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Description

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Previously, I wrote about how Japan is considered a high-context culture. This time, I'd like to share some recent thoughts that relate to that idea.

Thanks to inbound tourism policies, many foreigners are now visiting Japan. At the same time, some challenges have emerged—such as individuals who exploit legal loopholes to overstay or those who reside in Japan without proper authorization. There are even cases of people using public services unfairly, which can be a cause for concern.

Some foreigners—particularly those from Western countries—sometimes criticize Japanese people for not speaking English, assuming that their own way is the standard. But I imagine many Japanese people feel, “If you come to Japan, you should at least try to use Japanese.” In fact, when foreigners make an effort to learn the language and show respect for the culture, they are generally warmly welcomed.

There are also structural differences in languages. While many languages follow the subject-verb-object (SVO) order, Japanese typically uses subject-object-verb (SOV). This word order contributes to a communication style where the conclusion comes later, allowing space for thought and interpretation. It reflects a cultural preference for not rushing to conclusions and maintaining composure during conversation.

However, this can make Japanese seem vague or indirect to foreigners, and it may even be viewed as “irrational” by those unfamiliar with its nuances. But once the cultural and linguistic context is understood, these misunderstandings tend to lessen.

In addition, Japanese often omits the subject in conversations, and silence itself can carry significant meaning. Japanese people have lived on these islands for tens of thousands of years, developing a shared sense of time, history, and mutual understanding. As a result, it often feels natural to communicate without saying everything explicitly. That's why unspoken words and meaningful silences are so deeply embedded in the language—it's highly context-dependent.

It's not easy for non-Japanese speakers to fully grasp this style of communication. Perhaps in 30,000 years it might come naturally—but honestly, there's no need to force anyone to “become Japanese.” It's perfectly fine for everyone to live comfortably within their own language and culture.

That said, there are situations where cross-cultural understanding is important. For example, it helps to explain that silence in Japanese culture is often intentional and can express things like respect, empathy, agreement, disagreement, hesitation, or even rejection. It's also useful to teach the value placed on “what's not said” in high-context cultures. In contrast to low-context cultures like those in the English-speaking world—where “saying things clearly is a sign of sincerity”—Japan sometimes emphasizes maintaining relationships by *not* saying things directly.

To deepen this understanding, experiential learning can be effective. For example, after a meeting or conversation, asking questions like “What do you think that silence meant?” or “How could you have responded?” can lead to helpful insights.

When it comes to sentence structure and clarity, today's generative AI is doing quite well. But when it comes to understanding "silence," there's still a long way to go.

AI today is trained mainly on data that is explicitly expressed—text, transcripts, and spoken language. However, non-verbal elements such as pauses, facial expressions, atmosphere, and intentional silences are much harder for AI to learn. Understanding silence requires the ability to grasp broader context and infer what's *not* being said.

To achieve that, we'll need to further develop multimodal AI—models that can process not just text, but also tone, timing, and facial expressions. In that sense, Japan, with its extremely high-context communication style, might actually be a great place for research and development in this area.

To incorporate silence as part of language, we'll need to analyze things like the length of pauses between utterances, changes in speaking tempo, and convert these into metadata that AI can understand. Treating silence as a meaningful part of dialogue—and following up with questions like "Was that pause intentional?" or "Is there anything you're unsure about?"—could help AI better navigate human conversations.

Thinking along these lines, it seems that even on a small scale, individuals could experiment with LoRA fine-tuning and reinforcement learning with human feedback to explore how silence could be better interpreted by AI.

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Date Created

2025?6?11?

Author

kazuo-tsubaki