

## Culture as Context

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The relationship between context and culture seems to result in certain patterns, forms, and linguistic or non-linguistic features. They are all packaged in a product called “text.” If we closely observe our own linguistic behavior, we can see how much all of these elements affect each other. From a discourse analytic perspective, culture is a necessary aspect to examine in order to infer what is truly occurring in a conversation. Gumperz (1982) suggests that no matter what the context is, “all verbal behavior is governed by social norms specifying participant roles, rights and duties vis-à-vis each other” (p.165). He warns us of the danger of misunderstanding the speaker’s intentions and meanings if we solely rely on our own cultural background to interpret the talk. For instance, Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki and Ogino (1986) and Ide (2006) assert that a strict Japanese social code for politeness called “wakimae” (discernment) requires all Japanese speakers to comply with it without choice in their verbal activities. Japanese society emphasizes humility and one way this is realized is the use of the “non-acceptance” strategy in compliment responses.

The following is an excerpt from a recent conversation I had with a Japanese female friend, “M.” She is newly engaged to an American man, so we met up for a drink to chat. Since I had never met him, I asked if she had his picture with her. After she took the photograph out of her purse and passed it to me, we had the following exchange:

### *Your Fiancé is Good-Looking!*

- 1 J : ohhh, kakko ii jan! sugoi hansamu da yo ne.  
(Wow, he is gorgeous! Really handsome, isn’t he? )
- 2 M : eeeh? son-na koto nai yo. maa maa kana. hahahaha!  
(What? No, he’s not. He’s just OK. Hahahaha!)
- 3 J : eeeh, son-na koto naitte. maji ni otokomae da yo!  
(Oh, no, come on, he is really good-looking!)
- 4 M : soo ja nai yo...soo kana? soo omowanai kedo. futsuu ja nai? hahaha.  
(No, he’s not! Is he? I don’t think so. He’s just average-looking, hahaha)
- 5 junko chan no danna no hou ga hansamu da yo!  
(I think your husband is more handsome!)
- 6 J : ha? yadaaaa, nani itten no, zenzen jan.  
(What? God, no way, he’s not at all!)
- 7 ((Both women laugh it off and shift into another topic))

If we analyze what transpired in this excerpt without any regards to culture, this whole exchange may appear very strange to most people from Western cultures. In line 1, J compliments M’s fiancé, but M denies it immediately in her response in line 2. J repeats her compliment and challenges M to admit that her fiancé is good-looking in line 3. M still deflects it, but this time she does so by a lesser degree in line 4. In line 5, M returns the compliment to J about J’s spouse,

and it is J this time denying M's compliment in her response in line 6. Thus, this sequence shows both interlocutors repeating their denial or deflection of what was given as a compliment to their fiancé or spouse. We understand what is occurring in this excerpt, but we do not know why it is occurring if we entirely ignore what cultural or societal expectations are behind it. In the American culture, the preferred response to compliments is acceptance and a simple "thank you." However, the preferred response to a compliment in Japanese culture is *non-acceptance*. Peculiar as it might seem, this sequence is indeed an appropriate, typical Japanese conversational routine revolving around a context in which compliments and compliment responses are involved. This is also observed in Chinese conversation, and this type of compliment-denial loop has been called "tug-of-war" (Le, in press). But why do they employ the "non-acceptance" strategy to begin with? It is generally known that Japanese politeness frequently requires one to be extremely humble. In Japanese society, there is a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders, and nearly everything seems to be distinguished in this way (Condon & Yousef, 1975). Therefore, it is the cultural norm that accepting a compliment for "inside members," such as family, spouses and even fiancés, would produce the same type of consequence as "self-praise," making "me" seem conceited to others. Ide (2006) suggests that "politeness" is not entirely a volitional choice but rather a set of *social rules* that we are obliged to follow. Thus, any socially competent Japanese adult would know that he/she must use a "non-acceptance" strategy whenever the context contains a compliment directed at him/her or members of his/her side.

This example tells us that the phenomena of linguistic behavior cannot be explained by merely looking at the text and context without any understanding of what cultural norms and tendencies underlie them. If discourse analysis is about discovering the meaning behind the text and what effects it achieves in a given context, culture is as significant a clue as the text and context themselves in solving the entire mystery. It will complement and even strengthen the findings from the text since it can provide rich resources for verification and validation.

## REFERENCES

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(2008).