



## **" Lost in Translation" in Japan" ? Some practical tips to better understand Business Communication & Dynamics.**

### **Introduction**

I have been working for 2 traditional Japanese companies from 2004 to 2013. I was excited to discover a real different and rich culture and with economic successes, able to balance the tradition and modernity at the same time.

I will share with you the phases of my improvement journey, “only touching the surface of the sophisticated Japanese culture” with a practical approach.

- 1- about Wording (this article)
- 2- about Meeting and influencing (coming next week)

As a teenager, my only direct experience interacting with the Japanese was when I used to live in Versailles jogging at the Palace park every WE. There, I was asked to take pictures of families in front of a statue of Louis XIV riding his horse (everyone having visited Versailles has the picture in mind). And certainly for thanking me & taking home a “piece of France”, I was photographed in return hundreds time...

We all have friends who have done some business from the 70's to 90's with electronics (Sony, Pioneer, Canon), cars (Nissan, Toyota) eg, and their feedback was always about the same challenge: How to interpret a “Yes” on the spot in Japan & when reporting this “Yes” to company back home? I was fully and mentally prepared with this “Yes” answer, so difficult to understand for the non-Japanese.

Coming back to 2004, to prepare my very first visit, I was reading books as “Fear & Trembling” from Amelie Nothomb, a Belgium novelist, Memoirs of a Geisha, or the full biography of Emperor Hirohito, and luckily watching “the famous movie “Lost in Translation” that takes place in Shinjuku, Tokyo, mainly at Park Hyatt Hotel.

## ***Classical World-map in Japan***



### **About Wording(Part 1/2)**

#### **Simple words, but challenging interpretation**

##### **“Yes, No, recommendation”**

A couple of months later, I was scheduling my first business trip to Tokyo.

After a welcome ceremony, a non-classical one, my Japanese colleagues taking initiative to shake my hand warmly, I was immediately invited to review business dynamics and situation in different Asian markets. Great initiative and good approach for sharing successes and Way of Working, and despite the jet lag, I was already feeling a subliminal message for Europe.

With a sleepless night on the plane, no special agenda was planned for the first evening, and the day after, more detailed information and meeting exchange were scheduled in the program: I will learn my second “English Japanese word” after “Yes”.

Question was: “why do you have such a heterogenous installed base in Europe, when we send you a monthly technical bulletin with all details to upgrade European systems at the best of use? Simple and valuable question, but not discussed before, and midnight in Europe...my commitment was to investigate deeply the situation of the 2,500 customers installed over a period of 10 years.

Back to Europe, and then having a first meeting, checking the SOP and understanding the European interpretation of monthly technical bulletins, the issue popped up immediately.

The word “**recommendation**” was used by Japanese technical center and according to the culture (confirmed by my liaison agent), it means “mandatory” in Japanese, when European and American understood “at your will”: impossible to force a firm decision on paper with direct wording, and willing that your partner “keeps face”.

Now, coming back to the “**Yes**”, what we know as a “polite yes”, it is understandable with the 2 following concepts: decisions are made collectively, and there are different circles of influence involved. Impossible for someone to answer individually with a “yes”, even to a simple question. Then the “Yes” is a polite and vague way to answer with different interpretations:

Yes, (I am listening)

Yes, (I have understood your question)

Yes, (we will consider your question)

etc...

And how to say “**No**” keeping face for both interlocutors?

Having welcomed several Japanese in Europe with the main mission to facilitate communication,

and re-phrasing / reporting activities to Japan in a more comprehensive way, I was always starting with a kind of “debriefing” about communication style.

In Europe and USA, the professional communication try to be factual, direct, precise, avoiding as much as possible interpretations and always in a polite, respectful way.

An answer “No” is acceptable with the supportive arguments that can be shared: a debate should never make the confusion between a person and an idea.

So asking for advices for both understanding a “No” answer or the reverse to say “No” in a polite way, the best way is “*Maybe Yes*”.

An alternative, when you may be right with a local demand, but the Japanese collective decision is different: it is common to say “*Philippe-san, please understand!*”(in other words, stop arguing, there is no way to change the decision, even if the decision will be not applicable to Europe).

### **More complex words**

#### **“Business Opportunity” verbs signification in Japan**

We have discovered one way to say “No” with the “Maybe Yes”.

Let's talk about the “gradation” (scale from 1% to 100%) from a “Maybe Yes” to the full commitment of the organization to a project eg.

1% is “*Assess*” (a market eg) : very close to a “maybe yes”, but let the opportunity for the employee to work on officially, and keep its motivation

10% is “*Consider*”: several opportunities have popped up and are under discussion in the “Circle of Influence”. The objective is to collect more insights, there is no deadline for a decision.

