part, the different likely motivations of the behavior in question. For example, 'deference' and 'regard' are not part of the meaning of *enryo* as such, but given Japanese cultural attitudes, it is also easy to see why concepts of this kind can easily come to mind as a likely motivation of an *enryo* type of behavior. The same kind of behavior, however, can be motivated by shyness or diffidence – again, traits extrinsic to *enryo* as such, but that can be naturally associated with it. The same applies to 'discretion', 'ceremony', 'modesty', and the other glosses usually offered by dictionaries. It seems that the explication proposed here makes sense of all such associa-

tions. At the same time, it presents *enryo* as a unified Japanese concept, and it shows explicitly how it is related to some basic features of Japanese culture and society.

WA

When we trace . . . the progress of our history, what we always find there is the spirit of harmony. Harmony is a product of the great achievements of the founding of the nation, and is the power behind our historical growth; while it is also a humanitarian Way inseparable from our daily lives . . . our country makes harmony its fundamental Way. Herein indeed lies the reason why the ideologies of our nation are different from those of the nations of the West. (*Kokutai no Hongi* 1949:93)

According to all students of Japan (writing in English) “the key Japanese value is harmony” (Reischauer 1988:136); and when they say “harmony” they really mean not *harmony* but *wa*. (Significantly, English–Japanese dictionaries never gloss *harmony* as ‘wa’, although Japanese–English dictionaries do gloss *wa* as ‘harmony’.)

Rohlen (1974), the author of an ethnography of a Japanese bank, used the company motto, “*wa to chikara*” (translated as ‘For harmony and strength’), as the title of his book, thus drawing special attention to the importance of *wa* in the Japanese business world. Rohlen commented on the meaning of *wa* as follows (46–47): “This important concept has received little attention from Western scholars, and no succinct expression of its meaning exists in English. . . . The precise sense of this notion is not . . . easily defined. The usual translations of ‘harmony’ or ‘concord’ are inadequate to convey the full sense of the word.”

Whatever *wa* means, all students of Japan agree on its vital importance in Japanese culture. Nakamura (1968:633) quoted in this connection the classical statement from the first article of Prince Shōtoku’s seventh-century constitution, widely regarded as a keystone of Japanese political tradition: “Above all else esteem concord” (that is, *wa* – A. w.).

The prewar nationalist publication, “Principles of the National Polity” (*Kokutai no Hongi*), which I quoted earlier, contrasted Western individualism with the Japanese emphasis on *wa* as a central value (I quote after Kawashima 1967:264):

In individualism there can exist co-operation, compromise, self-sacrifice, and so on, in order to adjust and reduce contradictions and oppositions, but in the final analysis there exists no real harmony (*wa*) . . . the *wa* of our country is not mechanical co-operation, starting from reason, of equal

individuals independent of each other, but the grand harmony (*taiwa*) which maintains its integrity by proper statuses of individuals within the collectivity and by acts in accordance with these statuses. . . . After all, oppositions of opinions, as well as differences of interests deriving from [various] standpoints, are integrated into a unity of grand harmony proper to Japan and originating from a common source. Not conflicts, but harmony is final.

Rohlen (1974:47) stressed the “preeminent position of *wa* in the hierarchy of Japanese values.” He drew attention to the fact that *wa* “is undoubtedly the single most popular component in mottos and names of companies across Japan,” and he generalized: “To achieve *wa* is certainly a major goal for any Japanese group, and it also is an essential ingredient in the attainment of other goals. In this regard, it is something like ‘love’ in American popular culture, for it is both a major means to social improvement and an end in itself” (ibid.). Rohlen illustrated this claim as follows: “The term is also to be found in descriptions of the pleasures of company recreational outings, and the New Year’s greetings from some offices (which the company magazine publishes) show individual pictures of the staff grouped around the character *wa* written large in the center of the design” (ibid.).

So what is *wa*?

Honna and Hoffer (1989:122) wrote: “There is no doubt that harmony within the group is a key value in Japanese society.” This may seem virtually identical to Reischauer’s statement, but in fact there is a difference. Honna and Hoffer did not speak about ‘harmony’ in general but about “harmony within the group.” This points to one of the differences between the English concept of *harmony* and the Japanese concept of *wa*. The way Honna and Hoffer continued the passage in question highlights this difference: “There is no doubt that harmony within the group is a key value in Japanese society, so that Japanese people tend to think and behave as a group. . . . the emphasis on the group often causes a Japanese to refrain from standing up for himself and follow the group instead.” Thus, *wa* – unlike *harmony* – has clear implications of “groupism” and “anti-individualism.” (As has often been pointed out, the only Japanese word for something like “individualism” – *kojinshugi* – is pejorative; see Moeran 1986:75.) Honna and Hoffer (1989) explained: “Conformism fosters a great sense of oneness shared by all the members in the same group. . . . A member who deviates from the group norms or disturbs the group consensus may have to take the risk of being excluded from the group. In fact, there is a Japanese saying which goes, ‘The nail that stands up will be pounded down.’”

In trying to account for the group orientation of *wa*, we could start our explication of this concept as follows:

JAPANESE KEY WORDS AND CORE CULTURAL VALUES

These people think:
we are all like one thing
we all want the same

This formula corresponds very closely to the assessment of the social psychologist De Vos (1985:170): "Japanese organisations are based on the implicit idea that group members are somewhat merged in their collectivity. They share the same goals and have similar implicit interpersonal affective patterns which allow them to work together in harmony without any form of individualistic or 'alien' notions which would break up the basic melded harmony of the group." De Vos' idea of a "merger" of group members is reflected in the component "we are all like one thing," and his idea that group members share the same goals is reflected in the component "we all want the same."

However, there are reasons to think that (as suggested to me by Enoch Iwamoto), *wa* implies not so much a unity that is already there as a unity that is desired and aimed for. This would explain why *wa* is so often used in slogans and mottos, and why it is used by companies rather than by naturally cohesive groups such as families. By appealing to *wa*, company management, coaches of sports teams, and other people responsible for the success of group effort are trying to forge *wa* rather than to acknowledge what is already there. This suggests that it may be more justified to phrase the explication as follows:

These people think:
we are not one thing
we want to be like one thing
we all want the same

It might be added that De Vos' idea of group members being able to work together in harmony suggests one further component: "they can do something (together) because of this." I argue later that some such component is indeed justified. But first, let us return to the Honma and Hoffer passage and to its key terms "conformism" and "consensus."

I believe that *conformism* is not a very helpful word in the present context because it is a culture-laden concept itself, which imposes on a Japanese concept a thoroughly non-Japanese perspective. But the word *consensus* is more helpful, because it is more readily replaceable with a culture-free formula along the lines of what we have already proposed for *enryo*:

We don't want this:
one of us says: "I want this"
another one says: "I don't want this"

According to all students of Japan, the role of consensus in Japanese culture can hardly be overestimated, and it is clearly a concept highly relevant

to *wa*. Reischauer (1988:136) made the following interesting comment in this regard:

they seek to achieve [harmony – A. w.] by a subtle process of mutual understanding, almost by intuition, rather than by a sharp analysis of conflicting views or by clear-cut decisions, whether made by one-man dictates or majority votes. Decisions, they feel, should not be left up to any one person but should be arrived at by consultations and committee work. Consensus is the goal – a general agreement as to the sense of the meeting, to which no one continues to hold strong objections. One-man decrees, regardless of that man's authority, are resented, and even close majority decisions by vote leave the Japanese unsatisfied.

It is worth noting in this connection that dictionaries often gloss *wa* not only as ‘harmony’, but also as ‘peace’ and ‘unity’. ‘Peace’ implies an absence of overt conflict and confrontation (that is, an absence of a situation where one person says, “I want this,” and another, “I don't want this”); and ‘unity’ implies that “we are all like one thing” and “we all want the same.”

To quote Reischauer once more:

Through consensus decisions achieved by negotiation and compromise, they tend to avoid the losses of open conflict and much of the wasteful friction produced by litigation, to which Americans are so prone. They also build up a solidarity that is invaluable both to small groups and to the nation as a whole. Japanese business prowess depends heavily upon this solidarity, and group identification lies at the heart of their national strength. (1988:139)

The point about the relative absence of litigation in Japan is worth noting, as this aspect of Japanese society has always intrigued and fascinated Western observers. It seems clear that this absence of litigation is linked to the core value of *wa*, as has indeed been argued by Kawashima (quoted in Smith 1983:41): “it is the concern for harmony that lies at the heart of the avoidance of litigation, which is unacceptable in that it ‘presupposes and admits the existence of a dispute and leads to a decision which makes it clear who is right or wrong in accordance with standards that are independent of the wills of the disputants’.” Smith (*ibid.*) also quoted in this connection another Japanese scholar's – Ono Seichiro – definition of *wa*: “Harmony [that is, *wa* – A. w.] consists in *not making* distinctions; if a distinction between good and bad can be made, then there *wa* does not exist.”

