THE META-LANGUAGE OF POLITICS, CULTURE AND INTEGRITY IN JAPAN

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Abstract: Words and phrases must be interpreted within the proper cultural and contemporary political and historical context. In particular, the language of politics is distinguished by the use of specific terms and phrases which often allude to other associated meanings. This means that caution must be exercised when interpreting the terms used not only within the context of the other language, but often also within its own linguistic context. The translator or commentator has to be familiar with the language code used in the given environment and within the cultural biases of that particular society so that meanings are not lost and the often crucial connotations are not misinterpreted. Political rhetoric often employs words and language in a manipulative yet frequently subtle manner. This paper analyzes examples of shifts in language code by looking at a number of cases in Japan and their cultural construction where loss of integrity and backstage practices are at stake.
Key words: language of politics; formal/informal; corruption; Japanese culture.

Financial help received by the unemployed can be either called "aid" or "social insurance", indicating clearly a difference in the ideology underlying the two terms. In a similar manner, the term "democracy" in one society refers to the right to vote, in another society to a despotic form of economic equality (Itō 2006).

"Never, ever, ever give up!" were the words uttered by the Japanese Prime Minister Noda when announcing the government's decision to raise consumer taxes during his New Year interview on January 4, 2012. In making his announcement the Prime Minister used the famous words of Churchill. These are clearly "words of politics". Another example from the Japanese political scene refers to the name chosen for the Osaka-based political party (founded in April 2010 by the mayor of Osaka who was pushing for the administrative reorganization of the city and for the prefectural boundaries of Osaka to be redrawn to form a single Osaka metropolitan area). The party was called the "Osaka Restoration Group", and the word "restoration" clearly alludes to the historical term "the Meiji Restoration", referring to the period signaling the end of isolation politics and feudalism and the beginning of the modernization of Japan. Other recent international events provide a number of examples of this kind of conscious language use in politics and by politicians, such as for instance the "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia, the "Revolution of Bread and Dignity" in Egypt and other

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Middle Eastern countries. The use of these words points to a new trend in the rhetoric of politics.

"Social democracy" and "democratic socialism", "restoration" and "revolution", the "society with the greatest happiness of the greatest number"(Jeremy Bentham), and the "society with the minimum level of unhappiness"(Naoto Kan, former prime minister of Japan) are all very closely related terms although they have rather different meanings. Words indeed always signal ideological stances and therefore, caution is needed when interpreting the language of politics. At this point, we might well ask ourselves: what is politics? Although there exist numerous different definitions, here we will refer to the political system and political thought. The political system is understood as a system that authoritatively allocates values through an input→output→feedback process (Easton 1953). The people's support for the government and their demands towards it create a mechanism whereby it can formulate and implement rules. The systems that possess these functions convert the input into policy. Temporal and environmental changes bring about discrepancies and new contradictions and these cause the need for cyclical change in the polity and political system.

Now, would it be possible to place these terms and phrases within one part of this political system? Several doubts emerge here. Not all words used in politics have a clear-cut connection to politics, nor is the connection clear or unambiguous. Certainly, there are those who would contest that there is such a connection or, who, depending on the term or concept used, would perceive a strong sense of incongruity. In other cases, the use of certain words may also be associated with a given political clique. Therefore, it must be underlined that words always need to be interpreted within their own social context. The signs, symbols and codes that characterize this social context together generally create what we call the language system. What we generally call language is constituted by the language system as a social system and the words in total. In other words, language is not simply a disordered and chaotic sum of single words and phrases. Our use of language directly reflects our social acts, beliefs and values, which in turn, become reflected in the political system through our use of language. In this paper, when we mention the "language of politics", we will be referring to this interpretation of "language". The examples described here are taken specifically from Japanese politics and concern the issue of integrity.

Ordinary people become aware of the domain of "politics" as the "authoritative distribution of values" through the sphere of language. Language projects the "reality" which is socially constructed by the media and by the people. In this sense, the "language of politics", which creates concepts and forms associations with "politics", can be seen as symbolizing the conditions under which people are included in or excluded from political society. It regulates what people regard as being "political" as well as what people feel about the "political".