50% is “*Confirm*”: few opportunities have succeeded at the “consider” phase, or the time from the first investigation to the current moment was long. At this stage, it is 50/50 decision but with all stakeholders involved (sometime non-officially: see Nemawashi next article) in the process, and before presenting the project officially to Management Committee.

80% is “*Approve*”: it is the top-down positive decision by Management Committee, it is now official.

100% is “*Commit*”: it is the last step (bottom-up) from the teams with their commitment and plan to achieve objectives or implement the decision.

**Next article will be on my experiences with Meeting and Influencing in Japan**

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## **Influencing and Meeting in Japan (part 2/2)**

**Some practical tips also useful for other cultures**

**Following the previous article about some English words interpretation in Japan.**

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### **Influencing**

When a decision is collective within a formal or informal circle of influence, how to get commitment to a project eg?

How to better prepare, not only the content of a “powerpoint”, but also the support and feedback of the stakeholders?

**The Concept of *Nemawashi* (coming from gardening: going around the roots)**



This process is one of the foundation to propose a change or a new project by talking with individuals to gather support, feedback, buy-in, promotion in the different circles of influence.

This process is informal and take place before any formal step. It is an investment in time considering the whole process: time “consuming” in the planning phase, but then rapid execution in the implementation phase.

A successful *nemawashi* enables projects to be carried out with the consent of all stakeholders.

In Japan, executives expect to be let in on new proposals or projects prior any formal meeting.

If they discover something new for the first time during a meeting, they will feel ignored and may reject this proposal for that reason alone.

This is what I call “preparation of a constructive environment”.

**It is also applicable in all company cultures, try it in your own company.**

## **Meetings:**

My first visits & meetings to R&D facilities outside Tokyo were extremely beneficial to better understand important points about meetings with external visitors as for example the purpose, the agenda, the Q&A session...

### **The purpose: sharing, celebrating, not arguing**

The vast majority of non-Japanese visitors are coming back frustrated with meetings in Japan after their first time. Classically, you will have dozen of Japanese employees in the room with business cards mainly in Japanese and tittle so difficult to understand. At the end of the day, you may have a huge collection of cards with you, and it's extremely impolite to write on some notes...

Gradually, I have discovered that few of them were speaking or understanding English, after the traditional phrases to welcome the visitors.

Such formal meetings are never an opportunity to make decisions, even plans, except if you have made long and detailed preparation of the meeting .

Those meetings are more a ceremony where all stakeholders around a project are sharing outcomes and committing to something (see previous article).

So, the success of a meeting starts at least months before.

### **The Agenda: the concept of no-surprise**

The agenda is the master piece of the success: it includes all participant names, titles, dates of arrival and departures for scheduling both professional and social programs (I will come back with *Nomikai* event), and of course content of the meetings.

To facilitate communications, it is highly helpful to have a Japanese liaison person enabling you in the process.

The best is to send one month in advance not only your agenda, but also a good draft of your presentations with potential important questions, you would like to address during your visit.

It will be translated into Japanese, shared, discussed and you will receive answers after the formal presentation during your visit.

What is at stake if you don't prepare: no real understanding, no answer or breaks with interruptions during presentation with long discussions in Japanese and one sentence in English at the end.

## **The Timing: Swiss accuracy**

To be on-time in Japan is to be all ready to start 10' before!

I remember my first meeting planned to start at 2:PM after a lunch for introducing ourselves. At 1:50 PM, lunch done, everyone ready around the board table, concentration at its max, a scary silence, we were expecting to start. Not yet, everyone was looking at the wall clock, following the progression of the minute and sweep second hands until 2:00PM sharp, and then officially start. Same to stop at the end of the working day with a swiss accuracy.

## **Questions during meetings or visits:**

Officially welcomed, your questions can create confusion if your Japanese partner doesn't have the appropriate answer. First of all, he may lose face in front of colleagues, and secondly it will start a process where several people will try to get the answer for him (in Japanese).

## **Continuation of meeting: The *Nomikai* event**

When a new project is approved, Japanese celebrate it with a drinking party event, usually held in a restaurant. This event called *nomikai* is important part of the Japanese culture, and take place in most companies. It is considered as a social aspect of work in a more informal atmosphere after "the best efforts" to succeed with a project.

It is also a unique opportunity to exchange between co-workers and executives and gather more confidential information. It has always been the best place for me to understand the big picture and challenges to come.

There are normally several speeches including one from the president with words of motivation & confidence for the next steps.

The *nomikai* is concluded with a typical clapping at unison.

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