This brings us to another aspect of *wa*, which was best elucidated by Smith himself. In particular, Smith cited (1983:50) a most illuminating article from the American magazine *Sports Illustrated*, entitled “You've Got to Have *Wa*,” which discusses some characteristic features of Japanese baseball.

the piece deals with the impact of the concept of *wa* on American players who have been hired by Japanese teams. From this admirable essay, consider the following passage: “If you ask a Japanese manager what he considers the most important ingredient of a winning team, he would most likely answer, *wa*. If you ask him how to knock a team’s *wa* awry, he’d probably say, ‘Hire an American.’” (Whiting 1979:61)

Smith implied that the most important ingredients of a Japanese winning team include not only a sense of group unity, a shared goal, and an absence of internal conflict, but also no visible desire for individual success as opposed to group success – no desire for individual stardom, no desire for open distinctions between good and not so good members of the team. One must recall in this connection the Japanese saying reported earlier (following Honna and Hoffer): “The nail that stands up will be pounded down.” It is not only a dissenting member of a group who is seen in Japan as such an obnoxious nail, but also a would-be star.

But obviously, it is not just team sports groups in Japan who cultivate *wa* (recall Rohlen’s statement: “to achieve *wa* is certainly a major goal for any Japanese group”). In fact, De Vos (1985:178–79) argued that Japanese social groups in general can be compared to harmonious team sports groups. He pointed out that in contrast to America, where the emphasis is on personal autonomy and individual achievement, in Japan:

the within-group emphasis is on cooperative behavior and the necessary social subordination of oneself, on the surface at least, into a harmonious mode of instrumental realization with others of one’s own group. . . . Such cooperative behavior in turn can be put in a highly competitive frame of reference with respect to others outside the group. The ritually reinforced sense of social belonging within an organization takes precedence over any forms of individual realization of goals. Competitive inclinations cannot be released toward others close by, but are expressed through regulated competition as part of a group. The Japanese sense of accomplishment can be realized in group success. The analogy that comes immediately to mind is that Japanese groups are like football teams or other forms of team sports in which one can successfully compete only if one subordinates oneself to the group. Single stars who overemphasize their individual prowess may be disruptive to group spirit and, at least overtly, they must contain themselves within the group purpose in order to continue to function as part of the group. (178–9)

Any visible bid for individual stardom would, of course, be incompatible with the high value of ‘modesty’, ‘self-effacement’, and ‘humility’ in Japan (see, e.g., Honna & Hoffer 1989:20). Smith (1983:21) made the following pertinent comment in this connection: “This outward humility is the *tatemae*

(superficial appearance) used to maintain harmony, or *wa*, in human relations . . . ”

Once again, then, what exactly is *wa*?

Rohlen (1974:47) offered the following explication of this crucial concept:

Wa is not a metaphor. Nor is it some abstract or logical part of a system of distinctions. Rather, it is a quality of relationship, particularly within working groups, and it refers to the cooperation, trust, sharing, warmth, morale, and hard work of efficient, pleasant, and purposeful fellowship. Teamwork comes to mind as a suitable approximation. It is the complex of qualities that makes working relationships successful and enjoyable. Thus, *wa* is far from a concept of static harmony. It is a directly tangible thing that easily accommodates human frailties and differences as long as participants share a devotion to the success of the common effort and a respect for one another as partners in the enterprise.

This is very helpful indeed, and yet – like all such definitions – it is also vague and elusive, and it suffers from the inevitable ethnocentric bias inherent in culture-specific English terms such as *cooperation*, *warmth*, and *morale*. In an attempt to free ourselves from such a bias, and to formulate our tentative analysis of *wa* in precise and culture-independent terms, we can propose the following:

- wa*
- (a) these people think something like this:
 - (b) we are not one thing
 - (c) we want to be like one thing
 - (d) we all want the same
 - (e) we want to do something because of this
 - (f) we don't want this:
 - (g) one of us says: “I want this”
 - (h) another one says: “I don't want this”
 - (i) we don't want to say:
 - (j) “one of us did something good,
 - (k) another one did something bad”
 - (l) they all feel something good because of this
 - (m) they can do something good because of this
 - (n) people think this is good

Component (a) accounts for the conscious element of *wa*; (b) explains why *wa* implies a degree of distance; (c) reflects the desire for unity and closeness; (d) spells out the unity of purpose; (e) shows the common effort; (f), (g), and (h) explain why *wa* is also glossed as ‘concord’ and ‘peace’; (i), (j), and (k) reflect “the absence of distinctions,” the refusal to credit or blame individuals within the group; (l) shows the resulting “good feelings,” and (m), the group's capacity for success; finally, component (n) reflects the fact that *wa* is seen as a great social value.

ON

It has been said that societies can be divided into two types: those preoccupied with rights and those preoccupied with obligations; and that whereas the West is very much “right-oriented,” Japan is clearly an “obligation-oriented” country (see Kawashima 1967, quoted in Lebra 1974:196). Nothing reflects this centrality of obligations in Japanese culture better than its two core concepts: *on* and *giri*. There is a wide consensus among students of Japan that, to quote Lebra (1974:194), “the concept of *on* . . . has played an essential role in Japanese culture.” Some have even claimed that it “constitutes a basis for Japanese morality” (Lebra 1976:92).

What, then, is *on*?

Dictionaries usually include long lists of alternative glosses, which to an outsider may appear to be quite disparate. These include, among others, ‘favor’, ‘kindness’, ‘grace’, ‘goodness’, ‘benefit’, ‘benefactions’, ‘obligation’, and ‘a debt of gratitude’.

More helpful, but still insufficient and puzzling, is a single gloss offered by Bellah (1985:225): ‘blessings’. But more illuminating than any glosses are analytical definitions, such as the following, offered by Mitsubishi (1987:151): “*On* is the act of bestowing on another person something (usually goods) which makes the receiver feel grateful and arouses in him a sense of obligation.”

The origin of the *on* concept lies clearly in the samurai ethics: “In the old days, when a feudal samurai received an *on* from a lord, he repaid the favor by offering his service (military service). In this case, the *on* was the bestowal of a fief” (Mitsubishi 1987:151). In contemporary usage, the term is said to refer “at once to a favor granted by A to B and to a resultant debt B owes to A” (Lebra 1974:194).

As a first approximation, then, we could portray the meaning of *on* as follows:

X thinks something like this:
 someone did something good for me
 I didn't do something like this for this person
 I have to do something good for this person because of this

On and “good feelings”

A more detailed examination of the writings on *on* suggests that this concept is really much richer and much more complex than this simpler definition would imply. In particular, this definition ignores the question of the benefactee's feelings. Lebra (1974:194) wrote: “An *on* must be accepted with gratitude since it is an evidence of the giver's benevolence or generosity; at the same time it must be carried as a burden, because the *on*, once granted, makes the receiver a debtor and compels him to repay.” The word *gratitude*

used by Lebra and by many other writers on the subject suggests that the *on* benefactee is expected to feel “something good” toward the *on* benefactor (or *onjin*, as such a person is called in Japanese). At the same time, the word *burden*, also commonly used in connection with *on*, suggests that the benefactee feels “something bad.”