However, being a social construction, the "language of politics" does not require the individual to have direct experience in order to judge or understand the domain of politics (Percheron 1974, 1978). If instead of direct experience or definitions provided by dictionaries, it is the act of participating in power that defines this political sphere, then the meaning of the terms and words used comes to be defined through the reciprocally regulated and systematized relationship between words. This is a process whereby a given meaning is attached to a specific word. In this regard "the world of words" and within it the role of

secondary language (connotation) acquires importance. Connotations have a significant impact on the manner in which meaning is acquired. Being able to understand connotation requires an understanding of both the social context in which the words are embedded, and used, and of the grammatical system that enables the codification of these words.

Thus, the meta-linguistic function consists of the ability to interpret the reality that controls intuitive knowledge, and to understand the verbal expression as primary language which enhances the interpretative function of language. Words as single constituents of language help to integrate or to exclude people or groups from political society. Words order the system of meanings that are typical of the country in question and its political society. A source of meanings, the "language of politics" implies the way in which power, the "authoritative distribution of values", is used. In turn this shapes the repertoire and modalities of rituality, legitimacy and the persuasive force of political authority. As old categories fade away, new concepts emerge and wait to be expressed by the "language of politics". However, new terms and words do not fall out of the sky; they retain fragments of the shells of old terms and words.

The "language of politics" is not simply the totality of transient and continuously changing opinions or preferences vis-à-vis a particular problem or issue, but forever expresses the habits and dynamics of previous eras. The "language of politics" of the past acts as a restraint on the style of political reasoning and the modes of political cognition of people living in the present. Past meanings and uses continue to operate in the background of the context in which the relation between the individual and the political system is structured and interpreted. As Ivić claims, "the actual combination between phrasing and meaning emerges accidentally and thus it is arbitrary" (Ivić 1965, 90). The combinations found within one particular language are not necessarily found in another language. However, once this combination becomes fixed, it is not possible to freely change it. In this sense, it can be said that, on the one hand, all language signs are arbitrary; on the other hand, they are also compulsory.

Language and politics impact upon each other. Political scientist Takabatake argues that:

> language itself receives the impact of politics in several aspects. Issues as such as the formation and the reformation of the national language and the standard language, of the rise of polite language, taboo words, discrimination words, the form and censorship of communication, political terms used in commercials and in public speech, these are all closely related to politics (Takabatake 1976, 86).

A number of theorists have dealt with this issue. Bernstein, a linguist, points to the function of language in expressing class differences (Bernstein 1971). Language reflects the class system and its values. What Bernstein proposes is a hypothesis on language code. According to this, the language code that is seen as being typical of the middle classes is one that is elaborated, distinguished by a rich vocabulary and polished grammar on the one hand, and analytical understanding and the ability to distinguish between multiple meanings and terms on the other . By contrast, the working class is known for its use of a more restricted language code where the direct speech mode prevails and speech is marked by defined content, narrative thinking, and a lack of abstract reasoning. A similar theory has been developed by Lawton who argues that the middle class prefers the passive voice,

sentences focusing on the self, subordinate clauses, complex phrases and a polished writing mode (Lawton 1968). Although it can be argued that these theories indicate the ideology of Working Class Tories and this group's traditionally hegemonic and deferential treatment of the British working classes (Kawata 1977).

Politics, language and culture in Japan

Cultural biases and classificatory categories shape the manner in which institutions respond and function to a crucial degree (Cheng 1988). So for instance the emphasis laid on gift-giving practices and related obligation networks has been explained as one of the determinant factors in the creation of a clientelistic web of relationships in the public and private sector in Japan.

"Political language means more than it says", points out Johnson in his article on the difficulties and dangers that arise when translating political and other terms from one language to another (Johnson 1980, 115). The author analyses this question in the Japanese context and provides numerous examples of terms and phrases in Japanese that can easily be misinterpreted and thus mistranslated into English. He underlines that translation can lead to endless possible misunderstandings and that the problems related to accurate translations represent a continuous obstacle to viable communication between languages and across different cultures.

