



**“KUKI GA YOMENAI”:  
SITUATED FACE-THREATENING ACT WITHIN JAPANESE SOCIAL  
INTERACTION**

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**Abstract:** The number of foreign students has mushroomed in Japan lately. One of the cultural difficulties they are most likely to encounter and should overcome resides in non-verbal communication resources; aka, the “atmosphere” of the discourse is called as Kuki. A number of studies delineated that the sensitivity to Kuki is one of the essential aspects to establish rapport in Japanese discourse; otherwise, you will be labeled as “Kuki ga Yomenai” (KY) and marginalized from the discourse community. This study investigates how the perception of “Kuki ga Yomenai” is affected by the degree of face-threatening act (FTA), or FTA occurring in the discourse. Therefore, this study attempts to demonstrate how the perception of KY depends on the occurrence of FTAs based upon qualitative interviews.

**Keywords:** face-threatening act, Japanese, discourse analysis, qualitative research, sociolinguistics.

**Özet:** Japonya’daki yabancı öğrenci sayısı son zamanlarda oldukça artmıştır. Bu öğrencilerin karşılaşmaları muhtemel ve üstesinden gelmeyi başarmaları gereken zorluk sözel olmayan iletişimle alakalıdır. Aka, söylemin “atmosferi” Kuki olarak adlandırılmaktadır. Bir çok çalışmada vurgulandığı üzere Japon söyleminde uygunluk durumunu sağlayabilmede Kuki en önemli unsurlardan bir tanesidir. İlgili unsurun eksikliği durumunda, kişiye “Kuki ga Yomenai” (KY) yaftası yapıştırılabilir ve söylem toplumunda dışlanabilir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, “Kuki ga Yomenai” algısının ne derecede imge zedeleyici edimlerden (İZE) ya da söylemde oluşan yine imge zedeleyici edimlerden etkilendiğini araştırmaktır. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışma nitel görüşmeler aracılığı ile KY algısının İZE durumlarına nasıl bağlı olduğunu açıklamaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** İmge zedeleyici edimler, Japonca, söylem çözümlemesi, nitelik araştırması, toplumdilbilim.

## **Introduction**

The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed various kinds of social changes. The socioculture of Japan, which used to be a relatively homogeneous nation, has gradually diversified lately (Shoji, 2005), influencing its social mobility. Thus, the shift of its sociocultural norms is taking place now. Among them, Kuki, or atmosphere, is one of the noteworthy issues. In recent Japan, “KY”—the abbreviation form of “Kuki ga Yomenai (being unable to read the atmosphere)” —is such a trendy expression among youngsters that it was nominated as one of the candidates of “Shingo-Ryukogo Taisho (Latest/Trendy Japanese Expression Award)” in 2007. This phenomenon demonstrates that, as the frequency of alluding to Kuki among people raises, the nature of its notion itself is also getting diversified.

Up to now, some researchers of Japanese culture and language have investigated the notion of *Kuki* (Fukuda, 2006; Reizei, 2006; Saito, 2007; Yamamoto, 1977), demonstrating that it is a discursively and socioculturally constructed norm that people are expected to be sensitive to and to follow to establish rapport. In light of this, this study attempts to discuss the nature of *Kuki* by considering how KYness<sup>1</sup> influences rapport; aka, situated face-threatening act

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<sup>1</sup> This term will be consistently employed in this study to lexicalize the notion of *Kuki ga Yomenai* not as an course of action, but as an abstract concept.

(FTA).

*Kuki* is such a complicated concept. Yamamoto's (1977) auto-ethnographic study first tackled this concept by investigating how *Kuki* was constructed in Japanese societies during World War II. According to him, *Kuki* to approve all-out war in those days was so dominant and widespread all around the nation that all the Japanese residence should obey it whether they liked it or not; otherwise, they would be regarded as *Hikokumin* (national disobedience). This dominant power of *Kuki* marginalized those who are against war out of the community. This assumption resulted in privileging the literacy to deal with *Kuki*.

