

# Learning Languages as Expressions of Cultures

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## Abstract

This paper considers how ideas about language and culture influence language learning. The methodology for the study is a comparison of the tasks involved in learning introductory Hindi and Japanese. The paper was written after 132 hours of study of Japanese. Through comparing how Japanese and Hindi are taught I demonstrate that integral to the learning of these languages is the need to understand linguistic forms as expressions of distinctive cultural practices. This is prefaced by a discussion of standards being advocated for language teaching in the Common European Framework (CEFR) and in the American Council for the Teaching of foreign languages (ACTFL). I argue that further work needs to be done examining how Asian cultures influence language usage and how standards might be set for understanding the relationship between languages and cultures. The conclusion which I draw from this is that the adoption of neither CEFR nor ACTFL standards will not have beneficial impact on learners without further studies of the relationship between socio- cultural and communicative approaches to language teaching.

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## 1 Literature review

In Europe, since the 18th century, the word language has been understood in two distinct ways. In his seminal English dictionary of 1755 Samuel Johnson gave two definitions of language. The first definition was ‘human speech’ to which he added, quoting from Holder, “we may define language, if we consider it more materially, to be letters, forming and producing words and sentences; and if we consider it according to the design thereof, then language is apt signs for communication of thought.” However, Johnson’s second definition of language was: “The tongue of one nation as distinct from others” (Johnson, 1983). The first definition was linguistic. It defined language as a particular system for communication, whilst the second definition was cultural. It defined language in relation to the cultural productions of a particular people or nation.

There have been a number of important approaches to issues related to motivation and language learning which have been prominent during the last two decades. Bordia and others since 2006 have argued that a complex range of institutional factors influence language learning expectations in individual students. However it is notable that none of the factors they consider relate to what constitutes language itself (Bordia, Wales, & Pittam, 2006, p. 14).

The comparison of the backgrounds of Hindi and Japanese learners suggests that any model that attempts to generalise for all foreign language learners is likely to encounter difficulties. In the case of Hindi, ‘hopes and fears’ activities carried out at the beginnings of courses I have taught over the last twenty years, in Melbourne and Singapore, showed that expectations of learners from Indian backgrounds were that a Hindi course will focus on grammar and not culture, as they already knew about Indian cultures, whilst learners from non Indian backgrounds presumed that alongside communicative activities a major component of a Hindi course would be related to

learning about Indian culture. In comparison, in the admittedly small number, of Japanese classes I have attended none of the students came from a Japanese background, and the expectation appeared to be that communicative and cultural aspects of Japanese would both be addressed in the course. This suggests that approaches to understanding how institutional factors affect language learning also need to consider how factors unique to each language influence learner expectations and how they may be managed by institutions.

A second approach has focused on the idea that there are two basic motivations for language learning, intrinsic reasons, individual interest, and extrinsic motivations, the need to get certain qualifications etc. (Vandergrift, 2005, p. 71). Hayes (2009) argued from her study of students learning Japanese at ANU “that intrinsic motivations focused on enjoyment and self-satisfaction, far outweighed extrinsic motivations such as employment prospects” (Hayes, 2009, p. 238).

In the cases of Hindi, I have, since 2008, set activities in which students have to create virtual student clubs on the issues that they feel passionate about in relation to Hindi studies. From these, it has been evident extrinsic pragmatic motivations related to work form an almost negligible element in students’ motivation, hardly any student ever having mentioned such a motivation. However, the range of intrinsic motivations could be argued to fall into three overlapping motivations. First, many students have a passion for Indian, art, films, music and spirituality, often all wrapped up together in an interest in Bollywood. Second, almost all students are motivated to learn Hindi due to a desire to travel in India. Finally, the third factor which attracts students to study Hindi, is Indians themselves, and anecdotally, I would estimate that at least a third or so of students are in relationships with Indians.

The implication of this is I suggest that there are some interesting communalities to the motivations that attract students to study Japanese and Hindi, and that as Hayes has argued it is the intrinsic factors which are the main drivers for student interest in learning these two languages.

A third approach has been to question the relationship between language and culture and argue for the creation of a transnational approach to language and culture teaching. According to Risager (2007) this is a challenge to the “traditional view that ‘language’ and ‘culture’ constitute an inseparable whole, and that language teaching must therefore work for maximum integration between teaching the target language and teaching in the target language culture (or, in other words, culture and society in the target language countries)” (Risager, 2007, pp. 1–2). This view seems to be radically at odds with the motivations of students who study Hindi and Japanese who all regard language and national cultures as being inseparable factors in what attracts them to study these languages.