Indeed, the problem of translation appears to be a major issue in the Japanese socio-linguistic context. The nature of Japanese is such that there is ample opportunity for multiple interpretations and multiple translation options: technical terms are easily formed by combining several Chinese characters, there is an extremely large number of synonyms, and a rich repertoire of words taken from other languages and subsequently Japanized. Moreover, there have been cases in the recent history of Japan where the scope for mistranslation has meant that discussions have reoccurred over words already uttered or written by public figures from the Japanese political scene. Johnson has referred to this as a tendency "to take refuge in alleged mistranslations" (Johnson 1980, 90, Note 1). To illustrate this Johnson introduces the well-known case of an incident in July 1945 during World War II, when Prime Minister Suzuki Kantarō's response to the Potsdam Declaration was translated into English as "treat with silent contempt" (Johnson 1980, 89), provoking the continuation of the war and leading to the atom bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, several journalists and commentators at the time and also since then have argued that the translation of Suzuki's words was inaccurate and that the prime minister had intended to say "no comment". The ambiguity of Japanese syntax certainly enhances the probability of this kind of occurrence.[1]

Language is embedded in the cultural context in which it occurs. The socio-cultural features of a particular society greatly define the way concepts and ideas are expressed in that society's language. This "cultural dimension" of language is of greater relevance in the political context, in particular when political terms need to be translated and interpreted. The technical language of politics is influenced by the structural and cultural features

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[1] The position and use of the verb, subject and object within the Japanese phrase often render the understanding of the meaning of the sentence problematic.

of the political organizations in the country. Political institutions and the way they work may diverge considerably within countries. The subtle cultural characteristics of preferred communication modes and the use of meta-language have an impact on the working of institutions. For example, the emphasis on interpersonal relations and on informal alignments in Japanese bureaucracy is held to have led to the creation of specific and particularistic language codes, which express the distinction between "formal" or "informal" proceedings to a certain degree. This distinction, however, can easily be misinterpreted by the non-native interpreter or observer who does not pay adequate and sufficient attention to these "subtleties" in language codes.

Johnson provides numerous examples from the Japanese linguistic context for cases when these less "tangible" aspects of the culture are embedded in words and phrases (Johnson 1980). The author analyzes several terms used in different contexts, such as political life or the economy and points to the dangers inherent in interpreting and translating these words. In the political sector, Johnson argues, cultural biases, such as the discrepancy between the visible and less visible spheres of action within institutions in Japan, figure among the most difficult to understand and interpret for foreign observers.

Moreover, the divergence between what is ideal and the normative functioning in terms of political institutions can differ to a great extent in each society. Where this divergence is more accentuated (pronounced), the political language code will probably contain finer nuances and in greater numbers enabling it to give adequate expression to this divergence. In the Japanese context this phenomenon is closely connected to the cultural categories used by social scientists to describe and analyze Japanese society (see Nakane 1971, Hendry 2004). In this particular case the dual concept of *ura* and *omote* appears to be the most relevant. *Ura* (lit. backstage or rear) is used in Japanese to indicate areas that are not visible or that are informal. On the contrary, *omote* (lit. face, front) refers to the "public face", i.e. the formal version of things and events. In all political situations where the negotiations and bargaining often take place behind-the-scenes, the invisible political process is to be contrasted with the visible. A native speaker can clearly detect this distinction from the language code and the choice of terms used. Though, it need not be so clear to the non-native speaker. Besides, Japanese language has numerous terms that indicate the backstage quality of things and events, such as *kuromaku* (lit. black curtain), *uragane* (lit. invisible money), and *kuroikiri* (lit. black mist but often referring to suspicious events related to corruption on the political scene) (Johnson 1980, 98, 100). Consequently, as Johnson stresses, in order to be able to produce an exact and proper translation, knowing and understanding the specifics of the cultural context is of utmost importance. This is particularly true of political terms.

It is not only cultural biases that contribute to the shaping of the meaning of words but historical processes also have a role to play. With changing social and economic conditions, with evolving political priorities and ideas, concepts and things can either receive new labels, or the original labels can take on new altered meanings. On the political scene, modifications in labels and in their meanings clearly reflect changes in emphasis and preferences within politics. On the other hand, there are cases where terms that seem to allude to past events, in reality bear little or no relevance to them. This is the case in Japan, for example, where political terms often come from military jargon but do not in fact allude to war or violence at all (Johnson 1980). The case mentioned above where "restoration" was used in the name

of a political party is an example of the intentional use of terms which are associated with significant historical events. The intentional choice of terms is also evident when politicians address citizens in their public speeches. Various terms such as "Eligible Voters", "Citizens", "Nation", "People" can be heard on different occasions. Specific terms used by politicians or by the media are often codified within determinate conditions.

