This is a contribution from Japan to a project for a comparative study of business letters in various countries. Maintaining that a direct, surface-level comparison can be misleading, the authors first review the characteristics of the Japanese language, the traditional format and style of Japanese letters, and the status of letter writing in Japanese business circles. Then they discuss, with some examples, typical Japanese ways of thinking and feeling behind the letters they write, whether in Japanese or in English. This may serve as a hint for cross-cultural understanding, especially about the often ambiguous communications of the Japanese.

**Japanese Communication Behavior as Reflected in Letter Writing**

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"HOW JAPAN DOES IT" was the title of *Time’s* cover story (March 30, 1981) on Japan’s rise in world business. "How Japanese businessmen communicate" should be one of the factors contributing to this rise, but so far the Japanese have been more often criticized than commended for their poor English (some English and American professors dubbed it *Japlish* or *Janglish*) and for their communication behavior in general.

People who must deal with Japanese are well advised to look into the characteristics of Japanese ways of thinking and feeling as reflected in business correspondence, instead of just blaming them for ambiguity or unpredictability.

For international business, Japanese businessmen write mostly in English. But their mother tongue, customs and manners concerning communication in general, and cultural background are so different from those of English-speaking people that they cannot get away from their native ways even when they communicate in English, unless they have thoroughly mastered English and other Western habits of saying and doing things.

It follows then that a simple, direct comparison between letters written by Japanese either in English or translated into English and those in other languages will not be theoretically valid. Before presenting examples of letters written by Japanese, it will be informative to some readers to introduce the main features of the Japanese language and its writing system, the Japanese customs of letter writing in general, and the characteristics of communication behavior as reflected in letter writing.
Such preliminaries may seem roundabout, but may throw a light upon the seemingly strange and unpredictable communications of the Japanese and enable foreign businessmen to avoid making a mistake of taking modesty for inability, respect for lack of friendly feelings, politeness for a downright lie, etc.

THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE
AND ITS WRITING SYSTEMS

The following is a brief introduction to Japanese, oversimplified but sufficient to show the linguistic environment under which Japanese people are brought up.

The Japanese language is in a class by itself. With its origin still uncertain, it defies genealogical and morphological classification. Its typical word order is SOV (Subject+Object+Verb), as opposed to the SVO order found in many other languages. It also differs from English in that it is highly agglutinative (as in Korean, but not quite so as in Turkish) rather than isolating (as in Chinese) or inflectional (as in many Indo-European languages). There seems to be no major language which is really akin to Japanese.

Its writing system is quite complicated, with three or rather four sets of characters besides numbers, figures, and punctuation marks.

1. Kanji (Chinese characters) are used for writing a majority of nouns and stems of other important words. There are tens of thousands of them but about 2,000 are commonly used.

2. Kana (syllabary), of which there are two kinds: a) Hiragana (syllabary with cursive lines) for particles, auxiliary verbs, and other function words, and b) Katakana (syllabary with straight lines) for foreign words, onomatopoeias, etc. There are 48 each in number but they can express more than 48 sounds by their combinations and with some marks.

3. Romaji (Roman letters) are not always necessary but sometimes used for quoting foreign words and recently for brand names of some merchandise, etc.

You can write Japanese entirely in hiragana, as in books for young children; or katakana, as in telegrams and telex within Japan; or Romaji, as in international telegrams and telex. But there are so many homonyms that you cannot do full justice to the language unless you use the mixed system, that is, mostly in kanji and kana.
While English is written sideways from left to right, the traditional Japanese way is to write vertically and from right to left. But lateral writing has been increasing in business and official letters.

There are typewriters for Japanese, but typewriting in Japanese is a very cumbersome affair. For kana or Romaji alone, machines for English can be adapted, but the Japanese orthography requires at least 2,000 characters. A simple typewriter for personal use has over 2,000 types built in and a box of additional types. Business firms are equipped with much larger machines. You can imagine how inefficient it is to pick up types one by one from a stock of over 2,000.

With the progress in office automation, including word processing, the problem is being solved. But it is still expensive and many business letters are written by hand or with slow typewriters.

THE TRADITIONAL FORMAT OF JAPANESE LETTERS

What follows applies to both personal and business letters, except where the distinction is indicated.