The publication of the classic work on *Kuki* by Yamamoto generated quite a few followers of this terrain. Reizei (2006), for example, in an attempt for further exploration from psychological perspectives, lexicalized it into two dichotomic categories: "1) *Kankei-no-Kuki* (relational discipline in dyad)"; and 2) "*Ba-no-Kuki* (situational discipline in triad or more)." The former one refers to the "shared repertoire" (Wenger, 1998) of dyadic situations, i.e. what people have in common as a premise of interaction. On the other hand, the latter is the discursive constructed discernment that people there are required to follow in triad or more. Reizei (2006) also argued that it is in "*Ba-no-Kuki*" that the illiteracy of *Kuki* is mostly problematized (p.154). In other words, rapport in dyadic situations is relatively easily manageable; vis-à-vis, in triad or more, multi-dimensionally negotiated, determined, and settled *Kuki* eventually makes it difficult to maintain harmonious human relation. In this respect, people's performance deviates from individual to individual, resulting in the marginalization of *Kuki ga Yomenai Hito*, or KY people.

*Kuki* reading plays a significant role in establishing rapport in Japanese discourse. Takiura (2008) indicated that the notion of *Kuki* is highly context-dependent, and KYness is likely to be associated with face-threatening acts, or FTA. According to Goffman (1967), every member of a society has two types of basic wants in interaction: positive face and negative face. The latter refers to the freedom of action and freedom from imposition; whereas, the former one is the positive consistent self-image. Brown and Levinson (1987) proclaimed that certain kinds of acts "by their nature run contrary to the face wants to the addressee and/or of the speakers" (p.65) and thus intrinsically threaten face. Thus, they postulated "politeness strategies" designed to mitigate the degree of FTAs in interaction.

However, there are also some courses of action whose degree of FTAs cannot be mitigated. For example, the violation of "cooperative principle" (Grice 1989), such as disagreement, criticism, intentional sarcasm and so on, naturally resulted in conflict and/or disharmony of discourse. Spencer-Oatey (2005) delineated that insensitivity to behavioral expectation, face, and interactional goals, triggers conflict in establishing rapport (see Spencer-Oatey, 2000, for more information). Likewise, it is assumed that, in theory, KYness in Japanese discourse as a result of situated FTAs occurrence causes some disharmony of interaction. In practice, however, no study has yet empirically evidenced that there underlies a situated FTA in KYness in interaction; and, symmetrically, how interactants' KY behaviors affect addressees' perception of FTAs, as far as the author knows.

The above theoretical constellation has led me to set up the following research questions: 1) What the nature of KY (*Kuki ga Yomenai*) is like; 2) How KYness leads to conflict in establishing rapport; what implication the research findings have to non-Japanese citizens? In order to collect the data that help me answer these questions, I employed the following research methodology.

## Methodology

This research tackles the Japanese culture-specific discursive discipline through an empirical qualitative approach. In order to do so, I employed an interpretive qualitative approach (Davis, 1995) to take a holistic perspective to capture the multidimensional aspects of *Kuki* discourse. To collect data, I conducted semi-structured oral interview with several participants regarding their experience concerning KY, and the discussions with the interviewees were audio-recorded. The excerpts presented in this research were quoted from this interview data.

The research subjects<sup>2</sup> of this study are all university students aging are at 21 to 22, of which age group the trend of KY was mainly generated and developed. Furthermore, they all partook in an interschool NGO volunteer project for approximately 4 years. The assumption that a certain kind of knowledge concerning the notion of *Kuki* was shared by these human subjects warrants verifying the quality of data used in this study. To analyze data, the form of case study was employed. The names of the five participants are labeled as: 1) Mei; 2) Maiko; 2) Goro; and 4) Nobita; and 5) Shun (all pseudonyms). The background information of these participants will be detailed later.

Throughout the interviewing procedure, two preset questions were asked: 1) have you ever encountered any KY situation?; and 2) what kind of situation was it? In addition to that, I attempted to let them talk freely to elicit further information concerning their understanding of *Kuki* without much restriction and pressure. This semi-structured interview approach guarantees the credibility and validity of this qualitative research by virtue of the authorized procedure; on the other hand, to reduce observer paradox generated by topic-management. Kitazawa et al. (2008) explained that semi-structured interview procedure functions as a key for qualitative researchers to capture multidimensional realities from participants-centered perspectives (p.41).

## Data analysis

### *Mei's sister marginalized*

Mei was a 21 years old female university student. She belonged to the department of international studies. At the time of data collection, Mei was engaged in her graduation research project. Her topic of inquiry was how communities of Japanese elementary schools were constructed and how it leads to bully at schools. Mei studied this issue through an ethnographic approach. She was longitudinally involved in an elementary school club activity named "Oshakko Club" as a participant observer, where the participants, including Mei's sister, chatted with each others to share something. She was willing to talk about her data analysis while interviewing:

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<sup>2</sup> The author hereby declares that all these research subjects accepted their informed consent.

