

NATIONAL AND CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION  
IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** This article examines the national-cultural and linguistic features of expressing emotions in the Japanese language. It analyzes the role of the Japanese mentality, specifically the principle of "Wa" (harmony), and the concepts of "Honne" and "Tatemaе" in controlling and indirectly expressing emotions during the communication process. Furthermore, the article highlights the lexical and grammatical formation of human feelings through onomatopoeic units unique to Japanese (Giseigo and Gitaigo), as well as the psychological phenomenon of "Amae." The research provides a scholarly basis for the significance of silence (Ma) and non-verbal communication within the Japanese emotional culture.

**Keywords:** Japanese language, emotion, national-cultural features, Honne and Tatemaе, Amae, onomatopoeia, Gitaigo, ethnolinguistics, communication etiquette.

**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu maqolada yapon tilida emotsiyalarni ifodalashning o'ziga xos milliy-madaniy va lingvistik xususiyatlari tadqiq etiladi. Yapon xalqining mentaliteti, xususan, "Wa" (uyg'unlik) tamoyili, "Honne" va "Tatemaе" tushunchalarining muloqot jarayonida emotsiyalarni jilovlash va bevosita ifodalashdagi o'rni tahlil qilingan. Shuningdek, maqolada yapon tiliga xos bo'lgan onomatopeik birliklar (Giseigo va Gitaigo) hamda "Amae" psixologik fenomeni orqali inson hissiyotlarining leksik-grammatik shakllanishi yoritib berilgan. Tadqiqot davomida sukunat (Ma) va noverbal muloqotning yapon emotsional madaniyatidagi ahamiyati ilmiy asoslangan.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Yapon tili, emotsiya, milliy-madaniy xususiyat, Honne va Tatemaе, Amae, onomatopeya, Gitaigo, lingvokulturologiya, muloqot etiketi.

**Аннотация:** В данной статье исследуются специфические национально-культурные и лингвистические особенности выражения эмоций в японском языке. Анализируется менталитет японского народа, в частности роль принципа «Wa» (гармония), а также понятий «Honne» и «Tatemaе» в сдерживании и непосредственном выражении эмоций в процессе коммуникации. Кроме того, в статье рассматривается лексико-грамматическое формирование человеческих эмоций через характерные для японского языка онomatopoeические единицы (Giseigo и Gitaigo), а также психологический феномен «Amae». В ходе исследования научно обосновывается значение тишины («Ma»)¹ и невербальной коммуникации в японской эмоциональной культуре.

**Ключевые слова:** японский язык, эмоция, национально-культурные особенности, Honne и Tatemaе, Amae, онomatopeя, Gitaigo, лингвокультурология, коммуникативный этикет.

¹ Алпатов В.М. Япония: язык и культура. Москва 2008 г.

**Introduction.** Language is a complex system that embodies a nation's way of thinking, worldview, and cultural identity. Owing to its unique structural and semantic characteristics, the Japanese language occupies a distinctive position among the languages of the world. In particular, the expression of emotions in Japanese culture is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a profound socio-psychological process. Over the centuries, the Japanese people have developed a distinctive form of “emotional etiquette” that regulates how inner feelings are expressed in social interactions.

This article examines the expression of emotions in the Japanese language through the lens of the Japanese social principle of *wa* (和, harmony). In Japanese society, personal emotions are often subordinated to collective interests and social order. Consequently, the emotional lexicon of the Japanese language is characterized less by direct expression and more by the communication of empathy, the mitigation of interpersonal tension, and reliance on nonverbal cues. This study explores the unique terminology, onomatopoeic expressions, and socio-cultural filters that shape emotional communication in Japanese.

### **Psychological Concept: *Amae* (甘え) and the Sense of Interdependence**

At the core of the emotional vocabulary of the Japanese language lies the concept of *amae* (甘え). Etymologically, the term derives from *amai* (甘い), meaning “sweet.”

In essence, *amae* refers to an individual's desire to be loved, understood, accepted, and supported by others. While Western societies often emphasize independence and individualism, Japanese culture places greater value on interpersonal dependence and interdependence.