Until quite recently, say, fifty years ago, the Japanese wrote letters, particularly personal letters, in accordance with the traditional form and style, using a roll of paper and a brush and Indian ink.

There was a well-established format, starting with (1) the salutation followed by (2) a remark about the season or weather, (3) an inquiry about the receiver's health (in personal letters) or congratulations on the receiver's prosperity (in business letters), and (4) thanks for a gift or some other kindness recently received (in personal letters) or patronage (in business letters). Then, (5) the main message appeared.

Likewise to conclude a letter, (6) a closing remark or summary and (7) good wishes for the receiver's health or prosperity were necessary before (8) the complimentary close.

After that came (9) the date, (10) the sender's name, and (11) the receiver's name with an appropriate title.

In the older style, there was no pagination since rolled paper was cut wherever the letter ended, and there was no paragraphing, either. Today, sheets of paper are used, and pagination and paragraphing are usually practised.
Efficiency-minded people omit some of the 11 elements mentioned above, but often do so with apologies. It may be said, therefore, that the traditional form is still embedded in the mind of the Japanese, except for the young generation.

Recently, official and business letters have been written on printed letterheads, either by hand or on a typewriter, and laterally rather than vertically. Though there is no fast rule about the layout, the following is gaining ground: If the letterhead is printed laterally at the top, first comes the date, then the inside address as in English letters. Unlike English letters, the sender's job title and name appear after the inside address with the sender's seal. The letter may or may not be signed by the sender himself, his seal being considered more important than the signature. Very often the name is typewritten.

After that, the message begins. The beginning and the end are indicated by the salutation and the complimentary close. The subject may be written in the center before the message, as in English letters.

THE STYLE OF JAPANESE LETTERS

Strictly speaking, you seldom "write as you talk," in spite of the famous motto. In English you may write personed letters nearly as you talk. But the difference between spoken and written Japanese is so wide that one may exaggerate and say that there are two systems of language. Recently the gap has been narrowing, but there had been the "epistolary style" called sohroh-bun until one generation ago, or before the end of WWII. It was so called because each sentence ended with an honorific verb-affix sohroh.

There were and still are strict rules concerning the choice of salutations, complimentary closes, titles, etc. To show humbleness about yourself and respect toward others, there are dozens of nouns and pronouns referring to self and others from which you must choose the right one for each occasion.

Remarks about the season or weather at the beginning of a letter may sound absurd to Western readers, but they are often used in Japanese letters just as a seasonal word is essential to haiku (17-syllabled poem). There are some set phrases for this purpose, and books on letter writing list their models season by season or month by month. Perhaps this is a reflection of the life of the Japanese living close to Nature.
The present-day young Japanese do not know much about these things and write personal letters as they talk, but business letters are written in a more formal way. Examples will be presented later, but it may be almost impossible to reproduce the style and tone.

To put it in a nutshell, Japanese society is still feudalistic in a way, especially in the business circles, where vertical human relations are made much of, though in many other ways the people are enjoying full democratic rights and are quite egalitarian. So the letter style is characterized by politeness and formality and will seem much less vivid than English letters.

THE STATUS OF LETTERS IN JAPANESE BUSINESS CIRCLES

While trying to collect sample letters, the authors have keenly felt the appalling decline of the status of letters in the business world, especially for domestic business. For international trade, telex is now the primary means of communication. Of course letters are still used, but their functions have shifted to that of confirmation or courtesy or for matters of high policy.

For domestic business, telephone calls and personal calls are preferred to letters. For one thing, Japanese markets are geographically small. But a deeper reason is that the Japanese have always been—and particularly the younger generation are—"allergic" to letter writing. The strict rules mentioned before are too troublesome to follow. Moreover, letters are not always considered the highest form of courtesy. In a "thank-you" note, for example, one often finds such an apology as "Please excuse me for lack of formality in thanking you by this note instead of paying a personal call."

The difference in the concept of contracts may also come in here. Being a nation of virtually one-race, one-language, and one-culture, the Japanese have felt little need to write down in black and white all the talks leading to a contract. Among the Japanese there is much less room for misunderstanding than in international transactions.