**Excerpt 1.:**

ある日、私の妹が「おしゃっこクラブ」やってたときに、武子ちゃんが、「丸子ちゃんてむかつくよね」みたいな事をいきなり言って、その子はグループのリーダーみたいな感じで、他のみんなは「うん、そうだね」みたいに言ってたんだけど、うちの妹だけが、「いや、そんなことないよ、丸子ちゃんはいいい子だよ」って言っちゃった時に、武子ちゃんが「はあ？何言ってんの？」って言い始めて、みんなが武子ちゃんについて、「KYだ！」みたいに言って、妹を責め始めて、 (One day, my younger sister chatted with some of her friends as a club activity of “Oshakko Club”. Suddenly, Takeko, the leader among them, said that “Maruko is so disgusting”, and the rest of them agreed with her. Nevertheless, my sister contrastively resisted against her by saying “No, Maruko is a good girl!” Then, the rest of them said “What are you talking about?”, and then, blamed her, like “You must be KY!”) (Interview, 2008/11/21)

It should be noted that all the participants of this discourse community belonged to the same “in-group”, that Sugiyama (1974) claims as one of the indispensable factor on rapport establishment among Japanese. Their shared repertoire not only as the classmates of the same school, but also as “close friends” strengthened their agency of the same in-group membership. In addition, sharing the discomfort concerning Maruko’s behavior, who is in an “out-group” (Sugiyama, 1974), urged them to empathize with the group leader, Takeko. This consequently emphasized the significance of group membership, resulting in constructing Takeko-centered hierarchical relation within the discourse community. Nakane (1967) elucidated that the hierarchical social strata in Japanese discourse is too dominant for in-group members to diverge (see also Doi, 1971; Hamaguchi et al., 1985; Sugiyama, 1974).

Among them, Mei’s sister was the only figure that went divergent from the mainstream of this discourse: she contradicted Takeko’s expectation. Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that stating a negative evaluation of some aspect of hearer’s positive face intrinsically threatens face (p.66). Likewise, the course of action by Mei’s sister was perceived as an FTA by the other in-group members, which finally pushed her out to periphery of the discourse community. It should be noted that Mei’s sister refused to follow the topics out of her sense of morality, which consequently disharmonized their membership. As a result, the harmony-oriented construction of Japanese discourse makes the discourse insiders place emphasis on being more sensitive to how you are expected to interact with each other, rather than to how the justice should be.

***Maiko’s observation in an elementary school classroom***

Likewise, Maiko, who is an in-service elementary school teacher in Kanagawa now, also experienced a similar situation during her teaching internship activity. She was a 21 year old student majoring in education. One day, her students were asked to discuss and determine what to perform in their coming school festival. As a homeroom teacher, she helped them talk over the issue harmoniously without much quarrel. However, she recognized that some students suddenly started to call each other as KY, at which she said she was so astonished. She commented:

**Excerpt 2.:**

今の小学生にとっては、自分たちのグループに属していないという事実そのものがKYと呼ばれる所以らしいんですね。たとえば、今話題にしていること以外のことを誰かが突然持ち出しただけで、「あー、KY！」みたいにいわれるようなんですよ。(To

the current elementary school students, they seem to call somebody who does not belong to their own community as KY and that's it. For example, just because somebody started out new topics, he tended to be criticized as "KY!" (Interview, 2008/11/22)

Maiko's comments on the awkwardness in understanding the concept of her pupils' KY hint us to capture the nature of *Kuki*. It is hereby noteworthy that even elementary school pupils are sensitive to the contingent sociocultural dominance of their classroom discourse and regard those who do not follow the dominant topics of conversation as inappropriate under a certain circumstance, and thus as KY. That is, the violation of behavioral expectation under the dominant "*Ba-no-Kuki*" marks KY doers as the objects of criticism. Sugiyama (1974) explained that in-group/out-group boundary is one of the important factors that Japanese discourse consists of. In this light, KY behaviors that threaten in-group members' positive face result in breaking down the discursive solidarity.