However, unlike Risager, I would argue that this traditional view has already been challenged in a different way by those who view language teaching as pragmatically motivated by the needs to communicate in order to satisfy extrinsic motivations. In particular it appears that the Common European Framework for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) is being used as a justification for stressing pragmatic language learning based on extrinsic motivations. This perception is based on the way in which the descriptors for different levels in the framework are almost solely concerned with communicative abilities and cultural issues are not directly addressed within the framework. It can be argued that the CEFR “has no section for culture but several cultural references spread through its examples.” (Tomalin, 2008). On the other hand, the Association of Language Testers of Europe (ALTE) defines their level four as equivalent to CEFR C1 level and it is the first level at which learners are explicitly stated to be expected to be “aware of the relationship between the language and the culture it exists in” (ALTE, n.d.).

This appears to stand in sharp distinction to the US approach which incorporates cultural understanding into its explicit description of its aims as one of the five ‘C’s it seeks to further, communications, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities (ACTFL, 2008): “Through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use that language; in fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs.” (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, p. 27) However, the ACTFL standards also do not explicitly indicate how the relationship between language and culture is to be understood at different levels of proficiency.

The approach I will follow in this paper agrees with Hayes's assertion that intrinsic factors are of greater importance for learners of complex Asian languages such as Japanese and Hindi and I argue that the relation of intrinsic motivations to learning about both the linguistic aspect of language and the target cultures needs to be addressed at every level of teaching.

## 2 Comparing introductory Japanese and Hindi

The research is based on my experiences of studying and teaching Hindi and taking part in 132 hours of Japanese classes. Initially, I attended an adult education class for 16 weekly one and half hour sessions and then I studied for 108 hours over the first year of the La Trobe University Japanese course for beginners, in addition to the class work I also did the necessary homework and listened to around ten to fourteen hours of Japanese songs and dramas etc a week. This allows me to compare what was taught during this course with similar introductory Hindi courses that I have taught. What I will do is to highlight a series of key issues which were addressed in the courses and compare the complexities of the learning tasks involved for Japanese and Hindi. I will then analyse how in both cases the teaching of cultural aspects of languages is an integral part of language learning.

### 2.1 *Explicit teaching of culture*

I will not be discussing here the added cultural content which is also part of language teaching. For instance in the Japanese course we were taught about the geography of Japan, how to count eras since the passing away of emperors, death rituals and chopstick etiquette, how to be self deprecating in regard to gifts we offer and food we present to others, customer salesperson relations, and the relation between Japanese and English gestures for self and pointing out. In a similar way, in Hindi I might teach about Indian geography, Indian traditional calendrical systems, etiquette related to right and left hand usage, cultural sensitivity about accepting food and beverages from hosts and gestures of greetings and gestures for pointing. I will not discuss such matters here, what I will look at here is rather the way that language expresses cultural ideas in both Japanese and Hindi.

### 2.2 *Introducing yourself*

In the first class, the Japanese students learned that the word order was different from English and followed a pattern in which *wa* had to be added after the topic and the sentence ended with *desu*, which was translatable here as 'am'.

English	Japanese	Hindi
<i>I am [name].</i>	<i>watashi wa [name] desu</i>	<i>main [name] hūm.</i>

**Table 1: Self-introduction in Japanese and Hindi**

In Hindi, students also have to learn that the word order is different from English, as it is the same as in Japanese. However, whilst students do not have to learn topic markers, as Hindi does not have these, they do have to learn a feature of pronunciation in Hindi, how to nasalise certain vowel sounds.

Japanese students then learned that when speaking of others who do not belong to your 'in' group the respectful term *san* should be added after their name, but you should never add it after your own name or of those in your 'in' group. This structure was then practiced by doing a drill running round the class where you had to say.

English	Japanese	Hindi
<i>I am [name] next to X, next to Y, next to Z etc.</i>	<i>watashi wa – san no tonari no, [self] desu.</i>	<i>maim – jī kī bagal mē, -jī kī bagal mē [self] hūm</i>

**Table 2: Drill from language class**

In Hindi, the syntax of the same construction is identical. However, students have to learn that a respectful term *jī* should be added only to names of people older than yourself of or higher social status. This is an example then where from the very start of learning Japanese and Hindi it is necessary to learn linguistic structures in relation to social mores related to kinship structures and how speech expresses respect.