The famous discussion of the concept *on* in Benedict’s book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1947) suggests a similar ambivalence. Benedict, too, used the word *burden*, which suggests “something bad.” At the same time, however, she repeatedly mentioned the benefactee’s expected *love* or *devotion* for the benefactor. For example, she wrote: “‘Remembering one’s *on*’ may be a pure outpouring of reciprocal devotion. A little story in a Japanese second-grade school reader entitled ‘Don’t forget the *on*’ uses the word in this sense. It is a story for little children in their ethics classes. . . .” (Benedict 1947:100). The story is about a cute little dog, Hachi, who was loved by his master “like a child of the house,” and who after the master’s death remains faithful to his memory and for years keeps looking for him every day. Benedict commented: “The moral of this little tale is loyalty, which is only another name for love.” This, of course, implies, that the benefactee is expected to feel “something good” toward the *onjin*. If we tried to reflect this ambivalence in the definition of *on*, we would have to expand it along the following lines:

- X thinks something like this:
someone did something good for me
- X feels something good toward this person because of this
- X thinks something like this:
I didn’t do something like this for this person
- I have to do something good for this person
- X feels something bad because of this

Are both these feelings – the bad one and the good one – really parts of the semantic invariant of *on*? Benedict made the following comment on this point:

A son who cares deeply for his mother can speak of not forgetting the *on* he has received from his mother and mean that he has for her Hachi’s single-minded devotion to his master. The term, however, refers specifically not to his love, but to all that his mother did for him as a baby, her sacrifices when he was a boy, all that she has done to further his interests as a man, all that he owes her from the mere fact that she exists. It implies a return upon this indebtedness and therefore it means love. But the primary meaning is the debt, whereas we think of love as something freely given unfettered by obligation. (Benedict 1947:100)

Thus, according to Benedict, the emphasis is not on love but on debt. But is the idea of love – or something like love – included in that concept at all? (In our terms, is it justified to include in the definition of *on* the component

"X feels something good toward this person"?") Benedict herself seemed rather ambivalent on this point, but on the whole her comments do not seem to support this. For example, in her general discussion on *on*, she wrote:

Both the Chinese and the Japanese have many words meaning 'obligations'. The words are not synonyms and their specific meanings have no literal translation into English because the ideas they express are alien to us. The word for 'obligations' which covers a person's indebtedness from greatest to least is *on*. In Japanese usage it is translated into English by a whole series of words from 'obligations' and 'loyalty' to 'kindness' and 'love', but these words distort its meaning. If it really meant love or even obligation the Japanese would certainly be able to speak of *on* to their children, but that is an impossible usage of the word. Nor does it mean loyalty, which is expressed by other Japanese words, which are in no way synonymous with *on*. *On* is in all its uses a load, an indebtedness, a burden, which one carries as best one may. A man receives *on* from a superior and the act of accepting an *on* from any man not definitely one's superior or at least one's equal gives one an uncomfortable sense of inferiority. When they say, 'I wear an *on* to him' they are saying, 'I carry a load of obligations to him', and they call this creditor, this benefactor, their '*on* man'. (Benedict 1947:99)

Comments of this kind suggest that "good feelings" for the benefactor (such as gratitude, love, devotion, or whatever) are not really included in the concept of *on*. At the most, this concept might include an *expectation* of such feelings, which is a different thing altogether ("people would think: I will feel something good because of this" or even "I have to feel something good because of this," rather than "X feels something good because of this"). An expectation of this kind may in fact contribute to the "burden" of the benefactee, a burden that can at times be quite crushing. One more quote from *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*: "Love, kindness, generosity, which we value just in proportion as they are given without strings attached, necessarily must have their strings in Japan. And every such act received makes one a debtor. As their common saying has it: 'It requires (an impossible degree of) inborn generosity to receive *on*'" (Benedict 1947:113).

On the other hand, Lebra (1976:92) claimed explicitly that an *on* debtor is not only expected to feel grateful, but really does feel that gratitude (or at least that is what the word *on* implies). "First of all, the *on* receiver is expected to feel, and does feel, grateful to the *on* giver."

But the idea that *on* might imply "good feelings" on the part of the benefactee seems incompatible with the common view that *on* can be more or less cynically imposed on people, as evidenced by the common expressions *on o uru* or *on ni kiseru*. For example, Mitsubishi (1987:151) stated: "Any act of bestowal which is obviously motivated by the expectation of a repay-

ment becomes a not too laudable act of *on wo uru* (to sell *on*). When one forces another to feel obligated and seeks repayment it becomes an act of *on ni kiseru* (to fasten *on*)."

Incidentally, expressions of this kind demonstrate that the concept *on* does not imply any kindness or benevolence on the part of the benefactor, even though both these words are commonly mentioned in the discussion of *on*. For example, Mitsubishi (1987:151) stated: "When one returns kindness with ingratitude or bites the hand that feeds him, it is a depraved act described as '*on wo ada de kaesu*'."

But in fact, *on* implies that it is not just kindness that has to be "repaid" with something good, but any "debt" – or at least any major "debt," whatever the creditor's motivations might be. The words *obligation* or *favor* are therefore more helpful in the description of *on* than words such as *kindness*.

But returning to the question of the debtor's expected "gratitude," I am inclined to think that the word is simply badly chosen. What Lebra really meant was, I think, not "gratitude" but something else – and if I understand her intended point correctly, I think it is quite valid. This real point has to do not with the debtor's feelings, but with his or her memory or thoughts. Lebra (1976:92) explained this point as follows:

The moral significance of gratitude, however, lies not so much in an external demonstration as in Ego's awareness of being in debt, Ego's internalization of Alter as a benefactor, and Ego's retention of the memory of having received the *on*. Not to forget a received *on* is as important, if not more so, as to repay it; to be forgetful of a received *on* or to refuse to repay it would equally incur the accusation of being *on-shirazu* ('unaware of *on*', implying 'ungrateful').

To my mind, this suggests that what is really at issue is not a matter of feelings ("X feels something good toward this person because of this") but a matter of a permanent awareness of the incurred debt:

X thinks: I have to always think of this

What kinds of debts come under *on*?

The question of whether *on* concerns any debts whatsoever or only major debts deserves to be considered a little more closely, as different views have been expressed on this point in the literature. For example, Zimmerman (1985:67) wrote: "The Japanese word for the obligation incurred by the giving and granting of major favors (such as giving birth to someone or assuming responsibility for his or her education) is *on*. . . ." On the other hand, Benedict (as we have seen) linked *on* with both major and minor "debts" ("The word for 'obligations' which covers a person's indebtedness from greatest to least is *on*"), and she illustrated the concept of *on* with some examples of very trivial services.

However, it seems that not all “debts” would be covered by *on*, rather only those perceived as “unpayable”; and if some debts are seen as unpayable, then they can indeed come under *on* even if they are small and trivial. The following passage in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is particularly illuminating in this respect (see also the discussion in Coulmas 1981b):

Especially in unformalized situations the Japanese are extremely wary of getting entangled in *on*. Even the offer of a cigarette from a person with whom a man has previously had no ties makes him uncomfortable and the polite way for him to express thanks is to say: “Oh, this poisonous feeling (*kino doku*).” “It’s easier to bear,” a Japanese said to me, “if you come right out and acknowledge how bad it makes you feel. You had never thought of doing anything for him and so you are shamed by receiving the *on*.” “*Kino doku*” therefore is translated sometimes as ‘Thank you’, i.e., for the cigarettes, sometimes as ‘I’m sorry’, i.e., for the indebtedness, sometimes as ‘I feel like a heel’, i.e., because you beat me to this act of generosity. It means all of these and none. . . . In English, *sumimasen* is translated ‘Thank you’, ‘I’m grateful’ or ‘I’m sorry’, ‘I apologize’. You use the word, for instance, in preference to all other thank-you’s if anyone chases the hat you lost on a windy street. When he returns it to you politeness requires that you acknowledge your own internal discomfort in receiving. “He is offering me an *on* and I never saw him before. I never had a chance to offer him the first *on*. I feel guilty about it but I feel better if I apologize to him. *Sumimasen* is probably the commonest word for thank-you in Japan. I tell him that I recognize that I have received *on* from him and it doesn’t end with the act of taking back my hat. But what can I do about it? We are strangers.” (Benedict 1947:105)

This “unpayability” implied by *on* is not reflected, so far, in our attempted explication of this concept. We can account for it, however, by replacing the component “I didn’t do something like this for this person” with “I couldn’t do anything like this for this person.” This phrasing, which seems fully consistent with the foregoing comments and examples offered by Benedict, would also account for the much commented on asymmetric nature of *on*. To quote Lebra (1974:195):

It is asymmetric in that the *on* is considered limitless and unpayable and that the receiver feels urged to return at least “one-ten-thousandth” of the received sum through total, sometimes life-long, devotion to the donor. Bellah (1957:73) paid special attention to this relentless demand of *on* which puts one in the status of a permanent debtor, and equated it to the idea of original sin with all its dynamic potentialities.

Bellah’s reference to the original sin is extremely interesting, and it is tempting to expand the definition of *on* sketched here in such a way as to

reflect this analogy with the original sin more closely. This can be done by including in the proposed definition components such as “this is bad” (if not actually “I am bad”) and “I have to think about it always.”