This concept is reflected in language use. For example, before making a request, Japanese speakers frequently employ expressions such as *aete* (敢えて, “daringly” or “venture to”) or *sumanai* (済まない, “I'm sorry” or “I am indebted to you”). Through these expressions, speakers acknowledge their dependence on the goodwill of others and convey an expectation of understanding and kindness from their interlocutors.

### ***Honne* (本音) and *Tatemae* (建前):**

One of the most important aspects of the Japanese communication system is the distinction between the “inner” and “outer” worlds. The concept of *honne* (本音) consists of the kanji *hon* (本, “true” or “genuine”) and *ne* (音, “sound” or “voice”) and refers to a person's genuine feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Japanese people generally express their *honne* only within a close and trusted circle, known as *uchi* (内, “inside”)<sup>2</sup>.

In contrast, *tatemae* (建前) refers to the public façade or socially expected behavior that individuals display in accordance with social norms. In social situations involving *soto* (外, “outside” or out-group members), Japanese people may conceal feelings of anger, disappointment, or dissatisfaction behind the mask of *tatemae*, maintaining a polite smile and harmonious interaction<sup>3</sup>.

This cultural characteristic has contributed to the highly developed system of *keigo* (敬語, honorific language) in Japanese. Through grammatical constraints and politeness strategies, speakers regulate and moderate the direct expression of their emotions.

### **Onomatopoeia: The Acoustic Representation of Emotions**

<sup>2</sup> [Neverov S. V. *Social and Linguistic Practice in Contemporary Japan*. Moscow: Nauka, 1982.]

<sup>3</sup> [Ono Masahiro. *Giongo, Gitaigo 4500: Nihongo Onomatopoeia Dictionary*. Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007.]

The Japanese language makes extensive use of *gitaigo* (擬態語), a category of mimetic expressions that describe psychological states, emotions, and conditions with remarkable subtlety. These expressions enable speakers to convey emotional experiences in a vivid and often sensory manner.

For example:

- *ira-ira* (イライラ) — a feeling of irritation, frustration, or restlessness that arises when things do not proceed as expected;
- *uki-uki* (ウキウキ) — a state of excitement and happiness, characterized by a feeling of buoyancy, as if one were “floating on air.”

Without such expressions, it would be difficult to convey the full range of emotional nuances present in Japanese communication. They enrich speech by adding emotional depth, vividness, and expressive color.

### **Nonverbal Communication: *Ma* (間) and *Ishin-denshin* (以心伝心)**

In Japanese culture, there exists a notion that excessive verbalization may hinder genuine understanding. Consequently, much of interpersonal communication relies on implicit meanings and unspoken understanding.

The concept of *ma* (間) refers to meaningful silence, pauses, and the space between words or actions. Silence is not interpreted as a communicative failure; rather, it often serves as an important medium for expressing emotions and intentions.

Similarly, *ishin-denshin* (以心伝心), literally meaning “transmission from one heart to another,” denotes the ability to understand another person's feelings, thoughts, or intentions without the need for explicit verbal communication. This concept reflects the high value placed on empathy, contextual awareness, and mutual understanding within Japanese society.

*Ma* (間), *Ishin-denshin* (以心伝心), and *Enryo* (遠慮)

The concept of *ma* (間) refers to pauses and silence in communication. In Japanese culture, silence is not perceived as a breakdown in communication; rather, it provides an opportunity for reflection and for sensing the emotions and intentions of one's interlocutor.

Another important concept is *ishin-denshin* (以心伝心), which literally means “transmission from heart to heart.” It denotes the ability to convey and understand genuine emotions without explicit verbal expression. Feelings are communicated through subtle cues such as facial expressions, eye contact, breathing patterns, and the overall atmosphere of the interaction.

Closely related to these concepts is *enryo* (遠慮), which refers to self-restraint and consideration for others. It involves suppressing one's desires, opinions, or emotions in order to avoid burdening or inconveniencing other people. As a result, emotional moderation becomes an important aspect of social interaction in Japanese society.

### **Grammatical Forms and Emotional Nuance**

In Japanese, emotions are expressed not only through lexical means but also through grammatical structures, particularly sentence-final particles and modality markers that reflect the speaker's attitude toward the utterance.

