曖昧さ: A PRAGMATIC RESEARCH ON JAPANESE AMBIGUITY AND POLITENESS IN INVITATIONS

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Resumen: El trabajo analiza nueve lexemas de ambigüedad y vaguedad que más aparecen en las respuestas a las invitaciones. Empezando por el modelo de las estrategias de cortesía de Brown y Levinson (1987) el objetivo del trabajo estará focalizado en las expresiones indirectas llamadas "off record acts" que están conectadas con el concepto de ambigüedad. El objetivo del trabajo está representado por una discusión de estos lexemas para entender cuál es el límite entre incertidumbre y cortesía, si el concepto de cortesía está efectivamente elegido y dónde siguen quedando matices de duda.

Palabras Clave: Cortesía, Pragmática, Ambigüedad.

Abstract: The paper analyses nine lexemes of ambiguity and vagueness which commonly appear in replies to invitations. Starting from the Brown and Levinson (1987) model of politeness strategies the aim of the present work will be focused on indirect utterances called "off record acts" which are connected with ambiguity. The purpose of the present work is to discuss about the pragmatics and the semantics of such lexemes in order to understand which is the limit between uncertainty and courtesy, whether politeness is preferred and where there is an effective doubtful situation.

Keywords: Politeness, Pragmatics, Ambiguity.

1. Introduction.

The work reports some of the main findings on Japanese *aimaisa* (ambiguity) to better compare and understand some possible variables on the conceptualization of vagueness and indirectness. After the introduction of a brief

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definition of politeness and the explanation of B&L (1987) model it will be reported the scheme of B&L strategies of off record act (FTA) and there will be illustrated the concepts of ambiguity and vagueness; finally there will be shown the pragmatic correlations of these concepts in the B&L theory; finally there will be presented both the scope and aim of the present research.

The work presents the major findings on Japanese ambiguity, vagueness and indirectness. There will be introduced also some cultural and social aspects which are strictly correlated to the concepts and there will be realized some comparisons. There will be later illustrated the methodology and a sample of the questionnaire which has been realized by explaining the choice of the analyzed lexemes, the answers adopted and the relative meanings. Finally, there will be reported and discussed the survey's results. The essential aim of the work consists in attempting to discover the use of such lexemes in that peculiar context, the real boundary between uncertainty and politeness, and the unavoidable variables which could delimit a research on linguistic ambiguity.

2. Principles for a pragmatic approach.

What does it mean to be polite? And in which ways are people considered to be polite or not from a sociopragmatic perspective? There are a lot of definitions of the Latin term "politus" according to dictionaries such as: "Having or showing that one has good manners and consideration for other people" (Oxford Advanced Dictionary, 1995*)* or "Someone who is polite has good manners and behaves in a way that is socially correct and considerate for other people feelings." (Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, 1993).

As it has been argued by Maynard (1997):

"Politeness is universal. Virtually all speech communities use respectful forms,

address terms, pronouns, and speech formulas as well as general rules of etiquette and protocol to express various levels of politeness [...] but the strategies used, as well as the level of intensity and overall importance of conventions of politeness, differ from one language to the next." (Senko K. Maynard, 1997: 55-56).

By being polite people seek to find a social balance which is usually considered the best way to avoid social disagreement. Japanese call this concept *wakimae.* As claimed by Maynard (1997): "*wakimae* refers to sets of social norms of appropriate behaviour people must observe to be considered polite in society. The manipulation of politeness strategies is a concrete method for meeting the social rules of *wakimae.*" (Senko K. Maynard, 1997: 57)[1].

Haugh (2004) discusses about the conceptualization of politeness in different cultures and language contexts:

"[...] differences in politeness forms and strategies reflect divergences in the ways in which politeness is conceptualized in different cultures. In contrast [...] that politeness is conceptualized in the same way across cultures, and that differences in politeness forms and strategies are simply a reflection of divergences in the structures that constitute different languages and the norms governing the use of those structures." (Haugh, 2004:2)[2].

Therefore, of course there are cultural differences in the way of expressing politeness depending on the social contexts we refer to but, at the same time, the general concept of politeness and the respect of social norms -*wakimae*- is present in every culture, although there are many ways of using it also in relation to the language analyzed.

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[1] MAYNARD SENKO, K., *Japanese Communication: Language and Thought in Context*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

[2] HAUGH, M., "Revisiting the Conceptualization of Politeness in English and Japanese", *Multilingua,* 23 (1), 2004, pp. 1-27.

Whether the concept of politeness was not be considered from a semantic perspective but from a sociopragmatic one it would likely result more complicated to determine which are the variables involved in the idea of respecting other's feeling. In fact, depending on the context or situation taken into exam there could be different perspectives about the same behavior that could result polite for some people but not enough polite for others (Tsuruta 2002 referring to Leech 1983:102)[3].

The idea that Japanese are more polite or more used to polite expressions than other cultures could not be generalized. If there are cases where people of different cultures could feel that Japanese are not polite at all, there are also situations where they are more often used to respect the social hierarchies by choosing the appropriate politeness strategies (Maynard 1997)[4].