But perhaps the component “this is bad” is unnecessary, and the combination of components:

X thinks: I can't do something like this for this person
 I have to think about it always
 X feels something bad because of this

accounts sufficiently for Bellah's intended point. On the other hand, it might be justified to posit a general cultural norm for Japan, along the following lines:

If someone does something good for you
 you have to do something like this for this person
 if you can't do it this is bad
 you have to do something because of this

A norm of this kind would explain not just one concept (*on*) but a whole range of phenomena, both linguistic and nonlinguistic.

On and status hierarchy

One of the most interesting and most controversial questions that arise in connection with the concept of *on* is the nature of the relationship implied by it. According to many writers on the subject, this relationship has to be hierarchical. According to others, however, it can be a relationship among equals. The prototypical *on* situation is no doubt hierarchical. It involves, as mentioned earlier, the relationship between a samurai and a lord; the lord bestowed on a samurai a fief, and the samurai repaid him by lifelong loyal service.

But *on* has other prototypes as well – in the realm of politics (political authorities), religion (benevolent supernatural beings), and family (parents). For example, with respect to the political sphere, Bellah (1985:20) wrote:

First of all the compelling and overriding loyalty toward the political authority must be seen in the context of the idea of *on*. The political authority has the obligation of bestowing blessings (*on*) on the people subject to it. In the case of the samurai this takes the direct form of receiving a stipend, but the concept is much more general. For instance one of the great blessings which the shogunate bestowed on all the people was peace.

With respect to religion (primarily Buddhism), the same author wrote (Bellah 1985:70–73):

Action with respect to deity as a benevolent superordinate gets us at once into the theory of *on*. Deity in some form dispenses blessings (*on*) and it is the obligation of the recipient to make return for these blessings (*hoon*). Religious action, then, is the various forms this *hoon* may take. . . .

Religious action conceived as a return for blessings from a benevolent superordinate, then, is based on a view of man as weak and helpless by himself. Only with the help of benevolent beings can he live, and the blessings he receives are so much greater than his ability to return them that actually he can only return an infinitesimal amount.

But Bellah's sources (e.g., the early Buddhist work "Anguttara Nikaya") link the *on* also with filial piety and with the unpayable debt toward one's parents: "We may carry our mothers on one shoulder, and our fathers on the other, and attend on them even for a hundred years, doing them bodily services in every possible way, and establishing them in the position of universal sovereignty: still the favour we have received from our parents will be far from requited."

But to what extent are all these different prototypical relations valid to the modern concept of *on*?

It seems to me that in fact none of them should be reflected explicitly in the semantic formula of *on*, and that at the same time the general type of relationship should be somehow hinted at – as essentially and inherently asymmetrical and, so to speak, "vertical." However, the exact nature of the asymmetry and the verticality implied by this concept remains to be clarified.

Sakurai (1961), quoted in Lebra (1974:194), "characterized *on* as a contractual relationship between a master and his subordinate bound by a double contingency of expectations: the master bestows an *on* provided the subordinate performs loyal service, whereas the subordinate fulfills the obligation of loyalty on the condition that the master rewards him with an *on*."

Lebra opposed this view, arguing as follows (1974:195):

the asymmetric norm of *on* has been socially determined by the cultural emphasis upon status hierarchy. Ordinarily an *on* is granted by a superior-status holder and the burden of repayment falls on the inferior person's shoulders; hence, the *on* reinforces the inferior's loyalty and obedience to the superior. The hierarchical relationship underlying the *on* is reminiscent of the historically specific meaning of *on*, that is, the territorial grant or stipend bestowed by the feudal lord upon his vassal. In modern Japan every Japanese was supposed to owe the heaviest *on* to the emperor as the sovereign. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that *on*-reciprocity takes place between equals. In this case, status hierarchy is generated after an *on* is granted rather than the other way around as is a more common case. The point is that *on*-reciprocity is inseparably entangled with status difference and status orientation in general, whether status hierarchy precedes or is preceded by *on*-granting.

Thus, according to Lebra, *on* always implies 'status difference', 'status orientation', and 'status hierarchy', and yet an *on* relationship can also take

place between equals (and not necessarily between a master and a subordinate or between a superior- and an inferior-status holders). This may sound quite confusing, and in any case, terms such as “superior-” and “inferior-status holders” are inherently obscure and culture-specific, and could not, needless to say, be used in a simple and universally interpretable semantic metalanguage. I might add that to the extent to which such terms are clear at all they do not mean the same as Sakurai’s terms “master” and “subordinate” (rendered as such by Lebra).

Nonetheless, I can guess what Lebra’s intentions were and I can clarify those intentions by proposing the following explication of *on*:

on

- (a) X thinks something like this:
- (b) this person did something good for me
- (c) I couldn’t do something like this for this person
- (d) I have to think about this always
- (e) I have to do good things for this person because of this
- (f) if this person wants me to do something I have to do it
- (g) X feels something bad because of this

It seems that this formula accounts well for all the different aspects of *on* discussed in the literature. It presents this relationship as asymmetrical, and it invites the inference that the *onjin* is X’s superior without precluding the possibility that the “status difference” and the “hierarchical relationship” is created by, rather than prior to or independent of, the “unpayable debt” itself.

Is on still on in Japan?

In modern Japan, the principle of *on* has often been attacked as feudal and undemocratic (see Lebra 1974:203), and it would seem that its importance in Japanese culture has diminished. Nonetheless, as Lebra (1974) argued convincingly (drawing on fairly recent studies devoted to this problem), “it would be far from the truth to say that the norm of *on* has completely broken down.” In particular, she reported a study in which the participants were asked to imagine that they were the president of a company recruiting new employees on the basis of a competitive examination.

The president is free to choose between two candidates: the candidate who ranks highest in the examination and the candidate who is second highest but the president’s relative. Seventy-five percent of the respondents chose the first candidate, and only 19 percent favored the relative. In response to the next question, which replaced the relative by a child of the president’s *onjin* (benefactor), the proportion changes to 48 percent (in favour of the highest candidate) vs. 44 percent. (Lebra 1974:205)

These results support the view that, despite all the changes that have taken place in postwar Japan, *on* is still a powerful cultural norm.

GIRI

What is *giri*? According to Mitsubishi (1987:40), “*giri* is the linchpin of human relations among Japanese.” The importance of this concept in Japanese culture is acknowledged by all students of Japan. Some, for example, Roberts (1974:399), have claimed that it was *giri* that “enabled the shattered Japanese economy to recover so rapidly after the war.” According to the same author, *giri* is a power “that gives Japanese society its stability” (*ibid.*). Zimmerman (1988), an outstanding businessman and for many years the president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Tokyo, emphasized in particular the importance of *giri* in the world of business. He called it “a powerful force” (73) and remarked that, “The implications of *giri* . . . pervade Japanese society, and the business world is no exception” (69).

But students of Japan agree not only that *giri* is a powerful force, but also that it is a culture-laden, uniquely Japanese concept, without an equivalent in English or any other Western language. Japanese-English dictionaries offer a bewildering variety of alternative glosses, including ‘justice’, ‘honor’, ‘duty’, ‘obligation’, ‘a debt of gratitude’, ‘respectability’, ‘decency’, ‘courtesy’ (*Kenkyusha’s*); ‘propriety’, ‘rectitude’, ‘moral cause’ (*Brinkley’s*), and others.

As Benedict pointed out a long time ago, monolingual all-Japanese dictionaries are not very helpful on this point either. One, quoted by Benedict in her own translation, offers: “*giri* – righteous way; the road human beings should follow; something one does unwillingly to forestall apology to the world” (1947:137).

The most commonly given English gloss is ‘duty’ or ‘obligation’ (although, significantly, English-Japanese dictionaries never gloss either of these words as *giri*). Benedict commented (1947):

There is no possible English equivalent [for *giri*], and of all the strange categories of moral obligations which anthropologists find in the cultures of the world, it is one of the most curious. It is specifically Japanese. . . . it is not possible to understand their courses of action without taking it into account. No Japanese can talk about motivations or good repute or the dilemmas which confront men and women in his home country without constantly speaking of *giri*. (133)

To an Occidental, *giri* includes a most heterogenous lot of obligations . . . ranging from gratitude for an old kindness to the duty of revenge. It is no wonder that the Japanese have not tried to expound *giri* to Westerners. (139)

Since Benedict wrote these words, several Japanese scholars have tried to expound *giri* to Westerners. However, their success in doing so was rather limited, and the explanations are often as bewildering as the explicandum it-

self. Lebra (1976:93) regarded as the best explanation of *giri* the one offered by Kawashima (1951), which she summarized as follows:

Giri refers to a social order consisting of a set of social norms that assign every status holder a certain role to be carried out. More specifically, *giri* is generated by and in turn maintains *gemeinschaft* relationships between particular individuals. The *gemeinschaft* relationship involving *giri* can be characterized by: (1) duration . . . , (2) total involvement . . . , (3) an imposition on the individual by virtue of his status . . . , (4) a personal, particularistic relationship involving face-to-face interaction in a physical sense, (5) emotional ties, and (6) a hierarchical relationship involving an unequal distribution of obligations.