These kinds of respect usages, reflecting Japanese notions of *uchi* and *soto* own and other groups, and Indian ideas of respect based on age and status are clearly intrinsic to both languages, which raises the questions of how they are to be taught, and how they might be related to any levels of competency in any standards adopted by language courses.

### 2.3 Greetings

In the first Japanese class I attended, students were taught time based greetings.

<i>good morning</i>	<i>ohayo gozaimasu (till 10 am)</i>
<i>good day</i>	<i>konnichiwa</i>
<i>good evening</i>	<i>konbanwa</i>
<i>good night</i>	<i>oya suminasai</i>
<i>a formal 'goodbye' only used when parting for a considerable time</i>	<i>sayonara</i>

**Table 3: Greetings in Japanese**

It was then explained that there are varying levels of politeness possible with some greeting forms. Informally, when parting men say *ja mata* and women say *ja ne* or *mata ne* and in very formal circumstances people say *shitsurei shimasu* (“excuse me I am leaving”), to which the response is *otsukaresama deshita* (“you must be tired”). After further study, in particular watching many TV serials, I now realise that *otsukaresama deshita* is only used in very formal situations, such as office workers congratulating their superiors for their hard work. This indicates one of the problems in trying to teach a language like Japanese, students have to scaffold off a familiar concept, like greetings being related to the time of day, and also realise that greetings reflect both gender and levels of respect, and not all students will pick up at once on all the aspects of what is being taught.

However, in Hindi students have to learn that, unlike English, greetings are not related to times of day but reflect religious identities and in many cases are the same when meeting and departing. Certain terms such as *namaste* are used when addressing Hindus but other terms such as *assalām alaikum* and its response *vālaikum assalām* are used when addressing Muslims. It may also be explained that informal forms on departure can include phrases like *phir milemge* (‘see you again’).

In Japanese, students learned that in a formal context, such as when a student meets a teacher asking after health could take the form.

English	How are you?	Yes, I am well.
Japanese	<i>ogenki desu ka?</i>	<i>hai, okagesama de.</i>
Hindi	<i>[tum/āp kaise/ī ho/haim]</i>	<i>[maim hīk hūm]</i>

**Table 4: Asking after health in Japanese (formal context)**

Students were not initially taught any forms appropriate for more informal exchanges, such as between friends. In Hindi, (in square brackets above) saying “how are you” is much more complex. Students have to learn straight away that Hindi has three levels of pronoun for “you” which are used when addressing people of different ages in relation to the speaker and to express degrees of respect. In addition students have to learn that Hindi is an inflected language and that the word for ‘how’ has three forms that inflect to reflect the gender, number and degree of respect for the person being addressed.

These kinds of initial greeting activities in Japanese and Hindi share in that they show how strategies involving lexical choice, inflection of verb forms and pronoun usage are employed in order to reflect cultural notions of respect and hierarchy. This raises the question of how this kind of usage might be compared with European languages and whether it would be possible to devise any kind of overall set of standards to encompass the nuances of meaning which must be learned when studying Asian and European languages.

#### 2.4 *Introductory dialogue and the weather*

Five terms for weather were introduced.

English	Japanese	Approximate Hindi equivalent
<i>hot</i>	<i>atsui</i>	<i>kāfī garmī</i>
<i>warm</i>	<i>ataakai</i>	<i>kuch garmī</i>
<i>cool</i>	<i>suzushii</i>	<i>thorī thand</i>
<i>Cold</i>	<i>samui</i>	<i>bahut thand</i>
<i>good weather</i>	<i>ii tenki</i>	<i>acchā mausam</i>

**Table 5: Weather terms in Japanese and their approximate Hindi equivalent**

A short introductory dialog was then introduced along these lines and practiced by going around the class and following it with about half a dozen people.