The meta-language of corruption in 1970s Japan

As already mentioned above, the role of connotation, or the function of meta-linguistic communication is particularly important when the political language of a given socio-cultural context needs to be understood. This language is informed first of all by cultural practices and its use can be manifold. In analyzing the context in which political meta-language develops, an anthropological approach is extremely useful. Different cultures select and make use of the various communication instruments available to varying degrees. In certain cultures a substantial part of communication may occur on the non-verbal level. If the partner or commentator is not aware of these cultural nuances, much of the real information may be lost. Moreover, meta-linguistic instruments necessarily differ from culture to culture and one needs to be familiar with the relevant repertoire.

We argue that the use of meta-languages is particularly evocative in cases of dubious integrity or in so called "patronage politics". In the dual cultural category discussed above for example, *ura* (backstage or rear) and *omote* (face or front) provide the basis for interpreting many meta-linguistic communication modes in Japan. In this paper, we will use one of the most famous examples in which corruption and loss of integrity have assumed a distinct and extremely direct form of communication, which is rather rare in the Japanese context of the 1970s.

The example that we will provide refers to one of the most famous and controversial figures of Japanese postwar politics, Tanaka Kakuei. Tanaka Kakuei, who served twice as prime minister from 1972 to 1974 has been described as a rare figure in Japanese politics, since he has a number of personal attributes that are at odds with our description so far on the characteristics of Japanese political language. First, Tanaka was one of very few political figures in the country unable to draw upon is educational or social class background in his pursuit of leadership. In one public speech, he proudly said of himself: "I have no formal education, I have no class extraction, I have no connections to the old establishment. I'm a self-made man. That's what people will remember me for. They will see what I have done. They will say: 'Tanaka did it'" (Shiota 2002, 257). Secondly, Tanaka is known in Japanese political history as one of the few leaders to have focused on action and actual achievements. Tanaka came from a poor rural village in the Niigata prefecture, where the snow and poor quality of the soil had for centuries left their mark on the lives of villagers. One of the early promises he made to local people when he ran for election when still in his twenties was to demolish the mountain behind his home village to improve the climate conditions, and to connect the village and Niigata prefecture with Tokyo. He achieved all that in the course of his political ascendancy, digging several tunnels, building bridges and dams, power station plants and constructing bullet-train links. Tanaka was a man of action, and he proudly referred to this quality in his mesmerizing public speeches, in which he promptly code

switched from technical and sophisticated language to extremely populist and direct (again rather rare for Japan) language. He came to be known as the "bulldozer with a computer brain", emphasizing both his propensity for real and fast action and his brilliant intelligence.

The third reason why Tanaka was a peculiar figure in Japanese politics concerns the exposure of a number of scandals related to corruption, which, for the first time in Japanese history, put a prime minister in the position of having to resign and eventually led to his conviction in 1976. Tanaka's corruption scandals stem from the early stages of his career in 1948. After he gained his first Diet seat (1947) he was arrested (spending 31 days in prison) because his construction company was charged with accepting one million yen bribes from the local government in Fukuoka to exploit mining resources. Several other murky events are known to have crossed his path to premiership. In particular, questions have been raised over the way in which he financed his political campaigns and maintained his electoral base through careful manipulation of the Etsuzankai [literally, "to cross the mountain to go to Tokyo"], a powerful support association created in 1948. Throughout Tanaka's career, the Etsuzankai served as a close circle that drew in consent and siphoned money off into public projects. Money was in turn re-introduced through a bid won by Tanaka's controlled companies. In a famous case, Tanaka's construction company took over the almost bankrupt Nagaoka coal-fired railway (connecting Tokyo to the city of Nagaoka, Niigata). Tanaka's company completed the whole electrification of the line, thus securing the unconditional support of the family who owned the Nagaoka railway and of the electors of the Santo District (throughout his career). From that period onwards numerous events were organized in the name of his patronage, such as Tanaka picnics, Tanaka Cup baseball games, and Tanaka Cup fishing contests (Hunziker and Kamimura 1994).