So most of the business talks are carried out by telephone or personal call, the latter being considered more polite. Only the data in inquiries, estimates, offers, etc., are confirmed in writing, often in forms or form letters, and contracts are made out.
Foreign businessmen may be well advised to understand the background as mentioned above and the resulting reluctance or inefficiency of many Japanese businessmen in writing letters. Poor correspondents are not always unwilling or insincere.

THE WAY OF THINKING
AS REFLECTED IN LETTERS

Mention has already been made about the general formality and politeness of Japanese letters. A longer treatise will be necessary to discuss the Japanese mentality. But here let us take up some features of letters written by Japanese in English and Japanese, mainly the latter, and point out the different way of thinking behind them.

The rules about the choice of salutations and personal pronouns according to the relative status of the sender and the receiver, and the fixed order of presentation (seasonal greetings, words of thanks, main message, and so on) are sometimes a great help rather than a hindrance. As long as you observe the rules, you are always on safe ground. No matter how difficult the situation may be, you can begin a letter with stereotyped greetings which serve as a buffer to bad news or refusal.

On the other hand, you cannot apply such techniques as the AIDA formula and other attention-getting devices often found in American sales letters. Whether good news or bad news, the Japanese tend to write in a chronological order or give reasons or excuses before stating the action taken or requested. Though the habit is gradually changing and a more direct approach is increasing, it is not wise to throw away a letter from Japan merely because the opening is not attractive enough. A good proposition may turn up later.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature is found in the way the Japanese decline a proposition or refuse a request—in other words, the Japanese way of saying "no." In English, too, you use a certain degree of buffer. But a Japanese letter beginning with what appear to be empty greetings and thanks, followed by lengthy reasons before a final or often ambiguous statement of refusal, may seem irritating to Westerners. But it is not fair to conclude that your Japanese partner is lacking in sincerity. Such is the traditional way devised out of consideration not to hurt the feelings of others with flat refusal.
Such a comment as “a Japanese ‘yes’ means ‘no’ and vice versa” is too exaggerated or contains but half truth. The error in the use of yes and no may be simply due to the speaker’s poor command of English. In Japanese, we say “Hai (yes)” to signify agreement, whether the original sentence is negative or affirmative. (“You are not Chinese, are you?” “Hai”—meaning “No, I am not.”) Beyond such a level, there are many ways of saying “no” without hurting others’ feelings.

One extremity is the delay in or lack of response to an inquiry or request. To Western people, an immediate reply may be more welcome even if it is “no.” But many Japanese hesitate to refuse immediately as if no consideration were given the matter or no efforts were made to meet the request. Sometimes no efforts are made, especially when the request is too much. But the delay in response is understood as a sort of white lie and mutually excused.

One of us (Haneda), when he was in business, had the following experience. Hesitating to say “no,” he said “It’s very difficult,” at which his foreign customer insisted that the matter might be difficult but not impossible and should be carried out by all means. He had to say “no” finally and must have worsened his impression on his customer.

“Sorry” and “regret” are two words often used by Japanese. People well experienced in overseas life say that you should not use these words unless you are prepared to admit your mistake and pay for it. But when a Japanese writes “We are sorry” in reply to a complaint or claim, he does not necessarily mean that he would take legal responsibility but that he sympathizes with the customer who is not satisfied, whether the customer is right or wrong. So the eventual refusal is not inconsistent with apologies at the beginning in Japanese.

Japanese modesty or humbleness may sound excessive in some cases. It is always proverbial that a Japanese, when making a gift, usually says “This is a trifling (or worthless) thing,” and when serving a food or drink, “This may not be tasty.” Logically it is absurd to offer a worthless thing or unpalatable food. But it is not fair to compare Japanese and English through literal translation. The sentences cited above are a sign of respect toward the receiver, debasing self and elevating others.

Japanese sales letters cannot be so vivid, personal, aggressive, high-pitched, or hard-sell as American letters. Instead of declaring from the very beginning, “I have a very good proposition or
"a very good product to offer," the traditional Japanese way is to begin a letter with customary greetings, etc. and then: "By the way, our humble company has recently developed a new product and we are submitting a sample for your kind inspection," or some such modest statement. In advertising, direct mail, TV commercials, etc. high-toned wording is increasing, but in letters the tone is usually subdued.