English	Japanese	Hindi
<i>Good evening ~ san.</i>	<i>konbanwa ~ san.</i>	<i>namaste – (ji).</i>
<i>Good evening ~ san.</i>	<i>konbanwa ~ san.</i>	<i>namaste – (ji).</i>
<i>How are you?</i>	<i>ogenki desu ka?</i>	<i>tum/āp kaise/kaisī ho/haim?</i>
<i>I am well</i>	<i>hai, okage samade.</i>	<i>maim thik hūm</i>
<i>It is warm today isn't it?</i>	<i>kyo wa atakai desu ne?</i>	<i>āj kāfī garmī hai, hai na?</i>
<i>It is isn't it.</i>	<i>so desu ne</i>	<i>hām, hai to</i>
<i>Okay, excuse me I am leaving.</i>	<i>dewa shitsurei shimasa</i>	<i>māf kījīye, caltā hūm</i>
<i>Excuse me.</i>	<i>shitsurei shimasa</i>	<i>koī bāt nahīm (no matter)</i>

**Table 6: Conversational phrases practiced in class**

In Hindi, learning the equivalent dialog would involve a whole range of linguistic features that would mean it took considerably longer to be learned. Hindi does not have set of weather descriptors for hot, warm, cool, cold etc. and the words for hot and cold would need to be qualified with words for “quite” and “very” in order to produce meanings like cool and warm. Moreover, certain phrases, like “excuse me I am leaving” would have to be learned as set phrases as they include grammar forms (polite imperatives and the present imperfective normally not taught until the second half of a first semester course). However, another important reason why practicing the equivalent dialog at this point in a Hindi course would be difficult is because students would have to be familiar with the Hindi sound system in order to be able to pronounce the words with reasonable accuracy.

Moreover, in both Hindi and Japanese this kind of short exchange also encodes a considerable amount of information about respect. In the case of the Japanese, the word choice and grammar sets up expectations about the level of respect being shown between the participants, it is a fairly formal exchange. In the case of the Hindi, the students would have to negotiate with understanding how the differing levels of pronoun usage, and their appropriate grammatical agreements, impact upon both respect for age and status, but also on politeness. This is yet another case that poses challenges for any attempt to develop universal standards for language proficiency levels, what seems a fairly straightforward communicative context in English, is in Asian languages a context in which are encoded whole sets of values which derive from distinctive complex hierarchical social systems.

### 3 Japanese and Hindi phonology and writing systems

Students learning Asian languages often report that they are challenged by the prospect of having to learn new phonological and writing systems and I shall now compare how these issues impact on the teaching of Hindi and Japanese.

#### 3.1 *The Japanese and Hindi sound systems*

In the Japanese course, it was taken as a given that the sound system of Japanese and English were effectively the same in terms of the pronunciations of vowels and consonants. Three matters were mentioned, Japanese is not a stressed language but based on ‘beats’, diphthongs have to be pronounced, and the sound *tsu* presents some issues for pronunciation.

In a Hindi course, quite a few hours have to be given to learning the sound system. This is because in Hindi vowels have two lengths, most consonants have two forms one said to be voiced and one said to be unvoiced, and there are distinctions between types of ‘t’ and ‘d’ sound (dental and retroflex sounds) pronounced with the tongue touching the soft palate of the mouth or the teeth. In addition, there are also certain types of ‘r’ sounds which are described as palatal retroflex sounds, made by touching the tongue with the tip curled back to the roof of the mouth and then flapping it down. Hindi also has not only nasal consonants, equivalent to the final ‘n’ of the Japanese syllabary, but also nasalised vowel sounds which are unfamiliar to English speakers

The question of whether the sound systems of the languages could be considered as purely related to communicative issues, or also has a cultural component is one that should also be addressed. I would argue that to pronounce Hindi correctly is culturally important as it is seen in India as a mark of how civilised a speaker is. In addition Urdu, spoken by many Indian Muslims, is essentially the same language as Hindi grammatically, but differs in its writing system, higher lexicon vocabulary and in the pronunciation of sounds drawn from Persian and Arabic. Correct pronunciation is therefore not just a communicative issue. If you mispronounce the word for food *khānā* as the adjective which means ‘one eyed’ *kānā* listeners will always correct for this. However, if a student pronounces a word of Sanskrit origin to somebody sensitive to the Hindu tradition, it will be regarded as showing a civilised respect for the tradition, and likewise if a student pronounces a word from Urdu correctly to Muslim speakers, it will be regarded as showing respect to Islamic tradition. So whether a student learns to correctly pronounce the sounds of Hindi will have a major impact on how they are perceived as a Hindi speaker for reasons which relate as much to culture as they do to communication. I am, however, not at all sure whether any similar issues related to religion arise in relation to European languages and how common standards on such as questions might be developed or incorporated into standards such as CEFR or ACTFL.