### ***Goro's headache***

Goro was a 22 years old university student majoring in English teaching. One day, Goro encountered some KY situation while writing his graduation thesis with his classmates at a computer lab. This facility has a general rule to stay tacit so as not to discomfort neighboring people. In Goro's retrospect, the majority of people working in this classroom were engaged in their graduation theses writing then. Every member of the discourse was so desperate and tensioned to complete their assignment that the expectation of taciturn behavior was further emphasized than usual. Suddenly, one person suddenly collapsed the silence and broke through the *Kuki* of the computer room. To that, he said he was so exasperated, and so was everybody else. His actual comment goes like this:

### **Excerpt 3.:**

ある日、4階のLL教室でみんなで卒論を書いていたんですよ。そしたら、ちょっと離れたところで、未来さんと優さんも卒論をやっていたんですよ。で、なんか、優さんが教えていたんですね、「ここはこうで」、みたいな。でもそれを未来さんは理解できなくて、逆ギレしだしたんですよ。「ここはこうだろ」、みたいなバカでかい声を出して、部屋を出ていったんですよ。「ああ、よかった出てってくれた！」と安心していたら、まだ廊下で騒いでいて、みんなでマジKYだって思って...(One day, we were writing our graduation theses together by helping each other at an LL classroom on the fourth floor of this building. Then, Miku was also writing her thesis and Masaru was helping her. Masaru pointed out some of the mistakes of Miku by saying "This should be like this", but she did not understand what he was talking about. So, she was frustrated and started to complain about it so loudly, by saying "You know! This should be that way!" After that, she went out of the room, and we felt so comfortable with it. But, she was still fussing around on the corridor. So, we said "Oh well, she is quite KY...") (Interview, 2008/11/22)

Miku, the KY doer, was not so sensitive to the discursive and sociocultural norm of this classroom, and "made a fuss" in complaining about her having not completed her assignment. Goro and his friends still felt frustrated at her continuous riot-making even after she disappeared from the room. Furthermore, she even attributed the cause of her frustration to Masaru's explanation incomprehensible to her with much emotion outburst. According to Goro, Masaru, a postgraduate of his department, is so well-trusted that he was asked to work as a student adviser then. Culpeper et al. (2003) explained that there are some "communicative strategies designed to attack face, and thereby caused social conflict and

disharmony” (p.1546), which are labeled as impoliteness (see also, Culpeper, 1996) Besides, Tanaka and Zhang (2008) demonstrated that, in Asia, third party’s face functions as a significant factor to realize harmonious interaction. Miku’s swear words at Masaru’s explanation definitely attacked his face, thus it was impoliteness. As well as that, Goro and his classmates were rather frustrated and irritated by her course of action that not only impeded their want not to be disturbed by others, but also threatened the face of Masaru to whom they pay respect. Therefore, her implementation of an FTA to Masaru, who is a third party but still one of the in-group members of them, produced an indirect FTA to Goro and his friends. This constellation of psychological perception of discomfort and FTAs affected their recognition of Miku’s KY behavior.

### *Nobita’s struggle with Shun*

The notion of *Kuki* from the perspectives of KY observers has been provided so far. This is partly because elicitation technique of honest opinions from the defective communicator requires much energy with difficulty, and it was nearly impossible to present the data that contained an embarrassing moment of communication because the human subjects did not feel like it. However, one of the participants agreed for me to present the data that demonstrate a moment when he performed a KY on his friend.

Nobita was a 21 years old university student majoring in international relations, particularly the region autonomy issues in China. The following excerpt demonstrates some social conflict in decision-making while he was having a short trip to Xi’An with his Japanese friends, including Shun who is the KY doer of this discourse.

#### **Excerpt 4.1.:**

西安という町に言った時に、俺と先輩は、10元のホテルでよかった。水があつてベッドがあればそれでよかった。先輩も安い宿に泊まりたいって言ってて、でも俊は、「俺はもう別のホテルに泊まるわ」とか言って、俺らがせっかく決めたプランを今にも破ろうとしていて、それでも何とか引き止めたんですよ。でも、そのおかげで遺跡めぐりに来たのに、時間がどんどんなくなって来たんですよ。(When Shun and I visited the city of Xi An with another friend, he and I felt it is fine to put up at a 10-yuan-a-day local youth hostel. Besides, he said he wanted to stay in a cheap one. But, Shun contrastively said that “I am going to put up at another hotel”, and he tried to make our plans collapsed. But still, we tried very hard to convince him. Thanks to this, we eventually ran out of the time to visit the heritage of Xi’An. (Interview, 2008/10/14)

Nobita and Shun have been close friends with each other since they got into university.. In addition, because they belonged to the same club activity other than the NGO volunteer, they already had much shared repertoire that scaffolds to understand each other’s feelings. Therefore, in dyadic situations where “*Kankei-no-Kuki*” dominates, they seldom had this kind of conflict. Nevertheless, in triadic situation with the presence of a third person to them, where “*Ba-no-Kuki*” is dominant, the negotiation of the point of compromise became more complex. In this case, Nobita put much significance on “joint enterprise” (Wenger, 1998), or positive face as the members of the same in-group community.