This is all very helpful, but it would be hard to maintain that it really clarifies the concept of *giri* for Westerners. I hope to achieve a greater clarity by breaking down this concept into simple components. Because *giri* implies, above all, a sense of obligation, one component seems rather obvious:

X thinks something like this: I have to do something

But clearly, there is much more to *giri* than that.

Does giri have to involve human relations?

The bulk of the literature of *giri* implies that *giri* is not simply an obligation – a kind of Kantian abstract moral imperative – but an obligation toward somebody, more specifically, toward a particular person. This suggests that our initial semantic component should be expanded as follows:

X thinks something like this: I have to do something for person Y

I quoted earlier the opening statement of the Mitsubishi (1987:40) entry devoted to *giri*: “*Giri* is the linchpin of human relations among Japanese,” and this statement is fully consistent with other writings on the subject, which also stress the relational aspect of this concept. Many sources also stress that *giri* is concerned specifically with relations between individual human beings. For example, Zimmerman (1988:70) stated: “*Giri* can also be expressed as overriding loyalty to an individual that transcends loyalty or obligation to the firm.”

This idea that *giri* is concerned with individual, private relations is also supported by Kawashima’s cited remark that *giri* refers to “a personal, particularistic relationship involving face-to-face interaction in a physical sense.” This appears to be one of the crucial differences between *giri* and *on*. *On* is a kind of obligation that can have as its target one’s ancestors, a faraway inaccessible emperor, one’s country, and so on; but *giri* has to have as its target another person, with whom one can interact face-to-face.

The idea that *giri* is necessarily concerned with private, personal relations

is also fully consistent with Benedict's discussion of possible conflict between *giri* and *chu* (Emperor worship) and the "atomism of Japanese morals" (1947:209). According to Benedict, in modern times a great effort has been invested into developing a more general, national code of morals that would be centered on Emperor worship rather than on personal obligations to individuals.

The best and most authoritative statement of this program is the Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors given by the Emperor Meiji in 1882. . . . The Rescript warns its hearers not to be like heroes of old who died in dishonor because, "losing sight of the true path of public duty, *they kept faith in private relations*" [Benedict's emphasis]. . . . The whole Rescript shows an official attempt to minimize *giri* and to elevate *chu*. Not once in the whole text does the word *giri* appear in the sense in which it is a household word in Japan. Instead of naming *giri*, it emphasizes that there is a Higher Law, which is *chu*, and a Lower Law, which is "keeping faith in private relations." (*ibid.*)

Finally, the idea that *giri* has to involve direct face-to-face interaction between individuals is also supported by Dore's (1958:254) observation that, "The immediate sanction which would attend nonfulfilment of the obligation is the displeasure or the distress of this specific person or group of persons" (an observation that echoes Kawashima's point about emotional ties involved in a *giri* relationship). This suggests that the semantic formula for *giri* should indeed relate individual human beings (person X and person Y) and in fact should also refer to the target person's possible feelings:

X thinks something like this:
I have to do something for person Y
If I don't do it, Y can feel something bad

Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that there is also some evidence against such an analysis of *giri*. In particular, this analysis seems hard to reconcile with Benedict's statement (1947:148) that "the stoicism, the self-control that is required of a self-respecting Japanese is part of his *giri* to his name," and that "a woman may not cry out in childbirth because of *giri*." Examples of this kind appear to indicate that *giri* does not have to involve the relationship between two people, X and Y, but can be a matter of something like self-respect. (Benedict compared this aspect of *giri* with the European concept of "honor" and, more particularly, with the German concept of "*Ehre*.")

The problem requires further investigation, but my own tentative conclusion is this: the meaning of *giri* has changed in the relevant respect over the last 50 years or so. In Benedict's time, *giri* apparently could refer to a person's obligation toward him- or herself; but this no longer is the case. Thus, my informants reject examples of self-control or stoicism as examples of *giri*.

According to them, if one behaves in some way because one thinks one "owes it to oneself," this would not come under *giri*. Accordingly, for the present-day concept of *giri*, it does appear justified to phrase the component in question in terms of one's obligation to another person:

X thinks something like this: I have to do something for person Y

Furthermore, it appears that the obligation in question has to be seen as the obligation "to do something good," despite Benedict's claim that *giri* ranges "from gratitude for an old kindness to the duty of revenge." According to my informants, in contemporary Japanese revenge cannot come under *giri*. To account for this, I expand the proposed semantic component as follows:

X thinks something like this: I have to do something good for person Y

Is giri a permanent relationship?

Assuming that *giri* is a relational concept, should we specify that the relationship in question has to be a permanent or semipermanent one? As it stands, our explication so far allows also for purely transient relationships – but is this right?

Many writers on the subject would presumably say that this is wrong. For example, both Kawashima and Lebra insisted that *giri* "is not a temporary relationship but a permanent one" (Lebra 1976:93), and, moreover, that it occupies not a small part of life . . . but the whole sphere of life" (*ibid.*). Kawashima's idea that *giri* "maintains gemeinschaft relationships between particular individuals" is consistent with this view.

Other writers on the subject are not equally explicit on this point, but what they say is usually consistent with the idea. For example, Roberts (1974), quoted in Zimmerman (1988:72), wrote of *giri* as "the peculiar sense of obligation that makes Japanese society so cohesive." It seems reasonable to assume that the cohesiveness of the Japanese society is attributed here to a network of more or less permanent sets of loyalties and obligations. It cannot be an accident that so many writers on the subject speak not simply of a *giri* obligation but of a "special bond of *giri*" (Roberts 1974:398). The word *bond* suggests something strong and enduring. There may even be a link in this respect between *giri* and *enryo*, because, as Reischauer (1988:147) observed, it may be due to *enryo* that "Japanese do not develop new associations lightly" and "are less inclined than Westerners to enter into casual contacts." Thus, *enryo* may stop people from developing new relationships with other people, whereas *giri* may strengthen the existing ones. As Reischauer (*ibid.*) put it, in Japan, "friends are less easily made, but once made may be held onto with a strength that the more socially casual Westerner finds puzzling."

Christopher (1983:172) commented in this connection on the difficulties

in the relations between the Japanese and the Americans. Once a relationship is established:

a Japanese comes to expect more of an American acquaintance than the American is prepared to give – with the result that the Japanese is confused and sometimes embittered by the American's sudden and, to the Japanese way of thinking, inexplicable evasion of the unspoken obligations of their relationship. On more than one occasion in my own experience Japanese friends have wanted me to do things that were either legally impossible or incompatible with American journalistic ethics, and I know that my failure to oblige them has put serious though unacknowledged strains on our friendship.

In trying to account for this binding and permanent character of a *giri* relationship, we could expand the explication as follows:

X thinks something like this:
 I have to do something good for person Y
 if I don't do it Y can feel something bad
 I can never say:
 "I don't want to think about this person"

This does not imply that to comply with *giri* one would have to always think about the person to whom *giri* is due, and yet it does imply that the relationship is seen as more or less permanent.

Is giri a repayment?

According to many writers on the subject, a *giri* relationship involves crucially the idea of repayment, along the lines of:

You have done something good for me
 I have to do the same for you because of this

For example, Smith (1983:45) defined *giri* as follows: "*Giri* is a duty or obligation of a person to behave in certain loosely prescribed ways towards another to whom the person is indebted." Similarly, Mitsubishi (1987:40) stated: "When a person says, 'I owe that man *giri*', he means that he had received some favor from him at one time and that he must eventually return the obligation." This tallies well with the folk definition of *giri* reported by Lebra (1976:93): "The villagers whom Kawashima studied defined *giri* as *okaeshi* ("return," that is, repayment for *on*)."

But even if *giri* does evoke, primarily, a return of favors, this does not mean that a return of favors necessarily belongs to the semantic invariant of this word. The association between *giri* and a balance of favors may be a matter of cultural knowledge rather than of the semantics of *giri*.