#### 3.2 *The Japanese and Hindi writing systems*

Japanese has three syllabaries, Hiragana and Katakana which are phonetic, and Kanji which are Chinese characters. During the introductory Japanese course, I attended only the Hiragana system which contains around fifty symbols was taught over approximately the first eight weeks of the

course. Hindi has only one syllabary, the Devanagari script which also contains around fifty symbols. There is a remarkable similarity in the organisation of the Devanagari script and that of Japanese Hiragana and Katakana which makes learning Hiragana easy for students who know Devanagari. Both systems start with the vowels, five for Japanese and 11 for Hindi, and then combinations of consonants and vowels in sequences such as sa, si, su, se, so. However, learning the Devanagari script is more complex than Hiragana for two reasons. First, for English speakers the relationship between the characters and sounds which are initially hard to distinguish is a problem to grasp. Second, the consonant vowel combination symbols are in one sense more complex, as there are eleven possible vowel combinations for each consonant. Third, Hiragana has a limited subset of 'joint' characters, where two characters join together to produce a third sound, Hindi has a set of basic common joint characters (called conjunct characters) which is about fifty in number and around 350 other conjuncts which are gradually learned later. A complication to this is that some Hindi speakers regard knowing Devanagari script as sufficient, whilst others feel that both the Devanagari and the Urdu script should both be learned. The second position has also been typical of Hindi/Urdu university programs in the USA whilst British and some European programs have tended to teach only Devanagari script. Urdu script is a form of Arabic script, with adaptations to represent the phonological systems of Persian and Indian languages and is typically written in the style called Nastaliq. Learning this script is typically done after learning Devanagari, as it is, in some ways, more complicated to learn as most of the 37 characters have initial, medial and final forms which need to be learned as well as rules about how dependent on positions in words the characters change shape. Some teachers hold that to learn Nastaliq script normally takes a similar length of time to that taken to learn Devanagari, whilst others tend to the view that it takes a longer time to learn, but almost all agree that it is easier to learn Devanagari first and then learn Nastaliq.

For English speaking students, learning either Hiragana/Katakana or Devanagari/Nastaliq presents a considerable challenge. However, in practice it appears that for both languages students can learn the scripts in around the equivalent to one semester of study. Where, of course, Japanese is much more difficult in that students also have to learn around two thousand Kanji characters to attain a reasonable level of adult literacy.

It is self-evident that learning the scripts of Asian languages is a major obstacle for most students. There appears to also be very little possibility for an alignment of standards between European languages and Asian languages in this regard. In addition in Japanese the need to learn a large number of Kanji clearly creates a situation which has no direct parallel with Hindi. Furthermore, there is I would argue here a strong cultural component, as it is not just knowing Kanji, but being able to draw them well which is regarded as a sign of literacy. Indeed, the art of Shodo, calligraphy, is one of the most important of the arts of Japan. I would therefore argue that learning to write correctly in Japanese is taken as a sign of cultural learning as much as of communicative competence. There is difference between Hindi and Japanese here, for as long as the student of Hindi gains basic competence in Hindi script this is all that is needed and despite good penmanship being well regarded in India it is not taken as culturally significant. However, knowledge of both Devanagari and Nastaliq is culturally as well as communicatively significant, as it indicates respect for the Hindu and Islamic traditions of South Asia.

#### **4 Politeness and referring to other people and their occupations**

In the second Japanese class, students were asked to learn about changes in words when referring to oneself and to others. For instance:

English	Hindi		Japanese	
	Self	Others	Self	Others
[name]	[name]	śrī [name] jī (if elder/superior)	[name]	[name] san
Name	nām	śubh nām (formal- auspicious name)	namae	onamae
Job			shigoto	oshigoto
Doctor			isha	oisha san
Teacher	adhyāpak (nm.) adhyāpikā (nf.)	Guruṃ	kyoshi	sensei

**Table 7: Word changes when talking about oneself and others in Hindi and Japanese**

As can be seen Hindi does in many cases have a similar pattern of a form for self reference and polite forms for referring to others. In both languages respectful forms are sometimes made by adding prefixes and postfixes to words. However, in Hindi respect is expressed in questions like “what is your name?” through shifts in pronoun and verb usage which is unlike Japanese.

The question of whether such usages are to be regarded as purely communicative issues of expressions of cultural values needs to be acknowledged here. In both languages it is the complex social hierarchies which typified traditional Indian and Japanese societies which are the main determinants of such usages and as such it is important to incorporate such cultural understandings into language acquisition activities.