In contrast, Shun, a 21 year old Chinese major student, attempted to deal with the face negotiation in a different approach. In this regard, he commented as follows:

**Excerpt 4.2.:**

僕潔癖症でさあ、実際の10元の宿を見てみたらトイレもシャワーも共同で臭くて、そんな時に正直、体が震えてた。(I really hated to put up at the messy youth hostel, because of my cleanliness, to be honest. When I actually saw what kind of hotel it was, the shared toilet and the shower room was so dirty that I had a strong rejection against it.) (Interview, 2008/10/14)

This statement of Shun evidences that, although he was aware of the KYness of his course of action, he could not help rejecting to put up at the hotel due to something uncontrollable of him; aka, his intrinsic preference of cleanliness. One might claim that this was just out of his ego-centeredness. However, the following disclamation of his provides the counter-evidence to this interpretation.

**Excerpt 4.3.:**

そのホテルがかなり汚かった、って言うのもそうなんだけど、あとさ、これ以上俺が駄々こねてみんなに迷惑かけたくなかったってのもあるしさ(I did so not only because the hotel was quite messy, but also because I did not want to bother them with my selfishness any more.) (Interview, 2008/10/14)

This excerpt evidenced that his consistent rejection to put up at the hotel was multidimensional. It was not only out of his selfishness, but also based upon his volition to implement a negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987), or by keeping a social distance from the others to mitigate an FTA, that he conducted the offer-refusal to stay at the messy youth hostel. In other words, although he was sensitive to his friends' wants to stay at the youth hostel at which he was not willing to stay, he attempted to practice a turning down strategy not to further impede their freedom of action as well as to retrieve his freedom from imposition. This demonstrates that the implementation of a negative politeness strategy was underpinned in his course of action.

Paradoxically, however, Nobita reacted against this self-disclosure of Shun, stating:

**Excerpt 4.4.:**

俺らはどうしても一緒に泊まりたい。一緒に旅行しているんだから、一緒に泊まりたかった。(We wanted to stay together by all means. Because we were traveling together, we wanted him to be together with us.) (Interview, 2008/10/14)

Nobita, unlike Shun, attempted to use a “positive politeness strategy” (Brown & Levinson, 1987), or emphasizing closeness or friendship in order to manage the rapport in this discourse. In addition to that, it is notable that Nobita used “we” to indicate his positionality. His use of first-person-plural pronoun indicates that the situational discipline is dominantly determined by Nobita and his followers, which sarcastically makes Shun regarded as KY in this discourse. What we have here is that the different perception of the discursive *Kuki* led to some kind of conflict, but still, it could be done to achieve interactional goals. This evidences that the notion of *Kuki* is multidimensional, and not monolithic. Therefore, further exploration should be required for future research.

**Conclusion**

This study has investigated the notion of *Kuki*, a discursively and socioculturally constructed norm of Japanese discourse, discovering that the perception of KYness is highly influenced

by the degree of FTAs occurring in the discourse. In addition to that, the notion of *Kuki* is so multidimensional and it relates to various kinds of aspects to realize harmonious interaction.

In summary, Mei's ethnographic study represents that the *Kuki* construction is highly dependent upon the discursively dominant figures. Likewise, Maiko's story suggested that Japanese community construction, or both vertically and horizontally stratified hierarchy, highly influences the perception of KY. Furthermore, Goro's study discovered that the perception of KYness is affected by FTAs occurring in any parts of their in-group discourse, not only mutual FTA between interactants. Lastly, Nobita and Shun's struggle clearly represents the multidimensionality of *Kuki*. Nobita attempted to use a "positive politeness strategy" vis-à-vis Shun refused it by using a "negative politeness strategy".

Since *Kuki* is a nation-widely recognized notion, the study of it should be expanded to include much larger scale population. Besides, Nobita and Shun's case study indicated that it is also important to employ multiple perspectives to fully analyze the nature of *Kuki*; i.e. it is not fully discussed only by means of one particular person's perspective. Therefore, triangulation of the perspectives is vital to increase the validity of the analysis. In doing so, the research methods should also be revisited.

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