By saying this I do not wish to imply that meaning is independent of, and unrelated to, cultural knowledge; far from it. *Giri* itself is a clear example

of a word whose meaning is shaped by culture and embodies cultural knowledge. But cultural knowledge also goes beyond the meaning of individual words. The fact that in Japan repayment of debts is seen as a prime example of *giri* obligation may be cultural knowledge that – at this stage at least – is not a part of the meaning of this word as such. The crucial question is this: can the word *giri* also be applied to situations that do not involve any repayment of debts or can it not?

The answer to this question appears to be: yes, it can. For example, as one informant explained, if a friend is giving a party, one may feel that one has to go to that party “because of *giri*” (*giri de*), and this does not seem to refer to any favors received previously from the friend but simply to the bond of a permanent relationship.

Similarly, it is reported in the literature that in business relationships a person may feel bound in *giri* to do business with another person (or firm) simply because they have done business with them before – as if such a relationship created obligations, regardless of any exchange of favors. For example, Honna and Hoffer (1989:116–17) stated (in connection with *giri*): “The feelings of obligation also extend to relations between businesses, for example, between a firm and a supplier. If the two have done business together for some time, the firm is most likely to retain the supplier even if another supplier proposes a somewhat better offer.” (Incidentally, this statement does not contradict our conclusion that *giri* involves relations between individuals, because relations between businesses would normally involve relations between individuals.)²

Consider also the following Western analogue of a *giri* obligation offered by Dore (1958:254): “‘We really ought to go and see Auntie Mabel when we are in London. She’s a bit of a bore, but she will be upset if we don’t’ is a perfect example of a *giri*-act and a *giri*-relation.”

Clearly, this example of a *giri* act does not involve repayment – although, as Dore also pointed out, “Aunt Mabel may be 75 and tolerably well off, so the action does not have to be disinterested,” and “‘support and be supported’, ‘live together, prosper together’ were traditional phrases quoted as justifications for maintaining such relationships” (257). Dore offered the following comment, which clarifies Kawashima’s point about “an imposition on the individual by virtue of his status”:

Giri-relationships may be “ascribed” in the sense that they are implied in the very nature of the positions occupied by two parties in any kinship, community or economic organization. Such are relations between relatives not of the same household group, relations between employer and employee, between landlord and tenant, between neighbours or between fellow-employees. They may also arise as the result of a particular favour conferred, for example, relations between marriage go-between and mar-

ried pair, or between an employee and the man who found him his job. (254)

Thus, according to Dore, *giri* may arise as the result of a particular favor, but this does not have to be the case.

It would seem, then, that although in rural Japan *giri* appears to consist largely in "compulsory" reciprocal gift-giving, this is probably a cultural rather than semantic fact, even if for many rural Japanese there is a very strong association between the two, as described by Befu (1986:162).

Giri is a moral imperative to perform one's duties toward other members of one's group. Gift-giving falls squarely in the sphere of *giri*; one is morally obligated to give a gift when custom demands it. *Giri* is bound up with the institution of gift-giving in another way, namely, reciprocation. . . . the concept of *giri* evokes in the tradition-minded rural Japanese the obligation to reciprocate. Since gift-giving is an act of *giri*, and since *giri* requires reciprocation, a gift naturally calls for a return gift. . . . So important is the concept of *giri* in gift-giving that many rural Japanese interpret *giri* to mean strict observance of the etiquette of gift-giving.

This suggests that in Befu's view, *giri* is something like a social obligation, and that because in rural Japan reciprocal gift-giving constitutes a major social obligation, in many people's perception *giri* and reciprocal gift-giving are much the same thing.

I conclude, tentatively, that whereas repayment is strongly associated in the Japanese mind with the idea of *giri*, the semantic invariant of *giri* nonetheless does not include any reference to repayment.³ This takes us back to the formula:

X thinks something like this:
 I have to do something good for person Y
 if I don't do it this will be bad
 I can never say: "I don't want to think about this person"

Of course, it is possible that on further investigation the word *giri* will prove to be polysemous, or subject to regional variation (see Dore 1958:253), and that one will have to recognize that in one of its meanings *giri* does mean something like 'repayment of favor'. But neither polysemy nor variation in meaning should be postulated without proven necessity. At this stage, nothing forces us to conclude that *giri* has more than one meaning; if so, 'repayment of favors' is not part of this word's semantic invariant.

The moral and social character of giri

The components sketched so far seem to me well justified, but they cannot be regarded as a full explication of *giri*, if only because they do not account for the semimoral and semisocial character of this concept reflected in dictionary glosses such as 'decency', 'respectability', 'propriety', and even 'honor'.

To account for these larger implications of *giri* I propose to add one further component (d) to the explication:

- (a) X thinks something like this:
- (b) I have to do something good for person Y
- (c) if I don't do this it will be bad
- (d) Y can feel something bad because of this
- (e) people will say bad things about me

Taken by itself, component (b) could be seen as implying a purely moral dimension, but the combination of (b), (c), and (d) suggests that *giri* is concerned not so much with some moral absolute as with social consequences of one's behavior.

It is interesting to note in this connection how discussions of *giri* in the literature almost invariably include references to other people's opinion, such as the following:

To the Japanese it is sufficient reward to be respected in his world and "a man who does not know *giri*" is still a "miserable wretch." He is scorned and ostracized by his fellows. (Benedict 1947:176)

Giri remains today a virtue with great authority and to say of a man that "he does not know *giri*" is one of the most drastic condemnations in Japan. (ibid.:212)

The fear of such a condemnation is apparently extremely effective, despite the absence of any formal sanctions. Smith (1983:46) emphasized this point with respect to reciprocal *giri* relationships: "no one ever thought to take another to court to secure repayment of a debt of *giri* – but the person who violates the reciprocal relationship will be branded as without integrity or honor, and subjected to substantial informal sanctions." Benedict (1947:135) stressed the same point speaking of people's duties to their in-laws, called in Japan "relatives in *giri*": "A person fulfills his duties to his in-laws punctiliously . . . because at all costs he must avoid the dreaded condemnation: 'a man who does not know *giri*'."

It is particularly interesting to note in this connection that although *giri* is often glossed as 'rectitude', 'righteousness', or 'what is right', in fact *giri* can also be contrasted with such concepts. For example, Bellah (1985) always translated *giri* as 'right' and glosses it as such in his list of key Japanese words. And yet, as Benedict (1947:213) pointed out, "every Japanese knows the phrase, 'I could not do righteousness (*gi*) because of *giri*'." Similarly, Zimmerman (1988:68) stated: "The Japanese businessman may find himself torn between *giri* to a friend or a benefactor and his sense of right or wrong." A good example of such a conflict between *giri* and impersonal moral laws is provided by Dore (1958:380): "A nephew employed in his uncle's firm as undermanager is convinced of the justice of the workers' case in a strike conflict. Should he suppress his 'sympathies' and loyally support his uncle as the

ethics of *giri* prescribe? Or should he work for what he believes to be just even though it does bring on him the accusation that he does not know *giri*?" Having examined several examples of this kind, Dore commented: "the sort of situations outlined above present dilemmas of a different kind, conflicts between, on the one hand, particularistic loyalties, and on the other either individual aspirations which it is held to be the right of everyone to hold, or generalized principles of conduct which are held to be applicable to all situations" (381).

However, it seems that the contrast between "what is right" and "what is *giri*" can be interpreted in two different ways, and that perhaps it should be interpreted in both these ways at once. First, *giri* has to do with private relations, and private obligations could be seen as coming into conflict with "what is right" in some more abstract sense. Second, "what is right" can be interpreted in an absolute sense, as something independent of "what people might say," whereas *giri* is never independent of "what people might say."

It has often been pointed out that the Japanese ethical system is "oriented more to specific relationships than to abstract principles" (Reischauer 1988: 147), that "the Japanese on the whole think less in terms of abstract ethical principles than do Westerners and more in terms of concrete situations and complex human relationships" (ibid.:172), and also that the Japanese are more concerned with other people's opinion than with abstract moral principles – or rather, that they tend to be guided in their behavior by other people's opinions about them, or their anticipated opinions. As Benedict (1947: 173) put it, "The Japanese . . . need terribly to be respected in the world." Furthermore, several students of Japan have noted that the fear of losing face before other people plays a crucial role in the socialization of Japanese children. For example, "The mother tells the child that he will be laughed at or ridiculed by neighbours, his playmates, his relatives, or anyone whose opinion the child values most" (Lebra 1976:152).