Incidentally, Japanese seldom write application letters for job hunting, nor do they go to prospective employers direct. More often they go to persons who act as go-betweens. The intermediaries may extol the applicant to the skies, but the applicant himself maintains a rather modest attitude even in a job interview, stating his qualifications in his personal data sheet. This, too, has been changing, but it should be kept in mind that it is hard to distinguish modesty from inability or lack of self-confidence. For that matter, some Japanese who speak English fluently or at least actively are often taken to be competent but prove otherwise later. English teaching in Japan is not well balanced, and those who can read and write well do not necessarily speak well. So you cannot judge a Japanese solely by his ability to speak English.

EXAMPLES AND COMMENTS

Though the discussion in the preceding sections is far from adequate, let us proceed to observe some examples taken from real life. Each example is translated into good natural English as close to the original as the difference in linguistic structure permits.

Some of the proper names and commodity names have been replaced by fictitious names to avoid causing trouble to the original writers.
Example 1: A Letter Preserving the Traditional Style  
(translation)

AZ409  
April 7, 1981

Showa Machine Works Ltd.  
Attention of Sales Department

5-1 Moriyama Maguro  
Moriyamaku, Nagoya 463  
Asumi Trading Co., Ltd.

President: Nobuaki Iwai

Allow us to open   
with all reverence to you:

The season for cherry blossoms is here with us and everybody is beginning to feel refreshed. We sincerely congratulate you on becoming more prosperous in your business.

We have an inquiry from a foreign customer and shall be very happy to have your best price and technical literature for the item mentioned below:

Wire Drawing Machine  
6 units for Taiwan

Specifications:

1. Finished sizes: 0.04 mm to 0.10 mm  
2. Spooler: Single  
3. Speed: Min. 1500 meters/min.  
4. Type of spooler: Expanding arbor  
5. Capstan: Must be covered with ceramic  
6. Dimension of spool:  
   Flange diam. 215mm  
   Barrel diam. 163mm  
   Bore diam. 97mm  
   Traverse 200mm

The above are all the information available for this inquiry. We ask you to recommend a machine that can meet these specifications.

We shall be very pleased if you will study the inquiry and let us have your reply as soon as possible. We solicit your favor.

Let us close with  
great respect to you.
Comment on Example 1

The original is handwritten in a rather slovenly manner, because this is a simple inquiry requiring no formality. And yet, the traditional greetings at the beginning and at the end are preserved.

In the translated version, the equivalents to salutation and complimentary close will look strange to some readers. If they are put into English like “Gentlemen” and “Very truly yours,” the original flavor will be lost. In Japanese there are various degrees of formality to choose from.

Example 2: A Letter without Empty Greetings
(translation)

Sumikei Shindo Kogyo Ltd.
Mr. Shiota, Production Manager

October 31, 1970
Showa Machine Works, Ltd.
President: Mitsuo Aramaki
(Company & personal seals)

Application for Permission to
Visit Your Plant (to inspect
the machine we supplied)

Mr. W.K. Erickson, Export Manager of FENN MFG CO. of
U.S.A., with whom we have a licensing agreement, has come to
Japan and is now staying here to work with us. He wishes to
inspect the working condition of the Copper Tube Winder
Model CTS-40 which we designed and manufactured on their
license and delivered to you.

It is requested, therefore, that you allow us to inspect the
equipment on the day you designate (November 4) on condi-
tion that we will never divulge to third parties any secret mat-
ters we may see in your plant.

Comment on Example 2

In this example there are no empty greetings. The format is
the same as in English letters except for the placement of the
date and signature. The salutation and the complimentary close
are not used.
Example 3: A Letter Showing Humble Attitude  
(translation)  

(LETTERHEAD IN ENGLISH)  

August 21, 1979  

Mr. Kaneyuki Taeshiro  
International A & M  

The summer heat is still lingering, but we hope that you are as prosperous as ever and we thank you very much for your constant patronage.  

Concerning your request that the inquiry report be sent you not by sea mail but by air mail and that two voucher copies be sent you immediately upon publication, we have asked Hitchcock to meet your request as you see in the enclosed copy. We shall be happy if you find it satisfactory.  

It has not yet been long since I took over my duties from my predecessor and I may not be up to your expectations in many respects. But I am determined to do my very best, so please give me your further patronage and guidance.  

It will be some time before autumn cool. I pray that you take good care of yourself.  