#### 4.1 Politeness and referring to people by name rather than as “you”

The second Japanese class, in the first course I attended, also introduced the idea that once you knew somebody else’s name you would not refer to them using a pronoun but by their name followed by san. For instance,

English	Are you a teacher, Mr Sato?	Yes, I’m a Japanese teacher.
Japanese	sato san wa sensei desu ka?	hai, nihongo no kyoshi desu.
Hindi	Gupta jī, kyā [āp] hindī adhyāpak haiṃ?	hām, [māim] adhyāpak hūṃ.

**Table 8: Replacement of pronoun by name**

This idea is not intuitive for English speakers, but would be readily accessible to Hindi speakers as in spoken Hindi dropping of pronouns is common as the final verb forms also encode information about what pronoun would be being used. However, it is not regarded as correct to follow this practice in written Hindi and, in terms of Hindi teaching pedagogy, it is not advisable to learn sentences with omitted pronouns at introductory levels as the relationship between pronouns and their corresponding verb forms (*tū hai, tum ho, āp haiṃ*) needs to be practised so students don’t say things like “\*you is”.

The use of pronouns and names is an area where again I would argue despite this being apparently a purely communicative issue it also has ramifications which relate to cultural issues to do with hierarchies. In the case of Japanese, the difficulty of finding appropriate second person pronouns, the current term for “you,” *anata*, is not used when addressing people of higher status and is used only with equals or subordinates and is used by wives when addressing their husbands, this means that there is no readily available second person pronoun for use when addressing people of higher status or in situations such as classrooms. However, in Hindi there are two factors involved. First, substantive verbs inflect to show the person and number of their accompanying, or implied, pronouns, and hence it is not always necessary to include pronouns. Second, due to the presence of three levels of pronouns for “you,” it is possible to indicate the hierarchical relationship between speakers in any conversation.

### 4.2 Politeness and non repetition of “I”

The second Japanese class also introduced the idea that once the topic had been established in a conversation, such as *watashi wa* (“I” or “as for me”), it should not be repeated. (Square brackets represent possible omitted words).

What is your name? <i>onamae wa nan desu ka?</i> <i>āpkā śubha nām kyā hai?</i>	I am Peter <i>watashi wa peter desu.</i> <i>[merā nām ] peter hai</i> <i>([my name] is Peter).</i>
What is your occupation? <i>oshigoto wa nan desu ka?</i> <i>āpkā kām kyā hai? (your work what is)</i>	I’m a Hindi teacher. <i>hindī go no kyoshi desu</i> <i>[maiṁ] hindī kā adhyāpak hūm.</i>
Are you Australian, Mr Peter? <i>peter san wa osutoraria jin desu ka?</i> <i>Peter jī, āp austrēliā-ī haiṁ, hai na?</i>	Yes, I’m Australian. <i>hai, osutararia jin desu.</i> <i>hām, [maiṁ] austrēliā-ī hūm.</i>

**Table 9: Non-repetition of “I” in Japanese and Hindi**

It can be seen here that both Japanese and Hindi prefer to omit pronouns in comparison to English. However, it could be argued that in informal English the answers might actually just be “Peter,” “teacher” and “yes.” Also, whilst in informal spoken Hindi, the pronouns could be dropped, for learners it would be important that they were not dropped in order to practice pronoun and verb agreements.

It is vital students learn about Japanese first person pronoun usage, both its omission in some contexts, and the wide range of gender and social context dependent forms which are in use, ranging from forms used only by women, such as *atashi*, and those used only by men, such as *boku* and *ore*. However, in Hindi there are only two commonly used first person pronouns, *maiṁ* and *ham*. In Hindi instruction, students are taught that the use of the first person plural pronoun *ham* in a singular context is wrong. However, it is also necessary to then explain its usage as a first person singular pronoun in informal contexts or when a speaker is of lower status is actually quite common. It would be possible to speculate further on the relationship between pronoun usage and the hierarchical nature of Indian and Japanese societies but it is not necessary to do so here. What is essential is to point out that any further development of common standards for languages across the spectrum from European to Asian languages, along the lines of ACTFL or CEFR, it would be necessary to decide how to consider such issues and to allow for the issues which arise from the complexity of Asian languages such as Japanese and Hindi in these respects.

### 4.3 Politeness and talking about relatives

Japanese kinship terminology was introduced in lesson two from the fourth class onwards, of the first course I took, and students were asked to learn a range of terms which distinguished for all relatives between ways you would refer to somebody else’s relatives and your own relatives, and in addition there were terms which distinguished between elder and younger siblings. English also informally distinguishes between one’s own relatives, for instance saying “mum” or “mummy” and terms when speaking respectfully of other’s families, “mother” etc. However, English entirely lacks terms which in themselves relate to elder and younger siblings. This had the effect for Japanese students of doubling the number of vocabulary items that need to be learned for talking about families.