It seems that the concept of *giri*, as explicated here, reflects these features of Japanese culture.⁴

Giri as a burden

According to Benedict (1947:133), there is a common Japanese saying: "*giri* is hardest to bear." "As one Japanese said, 'If a grown son does things for his own mother, it is because he loves her and therefore it couldn't be *giri*. You don't work for *giri* when you act from the heart' (ibid.:135).

Comments of this kind suggest that *giri* necessarily implies unwillingness. Of course, one could say that the concept of obligation or duty as such implies a degree of unwillingness. But obligations do not have to be 'burdensome', 'hard to bear', and incompatible with an impulse from the heart. *Giri*, on the other hand, appears to suggest that natural inclination and obligation go in the opposite directions. The traditional pair of opposites *giri* and *ninjo*,

that is, ‘obligation’ and ‘human feeling’, reflects this “unwanted” character of whatever *giri* requires.

Benedict stressed this in particular with respect to the modern use of *giri*, and she documented this aspect of the modern concept of *giri* with linguistic evidence such as the following:

Today’s constantly used phrases are full of resentment and of emphasis on the pressure of public opinion which compels a person to do *giri* against his wishes. They say, “I am arranging this marriage merely for *giri*"; “merely because of *giri* I was forced to give him the job”; “I must see him merely for *giri*.” They constantly talk of being “tangled with *giri*,” a phrase the dictionary translates as ‘I am obliged to it’. They say, “He forced me with *giri*,” “he cornered me with *giri*,” and these, like the other usages, mean that someone has argued the speaker into an act he did not want or intend by raising some issue of payment due upon an *on*. . . . All these usages carry the implication of unwillingness and of compliance for ‘mere decency’s sake’, as the Japanese dictionary phrases it.

Observations of this kind suggest that the explication of *giri* developed thus far should be expanded by a further component, along the following lines:

If I do it, I will do it not because I want it
I will do it because I don’t want people to say bad things about me

This stops short of saying bluntly “I don’t want to do it,” because people “forced by *giri*,” may, in a sense, want to do what *giri* requires, not because they want to do that particular thing but because they want to comply with *giri*.

This brings us to the following tentative explication of *giri*:

- giri*
- (a) X thinks something like this:
 - (b) I have to do something good for person Y
 - (c) if I don’t do this it will be bad
 - (d) Y can feel something bad because of this
 - (e) people will say bad things about me
 - (f) if I do it I will do it not because I want to do it
 - (g) I will do it because I don’t want people to say bad things about me
 - (h) I can never say: “I don’t want to think about this person”

This explication reflects the importance of personal obligations in Japanese culture, the link between obligations and permanent bonds, the crucial role of “consideration” for others and anticipation of other people’s feelings (see Lebra 1976:38–49), and the relativistic and opinion-oriented character of moral norms.

SEISHIN

The English language literature about Japan is often a meeting place of words that in other contexts would hardly ever come together. One partic-

ularly interesting example of this phenomenon involves the words *spirit*, *spiritual*, and *spiritualism*, which in books and articles on Japan often keep company with such unlikely words (from a Western point of view) as *military*, *police*, *business*, or *sport*.

For example, Minami (1971:136) wrote of "military education based on spiritualism" and asserted that in Japan, "military education was itself spiritualistic." He also linked *spiritualism* with the use of formal clothing, and commented (146): "Men's summer short-sleeved shirts and shorts also seem to be evidence of the influence of physicality in terms of dispensing with the formalities of spiritualism and adopting physically comfortable conditions in daily living. . . . "

More recently, Frager and Rohlen (1976:266) discussed "the place of spiritual education in . . . the military and the police. They both share a tradition of 'spiritualism' that requires very little explicit educational enhancement." And further: "One effect of more leisure time and more personal income has been a rapid growth of people taking up some form of traditional art on what we would term a hobby basis. The pursuit of any of these, from flower arrangement to judo, involves the student in a serious program of spiritual education" (273).

Finally, Moeran (1986:68) remarked that according to Japanese radio and television commentators reporting on high school baseball tournaments, "It is the player's 'spiritual' attitude and strength which makes or breaks him when it 'comes to the crunch'."

When one comes across *spiritual* or *spiritualism* used in such unusual contexts, one is bound to wonder if they are not clumsy translation equivalents of Japanese words whose meanings are perhaps rather different. One discovers that the Japanese concept behind such "odd" combinations of ideas is *seishin*: "a key element in [Japanese] national mores" (Austin 1976a:255). As Frager and Rohlen (1976:256) pointed out:

At various times in recent history this term has been a prominent rallying cry for those wishing to preserve or reassert Japanese traditional ways, and during the 1930s and 40s it was extensively utilized by military and right-wing leaders in their efforts to inspire the nation. It is very important to note that, despite its history as a panacea of nationalist and militaristic movements, the Japanese orientation to seishin has a much broader and deeper basis in the ongoing life of most Japanese . . . in fact, virtually all aspects of life and behaviour are grist for the seishin perspective.

And Austin (1976a:255) in an editorial comment concurred: "The vitality of seishin is not least among the paradoxes of progress."

But what is *seishin*?

In Japanese-English dictionaries, *seishin* is usually glossed as 'mind', 'spirit', 'soul' (*Kenkyusha's*); 'mind', 'spirit', 'mental power', 'intellect', 'will',

'motive' (*Brinkley's*); 'mind', 'spirit', 'soul', 'will', 'mentality', 'intuition' (Takehara). In the literature on Japan, *seishin* is usually rendered as 'spirit'. It is clear, however, that although it is sometimes used for translating English words such as *spirit*, *mind*, *psyche*, and so on, *seishin* is a uniquely Japanese concept, which cannot be satisfactorily explained by matching it with any supposed English equivalents.

Rohlen (1986:335) observed in this connection:

The term *seishin* has many applications, including *seishin no ai* (platonic love), *seishin bunseki* (psychoanalysis), *seishin kagaku* (mental science), and *dokuritsu seishin* (the spirit of independence). Many of these are Japanese translations of foreign concepts and perhaps it is not correct to argue for a single meaning for the word, yet, once the broad, inclusive perspective of human psychology at the foundation of the *seishin* concept is grasped the differences among the various applications recede in significance.

However, it seems that although the different senses of the word *seishin* are undoubtedly related, it would be wise to follow Rohlen's initial point and assume that the sense or senses implied by the use of this word in translations of foreign concepts may be somewhat different from the native Japanese concept – and clearly, it is this native Japanese concept that we should, above all, try to elucidate.

As our starting point we take, once again, some descriptive explications suggested by various students of Japanese culture and society.

To begin with, Austin (1976a:255) characterized the meaning of *seishin* as follows: "Seishin is antithetical to modernization as generally conceived. It is not democratic, not universalistic, not individualistic, not materialistic. It is rather the complex of loyalty, discipline, esprit de corps, and indomitable perserverance that is central to so many of the historical accomplishments of Japanese civilization, from art to economic growth."

Other comments (e.g., Moeran 1986; Morsbach 1980) on *seishin*, however, suggest that of the four elements mentioned by Austin: loyalty, discipline, esprit de corps, and perserverance, only two are really pertinent: discipline and perserverance. Loyalty and esprit de corps may be among the fruits of a well-developed *seishin*, but they do not seem to be implied by the term as such. In particular, Morsbach (1980:331) argued: "While much has been written on the group orientation found in Japanese social interaction, it should not be overlooked that there is a strong tradition of *seishin*, which is basically an individualistic trait."

But although in its essence *seishin* "primarily operates on the individual level" (332), it can, nonetheless, be used "for promoting positive group interaction." Furthermore, "through the *seishin* concept one can also understand the functioning of groups better: situations where the words 'gaman'

and ‘gambatte!’ (‘endurance’ and ‘hold out!’) are frequently heard” (*ibid.*). Morsbach’s point is that whereas *seishin* “has nothing to do with groups” (332) nor with social values such as loyalty or *esprit de corps*, it does have a great deal to do with individual traits such as perserverance or endurance, and these are socially useful.

Morsbach defined *seishin*, succinctly, as “a personality syndrome centred on inner mental strength which can be developed through long years of training” (331). He elaborated: “*Seishin* is seen by Japanese as being the opposite of materialism and easy-going self-gratification. It involves single-mindedness of purpose and often has practical aims: a strong-willed person can conquer physical illness, selfish desires and can accept whatever comes, including unreasonable demands by supervisors and the pressures of group life.”