Sincerely,  
Kazunobu Marusugi  

Comment on Example 3  

Some firms doing international business use letterheads in English even for domestic business. In this example, the second paragraph is the main message, the others being intended for human relations. Observe the remarks about the season at the beginning and the end, and also see the humble attitude in the third paragraph.
Example 4: A Letter That Succeeded in Sale
(translation)

(LETTERHEAD)

(Signed by)
Director
Technical Department

Estimate on Horizontal Bull Block
for Aluminium Tube

Concerning the above-named machine, we submitted to you through Mitsubishi Trading Corporation our estimate together with the specification dated June 12 last year. The estimate, however, was intended for manufacturing domestically the bull block for copper tube, a product of Marshall Richards of England. On September 20, I visited you to learn your requirements in detail and felt that the machine we had estimated on was too big and too luxurious for the one actually required. Moreover, Marshall Richards is not so well versed in bull block for aluminium tube as in that for copper tube. So we have concluded that we have to develop the right type of machine on our own.

Since then, we received an order for a similar machine for steel tube and succeeded in developing it. Believing that this is the nearest thing for your requirements, we invited your technical director to see the test operation on February 13 this year. At that time, however, various shortcomings were revealed, but we have since solved all those problems, and are now sending herewith a new estimate.

We are sorry for the long delay, but we hope you will excuse us because it was due to our sincere wish not to deliver any unnecessarily expensive machine.

Comment on Example 4

The order of presentation is chronological as in many Japanese letters. The heart of the matter appears near the end. Each paragraph is rather long. But the consideration for the receiver's interest is evident throughout the letter, which eventually led to a sale.
Example 5: Written originally in English but reflecting
Japanese way of thinking

15th March, 1980

Schwedisch-Internationalds O Press Büro
Skeppargatan 24
S-11837 Stockholm
Sweden

Dear Sirs,

We thank you very much for your cooperation as our agent. We are glad that thanks to your efforts our sales in your country have been increasing remarkably.

Today we are writing this to ask a favour of you. Some time ago a newspaper here reported that a Swedish firm developed an insecticide for agricultural use and we took great interest in it. One of our customers also took interest and wishes to have literature on it.

We tried to find the address of the maker but could not find it here, though the newspaper article mentioned the name as "ABC Chemicals."

We wonder if you happen to know them, and if you do, please let us know their full address. Otherwise, you may be able to locate them, since they must have their office in your city.

We are sorry to trouble you but shall be obliged if you will let us know their address. If their office is not so far from yours, will you approach them with our inquiry and ask them to send us 10 copies of relative literature. We shall be glad to pay for the expenses in any case if you invoice us later.

Your cooperation would be much appreciated.

Yours faithfully,
TOYO TRADING CO., LTD.
(Signed)
Taro Aoyama
Import Manager

TA:hn

Comment on Example 5

According to the original writer, he could not open the letter with some such familiarity, "Will you help us locate a Swedish firm named ABC Chemicals?" The subject matter is outside the business between the sender and the receiver, so he felt it necessary to write the first two paragraphs to explain the circumstances and the third to show that he himself made due efforts before asking for help.
The fourth paragraph still shows a considerable hesitation. The fifth or the last but one is the core of the matter and covers even the question of expenses.

Between intimate firms a much shorter note may not be impolite, but the above example shows the Japanese flavor even when written in fairly good English—fairly good for a Japanese.

As to format, this firm uses the British style because most of the customers are British or European. Japanese firms follow either American or British style, or some adapt the style to that of customers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

International business is carried on largely by means of a common language, particularly English. But when the differences in linguistic structure and cultural background are wide, as between the English-speaking people and the Japanese, the use of a common language is often misleading.

Since the Japanese language is seldom used outside Japan, Japanese businessmen have been putting enormous efforts to learn English and other languages, which no doubt has contributed greatly to the growth of Japanese economy. We do not expect foreign businessmen to learn Japanese, but we do hope that they will realize, if partially, the characteristics of the communication habits of the Japanese. Then, what seems to be ambiguity or unpredictability will become clearer, and one can judge the real intention between the lines written in the common language.

One swallow does not make a summer (trite?). The examples cited are far too few to cover the features of Japanese letters, and the discussion has been cursory. But it will be a great pleasure for the authors if our article can serve as a guide to some readers who are interested in this field of study.