The most infamous scandal which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Tanaka was that of the corruption allegations related to the Lockheed case that emerged after the vice-director of Lockheed Corporation accused him of having accepted 1.8 million yen in bribes to secure purchase of airplanes for the partially state-controlled airlines. This scandal marked one of the darker episodes in Japanese political history, even though Tanaka (and his faction) retained power for almost a decade after his imprisonment.

As previously mentioned, Tanaka was not only a man of action, but a man of words as well. His style of political language was sophisticated in conveying meaning and masking his real intentions at the same time. One might say that the *omote-ura* paradigm was used in a peculiar way in Tanaka's speech, particularly because of his unusual directness. Responding to accusations related to the Lockheed case, he publicly stated:

> Being a public official, every problem related to me becomes an issue for everybody, which is not pleasant. I will discover everything about me, from the area I had land in 1946. I will do my very best to hasten this search, I want to help all citizens to understand everything about me (Shiota 2002, 285).

This excerpt is in itself odd in respect of the two levels of communication that are implied. The first concerns recognition of Tanaka's role as a public official, which gives the *omote* aspect of his standing as prime minister, before the whole country. The second level is one that is rarely communicated through the meta-language of politics and it is the private, or *ura* aspect, where he is inviting common citizens to "understand everything about me", an

expression which rarely applies to the Japanese context, where politicians are characterized as public office holders, and not as private individuals.

A similar consideration, albeit less easy to detect, comes from the well-known words of his resignation speech:

> After having entered office, almost two years and four months have passed and I have put all my efforts and determination and action into protecting and improving the peace, safety and prosperity of the nation. However, due to the recent confusion in the political system triggered by problems related to my own person, I, as the highest responsible authority for the country's political system, have become keenly aware of the political and moral responsibility of this (Shiota 2002, 288).

And, he then added an *ura* statement which was not publicly released but was reported to have been said to his followers following his resignation:

> Here, I will step down once, but I shall be Prime Minister once more. I will not retire like this, shamelessly (Shiota, *ibid*.).

Tanaka's language, and his relative impunity from corruption accusations are probably related issues (altogether he spent less than two months in prison, and was released the second time after payment of a 700,000 USD bond). His ability to construct a meta-language in which public responsibilities and awareness of them are combined with egocentric metaphor on achievements and action are what made this controversial figure unique in contemporary Japanese politics. The public weight of corruption scandals which would have forever tainted such a public office in any modern democracy were indeed concealed and became undistinguishable from the personality of Tanaka himself. This approach is based on the *omote-ura* cultural implications of Japanese public speech, and not only at the political level. However, Tanaka's novelty must be seen within its historical context in which Japan was striving to leave behind the war disasters and shame of the allied occupation period. His novelty drew on the language that he was able to invent, and that has generally not been replicated since, in which public/private, action/thought, formal/informal become categories that were externalized and played with like cards in a political game in which ordinary citizens succumb to illusion and take part.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the interpretation of any language needs to be placed within its own cultural and political and historical context. Within this, the language of politics can be considered a separate category where the use of specific terms and phrases may allude to other associated meanings. This means that caution should be used when interpreting the terms employed not only in another language, but often also within their own linguistic context. First of all, the translator needs to be familiar with the language code used in that particular environment and with the cultural biases of that society in order to avoid loss of meaning or misinterpreting often crucial connotations. Another area that causes problems in interpreting political terms is the nature of political (and media) rhetoric that uses words and language in a frequently manipulative manner and which is often very subtle as well. Intentional shifts

in language code can also be very indicative in specific cases, pointing to the use of a manner other than that used thus far, such as in the Japanese case. In particular, the contested personality of Tanaka Kakuei provides evidence for the idea that political language is a metalanguage in which actors and decision-makers can move away from public expectations, on the one hand, and constraints relative to the structure of politics, on the other. The corruption scandals that affected Japan in the 1970s are telling of how, under particular historical and social conditions, private motivation and public moral may become indiscernible. Tanaka Kakuei, with his determination and fine brain, exemplified a model, uncommon in Japan, of language sustained by action. Here, integrity is not simply obfuscated by the strength of this model, but it is eventually brought onto the backstage of cultural and discursive practices.

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