In Hindi, there is also a system where you have separate terms that can be used informally to refer to your own family for some relationships and to the relations of other families, such as *mām* for “mum” and *mātā jī* for mother. In addition, Hindi distinguishes between almost all forms of older and younger relatives and between patrilineal and matrilineal relatives. On top of this, relationship terms used for Hindu and Muslim families are different in many cases. This means that

learning how to refer to relatives in Indian extended joint families presents considerable learning difficulties for non Indians. In this case, it could be argued that Hindi is more complex to learn than Japanese as it entails not only learning over four times more terms than in English, but also the entire structure of the Indian joint family and marriage patterns and hierarchies in joint families.

I have always been stuck by the way that this representation of kinship structures in languages presents a challenge to the notion of common standards in language learning. Here, a distinction should be drawn between curriculum and assessment. Any curriculum for the teaching of Hindi and Japanese will have to spend an appropriate amount of time on understanding kinship structures in relation to the complexity of kinship structures in those societies. However, a European language will only need to spend a correspondingly short length of time teaching kinship structures as these are largely common to most Western cultures. It would I suggest be untenable for any common standard such as ACTFL or CEFR to include descriptors for all possible kinship structures, and this points to the issue of the need to distinguish the role of such standards in terms of curriculum design and in terms of assessment of attainment levels in different languages and understandings of different cultures.

## 5 Counting and number systems

In Japanese, the number system has several features which make learning it difficult for English speakers, to begin with, as it's not an Indo-European language there is no resemblance between its numbers and English numbers. However, like English its number system is quite logical and uses the Indian invention of zero and decimal place holders. Moreover, above ten it takes the form of saying ten-one, ten-two etc. in a fairly regular pattern. However, when counting dates of the month students had to learn that there were irregular forms, such as *hatsuka* for twenty, so the counting system was not completely regular. I subsequently learned in first year of more irregularities in the Japanese counting system, but these still remained fairly small in number and mostly related to phonetic changes in some combinations of numbers. I also learned of the existence of the second, indigenous, system of counting to ten, but again regard this as a relatively minor impediment to acquiring proficiency in Japanese.

In Hindi, the number system has several significant features which make it difficult to learn. Key amongst these is that although Sanskrit numbers, which are still used in Hindi for some ritual purposes, such as in the dates of religious observances, followed a logical pattern above ten of 'one-ten', two-ten' etc. over two millennia all the numbers between eleven and one hundred lost their regular patterns due to phonological changes and became effectively for learners a sequence of one hundred words that needed to be learned in order. Furthermore, prior to the standardisation of Hindi in the nineteenth century, there were substantial local variants in some numbers, and, for instance, to this day some Hindi speakers for 53 still say *tirpan* whilst others say *trepan*. As such, knowing the correct standard Hindi numbers became a marker of being well educated. However, there is an increasing tendency amongst Hindi speakers themselves to drop the use of Hindi numbers and adopt English.

I would argue that, in Japanese learning, to count to 100 is largely a matter of communicative competence. However, in Hindi learning, to count is both an issue of communicative competence and a cultural issue. It is a communicative issue, as whilst nowadays in urban India English numbers are being adopted, in rural areas and in written texts Hindi numbers are still used. Furthermore, to not know how to count in Hindi is an indicator that you are not engaging with the cultural values of those who campaigned for Hindi as a national language.

In terms of discussions of common standards, this also points to the issue of multi-lingualism. India is an extremely multi-lingual culture, and it is not unusual for people to know at least three languages, their own regional dialect, a standard form of language related to their state, and one or more national Indian languages, for instance, in Varanasi many people I know speak the local Hindi dialect Bhojpuri, standard Hindi, English and Bengali. This also leads to considerable mixing of languages. Hindi is also, like English, a language which has had the capacity to absorb large

amounts of non-Indic vocabulary into grammar structures which remain Indic. This raises a question, if it is a characteristic of some languages, such as Hindi, to absorb foreign vocabulary, then can language learning standards lay down standards for the extent and nature of the use of foreign loan words in a language? I would suggest this is a very difficult area to negotiate. French is famous for its reluctance to allow foreign words into French, even for new common objects such as computer. which becomes an *ordinateur*, whilst Hindi and many other languages adopt foreign words to describe new devices, such as *kampyūtar*. How then are common standards such as ACTFL and CEFR to set common standards for the degrees to which the adoption of foreign words are to be accepted as parts of languages?