This tallies well with Smith’s (1983:99) remarks made in the context of his discussion of *seishin*: “Through discipline and adversity a person achieves self-development and, crucially, self-mastery.” And also: “Unlike the heroes of Horatio Alger’s stories, who seem to be born honest and true and strong, those of the typical Japanese success story become all these things through suffering, perserverance, and obedience” (101).

This suggests that in addition to something like perserverance or endurance, *seishin* also crucially involves something like strong will and singlemindedness of purpose. This is consistent with Frager and Rohlen’s (1976:257–62) analysis of “the meaning of *seishin*,” which stressed, in particular, ‘fortitude’, ‘singlemindedness’, ‘strength’ or ‘will power’, ‘discipline’, and ‘perserverance and hard work in training’.

It has often been pointed out that in World War II, Japanese soldiers were urged to demonstrate their *seishin* by matching “our training against their (i.e., Americans) numbers and our flesh against their steel” (Benedict 1947:24), and that this attitude culminated in the “Special Attack Corps” (that is, Kamikaze units). For example, Minami (1971:134) wrote: “man can do the unexpected and superhuman when his “spiritual force” works upon a condition that seems to be beyond human wisdom and strength. . . . Spiritualism, the belief that that spirit displays superhuman power under conditions actually beyond human wisdom or judged to be beyond human wisdom, was quite dominant among Japanese military men.”

He also quoted the authors of *The Kamikaze Suicide Units* (Inokuchi & Nakajima 1951), who wrote (with reference to the deployment of Kamikaze in World War II): “The situation was already beyond the control of human wisdom. This being so, there could be no other means to achieve a miracle except the pure and innocent spirit of these youth and their fresh vigor to retain their spiritual purity.”

It is true that since the end of World War II, the Japanese faith in *seishin*

appears to have diminished and the concept itself to have lost some of its appeal in Japanese society. Moeran (1986:69) quoted in this connection Dore's (1958:67) comment:

The old Japanese belief that *seishin* – spirit, will-power – could conquer matter, that the human body would endure loss of sleep, starvation, and physical pain to an almost unlimited degree provided the will was strong enough, has demanded some modification ever since the central war-time inference from the premises – that Japanese spirit would be superior to American guns and bombs – has been falsified.

And yet – as pointed out by Frager and Rohlen (1976:255) in their article entitled “The Future of a Tradition: Japanese Spirit in the 1980s” – the concept of *seishin* has survived the wartime defeat and continues to act “as a kind of interpretative lens through which the Japanese like to view their own culture and society” (Moeran 1986:69–70). It is particularly interesting to note in this connection that an increasingly large proportion of Japanese companies conduct regular programs of *seishin* training for all their employees. Rohlen (1986) provided a fascinating account of such a program (in which he himself participated) in his article entitled “‘Spiritual Education’ in a Japanese Bank.” He reported that the program included, among other things, an arduous endurance walk, Spartan sessions of Zen meditation, visits to military bases (involving military exercises, fitness tests, and listening to lectures on military history), exercises in cramped group living, and so on.

Recalling the pain and the exhaustion associated with one of these exercises, Rohlen (1986:325) commented revealingly: “I vowed over and over never to get involved in such a situation again, and yet, within days, when the memory of the physical pain had dimmed, I was taking great pride in my accomplishment and viewing my completion of the twenty-five mile course as proof that I could do anything I set my mind to.”

Trying to articulate his understanding of *seishin*, based both on research and on personal experience, Rohlen (1986:328) wrote:

How may we define the term *seishin*? If the frame of reference is a very general one contrasting physical and mental, the concept *seishin* would most likely be placed in the mental column. Attitudes, will power, concentration, and many other “mental” qualities are important aspects of spiritual power. Yet this kind of distinction obscures more than it clarifies, for the physical/mental distinction is not central to the concept. . . . The standard by which spiritual strength (*seishinryoku*) is measured is performance. The outward manifestations of strength are such things as the ability to endure trouble and pain, a coolness in the face of threat, patience, dependability, persistence, self-reliance, and intense personal motivation; qualities we would associate with “strong personal character.”

JAPANESE KEY WORDS AND CORE CULTURAL VALUES

Let us reiterate Rohlen's question: how may we define the term *seishin*? My own (tentative) answer is as follows:

seishin

- (a) X thinks something like this:
- (b) I want to do something good (Y)
- (c) I know: I can't do it now
- (d) I think: I can do it after now if I do other things now
- (e) I know: I will have to do these other things for a long time
- (f) I know: I will feel something bad because of this
- (g) I want to do these other things
- (h) X does these other things because of this
- (i) X can do something good (Y) because of this
- (j) X can do other good things because of this

Component (b) accounts for the volitional component of *seishin*, reflected in dictionary glosses such as 'will', 'motive', or 'intention'. Components (c) and (d) account for the fact that *seishin* cannot be a natural quality but has to be due to personal development. They also account for the emphasis on training as a basis of *seishin*. Component (c) accounts for the necessity of perseverance and endurance, (f) for the endurance and hardships, and (g) for will power. Component (h) refers to the actual training, and component (i) to the resulting mastery and attainment of self-imposed goals. Component (j) accounts for the fact that – despite the singlemindedness reflected in component (b) – if one has *seishin* one could do not just one thing but, as Rohlen put it, anything one sets one's mind to.

CONCLUSION

The idea that every language has its key concepts, which reflect characteristic features of the culture in question, is not new. Some scholars – for example, Benedict – have applied this idea in their descriptive studies of different cultures, trying to reveal and explain important aspects of the cultures in question by exploring their key concepts – as if it were self-evident that this was the right way to proceed. Others have also discussed and advocated this idea on a theoretical level – some in general (e.g., Williams 1983) and some with special reference to Japanese (e.g., Moeran 1986).

However, although often very valuable, studies of this kind could not fully achieve their objective because they involved an insoluble contradiction: they tried to explain unique concepts of one culture in terms of unique concepts of another.

I contend that to be able to explain unique concepts of one culture to members of another, we have to leave the level of unique, culture-specific concepts and reach for the level of conceptual universals, or near-universals.

The present study is, needless to say, neither definitive nor complete. However, it does show that the methodology proposed here is both rigorous and effective. Using the natural semantic metalanguage, based on lexical (and

conceptual) universals and near-universals, we can achieve a greater precision and a greater clarity in the description and comparison of cultures. Key concepts can indeed unlock cultures for outsiders, but to be able to use these keys effectively we first have to unlock our own cultures – and to step out into the no-man's-land of universal, or near-universal, human concepts.

NOTES

1. This article was presented as a seminar in the Department of Linguistics at the Australian National University in February 1990. I would like to thank all the students and colleagues who have offered their comments and suggestions for improvement, and in particular Lisette Frigo, Enoch Iwamoto, and Tim Shopen. Lisette Frigo also read an earlier version and made various valuable suggestions.

2. It is interesting to note Kiefer's (1976:299) remark in this connection:

When I questioned a group of white-collar salaried men about their loyalty to their company, they considered the idea of loyalty to *company* ludicrous. They would not change jobs, if the opportunity arose, because they felt intense loyalty to the 'office gang' with whom they worked and relaxed during the largest percentage of their waking lives.

3. No repayment appears to be involved in some of the situations Benedict (1947) linked with one's "giri to one's name" (see also Minami 1971:165). But as present-day informants reject such cases anyway (as instances of *giri*), I have not included them in the present discussion.

For the same reason, I have not included in the present discussion duties to uncles and aunts, or nephews or nieces, which – according to Benedict (1947:136) – also come under *giri*.

4. Both the private character of *giri* relationships and their link with reputation are sometimes interpreted as responsible for the differences between private and anonymous behavior in Japan. For example, Dore (1958:386) wrote:

The man who is punctilious in performing all his obligations towards people with whom he has a *giri*-relationship will, it is said, nevertheless fight tooth and nail to be the first on the train, scatter litter in public parks, sell adulterated food and fail to put himself out to help strangers in distress. "Other people" outside of his *giri* world, people whose displeasure is of no importance to him do not count. The only way, says one newspaper writer, to prevent Japanese from using train lavatories while trains are standing in a station is to provide automatic locking devices on the doors.

See also the Japanese proverb quoted by Lebra (1976:80): "A traveller can do anything without shame."

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JAPANESE KEY WORDS AND CORE CULTURAL VALUES

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