#### **Sentence-final Particles**

For example, the sentence-final particles *~ne* (～ね) and *~yo* (～よ) carry significant emotional and interpersonal meanings.

*~ne* (～ね) roughly corresponds to “isn't it?” or “don't you think?” in English. It invites agreement, empathy, and emotional alignment from the interlocutor. In this sense, it can be viewed as a grammatical manifestation of the concept of *amae* (甘え), reflecting a desire for mutual understanding and emotional support.

~yo ( ~よ ), by contrast, conveys the speaker's confidence in the information being communicated and emphasizes the intention to share that information or feeling with another person<sup>4</sup>. Voice Forms and Emotional Perspective.

The Japanese passive voice often carries emotional connotations of inconvenience, suffering, or undesired experience. For example, instead of simply stating that “it rained,” Japanese speakers may use the expression *ame ni furareta* (雨に降られた), literally “I was rained upon.” This construction implies that the speaker experienced discomfort or inconvenience as a result of the rain.

Such usage demonstrates that Japanese speakers frequently frame events from an emotional and subjective perspective, even when describing natural phenomena.

Contemporary Japanese Language: Kawaii (可愛い) Culture and Digital Emotions

In contemporary Japanese society, the emotional landscape has been enriched by new cultural concepts and forms of expression.

One of the most influential concepts is *kawaii* (可愛い). Although commonly translated as “cute,” *kawaii* represents far more than physical attractiveness. It reflects a broader emotional and cultural orientation characterized by positivity, harmlessness, innocence, and a desire to protect and care for others.

Another notable phenomenon is the emergence of *emoji* (絵文字), a term composed of *e* (絵, “picture”) and *moji* (文字, “character” or “symbol”). Emojis, now used worldwide, originated in Japan. Their development can be linked to the Japanese preference for indirect emotional expression. Visual symbols provide an effective means of communicating feelings that may remain unspoken due to social conventions associated with *tatemaie* and emotional restraint.

Thus, emojis have become an important tool for conveying subtle emotional nuances in modern digital communication.

Expressing Emotions through the Concepts of “Face” (Kao – 顔) and “Eyes” (Me – 目)

In Japanese phraseology, emotions are frequently conveyed through expressions involving parts of the body, particularly the face and the eyes.

*kao ga tatsu* (顔が立つ) — literally, “one's face stands up.” This expression means that a person's reputation, dignity, or social standing has been preserved, resulting in feelings of satisfaction or relief.

*me ga nai* (目がない) — literally, “to have no eyes for something.” It refers to having a strong fondness or emotional attachment to a particular object, activity, or subject.

*kuchi ga omoi* (口が重い) — literally, “to have a heavy mouth.” This expression describes a reserved or taciturn person who tends not to disclose personal thoughts and emotions openly<sup>5</sup>.

## Conclusion

The study of the national and cultural characteristics of emotional expression in the Japanese language demonstrates that Japanese is fundamentally a context-dependent language. The meaning conveyed by an utterance is determined not only by the lexical content of words

<sup>4</sup> [Ono Masahiro. *Giongo, Gitaigo 4500: Nihongo Onomatopoe Dictionary*. Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007.]

<sup>5</sup> [Neverov S. V. *Social and Linguistic Practice in Contemporary Japan*. Moscow: Nauka, 1982.]

but also by the communicative situation, interpersonal relationships, and intonation with which the message is delivered.

In Japanese culture, the expression of emotions can be viewed as an art of demonstrating respect toward both the interlocutor and society as a whole. The national and cultural features examined in this study indicate that emotional restraint is not perceived as a sign of weakness; rather, it is regarded as evidence of self-discipline, inner strength, and cultural refinement.

While *tatemaie* contributes to maintaining social harmony and preventing conflict, *amae* fosters emotional closeness and interpersonal trust. At the same time, lexical layers such as *gitaigo* enrich the expressive capacity of the language and reflect the Japanese people's remarkable sensitivity to both human emotions and the natural world.

Therefore, learning the Japanese language involves far more than acquiring vocabulary and grammatical structures. It also requires an understanding of the subtle emotional principles and cultural norms that underlie Japanese communication and shape the perception and expression of emotions.

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