### 5.1 Counting and big numbers

In Japanese, from week 12 onwards of the first course I took, the concept of the units needed for counting large numbers were introduced. This was a difficulty for learners with English backgrounds, as in Japanese the counting units are, tens *ju*, hundreds *hyaku*, thousands *sen*, ten thousands *man*, and hundred millions *oku*. However, it was not a learning difficulty for learners with Chinese backgrounds, as this is the Chinese counting system. But for all non-native speakers, there were learning difficulties as a number of irregular forms were present due to processes of phonetic change, which meant that more than just the basic set of units needed to be memorised.

In Hindi, when counting larger numbers, the units used are hundreds *sau*, thousands *hazār*, hundred thousands *lākh*, ten millions *karor* and the less commonly used hundred million *arab*. There is no term for tens due to the irregularity of numbers between ten and 99 but the larger number usages are quite regular in Hindi and learning them presents little difficulty other than confusion about the relationship between a *lākh* and a million.

### 5.2 Counting and the difficulty of learning ‘counters’

Japanese has a further feature of counting, ‘counters,’ which were introduced early on in the Japanese course in week three when, for instance, handing out sheets of paper the teacher said *yon mai* “four sheets” in reference to paper. This is akin to the way in English we count certain items in pairs or ‘items’, traditionally English speakers would say “three pairs of jeans” (rather than “three jeans”), “one hundred head of cattle” etc. However, unlike English, the counter system in Japanese is very complex and requires students to learn a large number of counters for all types of items.

Hindi does not have a formalised counter system. Like English, some items can be counted in ‘pairs’ such as “two pairs of shoes” *do jore jūtte*. Eastern Hindi does have a counting particle *to* for nouns as in “two [items] tea” *do to cāy*. However, this is not a standard Hindi usage and does not have to be learned. Other than this, Hindi does not use counters, so Hindi is easier to learn in this respect than Japanese for English speakers. However, as noted above, the Japanese and Chinese number systems are related and so Chinese speakers are familiar with the concept of counters.

You would think, if you were an English speaker, that a topic like counting would be one which was purely linguistic and did not have a cultural component. So, are these differences between counting systems in English, Japanese and Hindi purely linguistic features of the languages or do they represent aspects of the cultures associated with these languages? Despite this being to a large extent an area where it appears there are no challenges to setting common standards in proficiency in numeracy, I would argue that, in terms of teaching and learning curriculum development, it makes sense to see them as expressions of culture as it makes learning them more accessible for learners. At the very least, it means that different conceptual frameworks for counting need to be learned for each language, and students have to learn that Hindi words like *lakḥpati* and *karorpati* (literally “lord of hundred thousands/ten millions”) would be the equivalent of “millionaire” in English.

## 6 Conclusion

Students learning introductory Japanese and Hindi face similar issues in terms of trying to learn language forms which are expressive of distinctive cultures. In particular, I have highlighted how in both languages there are numerous issues that arise due to the complex hierarchical relationships in society and complex family structures and kinship systems which have no direct cognates in European cultures. This, I argue, suggests that students who are interested in how languages express cultures are likely to have the best learning outcomes, in terms of engagement with their studies, as they will be keen to learn about how Japanese and Indian society functions as part of their language learning activities. Those who are studying due to extrinsic motivations related to pragmatic motivations in gaining communicative competence in order to further chances of employment would, I suggest, find it more challenging to get the most out of their learning experience, as they would continuously have to learn about culture in order to be able to understand how to express their ideas and understand spoken and written language forms. This preliminary study points to the need to carry out more comparative studies of the teaching and learning of Asian languages in relation to how the teaching of culture is embedded in the teaching of language. In particular, more work needs to be done on how, for South Asian languages, issues related to prior knowledge, and linguistic backgrounds interact with interest in Indian cultures in the learning of Hindi. This could then be compared with how interest in Japanese culture impacts on the learning of Japanese by students from non-Japanese backgrounds. I argue that this work is needed in order to develop a dialogue about how the learning of Asian languages differs from learning European languages and to articulate arguments for how curriculum design needs to be separated from the ideas of standards of levels of attainment which characterise much of the Common European Framework of Reference and ACTFL documentation.

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