As Matsumoto (1988) argues: "Nakane (1967,1970)[5] described the Japanese social structure as a 'vertical society' by which she meant that the primary relations in Japanese society are between persons who are related hierarchically (e.g. One senior to the other) in a certain social grouping, rather than relations between persons having the same quality" (Matsumoto, 1988:406)[6].

Therefore, the level of politeness expressed in such societies is related to the position that the people involved in a determined conversation have and certainly it could change, depending on the vertical system which is still very strong in Japan.

2.1 Brown and Levinson's model (B&L).

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3 TSURUTA, Y., "Politeness, the Japanese style: an investigation into the use of honorifics forms and people's attitudes towards such use", *British Library Document Supply Centre*, 2002.

4 MAYNARD SENKO, K., *Japanese Communication: Language and Thought in Context*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press. 1997.

5 NAKANE, C., *Japanese Society*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd., London, 1970.

6 MATSUMOTO, Y., "Reexamination of the Universality of Face: Politeness Phenomena in Japanese", *Journal of Pragmatics*, nº12, 1988, pp.403-426.

Starting from the concept of "face" which represents: "the public self image that every member wants to claim for himself" (B&L, 1987:61) Brown and Levinson theory has been always considered as the starting paradigm for all the studies on sociopragmatic politeness. Brown and Levinson's model identifies some possible strategies in doing a "face threatening act" (FTA) as far as "any rational agent will seek to avoid these face-threatening act or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat" (B&L, 1987:68)[7].

The concept of "losing face" or "making the other's faces threaten" has been widely argued, and according to that B&L realized a map in which are shown some possible strategies for doing a FTA (B&L, 1987:69)[8].
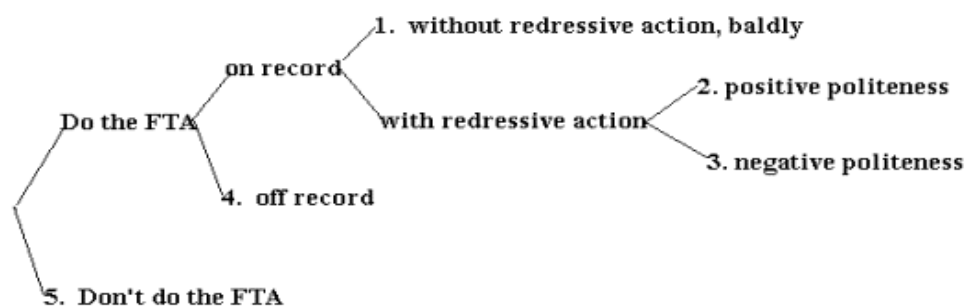
As shown in figure 1, B&L divides politeness strategies according to the type of FTA that should be realized. This can be done either on or off record. Doing a FTA on record could include both expressions without redressive action (baldly) by resulting not ambiguous and very direct (for example, for a request, saying "Do X") and expressions with redressive action (B&L, 1987:69). By contrast, doing a FTA with redressive functions should include either positive or negative politeness strategies. It means that, in this specific case, by doing a FTA there is an attempt at

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7 BROWN, P. & LEVINSON, S., *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

8 BROWN, P. & LEVINSON, S., *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

saving the hearer's face and the potential damage of an FTA could be minimized as long as such redressive actions may be expressed by using two different aspects of "face", negative or positive. According to B&L definitions negative face represents: "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" and positive face: "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (B&L, 1987:62). On the other hand, doing a FTA off record underlines the indirectness of such speech act.

By arguing that, linguistic strategies of off record acts include metaphors and irony, rethorical questions, clues, be ambiguous, vague and indirect (B&L, 1987).

In the next paragraph there will be discussed the concept of vagueness and ambiguity in order to understand what kind of relations can be found according to Brown and Levinson's model.

2.2 The definition of ambiguity and vagueness and its pragmatic correlations with the "off record" acts in B&L.

The term *ambiguous* derives from the Latin word "ambiguus" that means literally: "inclining for one side and also for another at the same time". Oxford Wordpower Dictionary (1993) defines the meaning of *ambiguous* as "having more than one possible meaning" and the term of a*mbiguity* as "the possibility of being understood in more than one way".

As it has been argued by Cheng and Warren (2003)[9]:

"the category 'vagueness' covers a closed set of items which are inherently imprecise and which the participants interpret based on an understanding that the speaker is indicating, through the choice of vague language, that what is said is not

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9 CHENG, W. & WARREN, M., "Indirectness, Inexplicitness and Vagueness made clearer", *Pragmatics*, nº 13 (3), 2003, pp. 381-400.

to be interpreted precisely [...] Given that the precise meaning can not be retrieved by the hearer, the successful use of vague language requires the participants in the discourse to have a shared understanding to the relative status of a particular set of vague lexical items." (Cheng and Warren, 2003: 394).

Of course, the terms "ambiguity" and "vagueness" could be accompanied by the term "indirectness" which joins to the negative politeness strategies in B&L but which can also be related to hints in off record acts.

Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) reports that: "Leech (1983:108) maintained the same parallel relation between indirectness and politeness offering two rationales: (1) indirectness increases the degree of optionality and (2) when an illocution (speech act) is more indirect, its force tends to be diminished and more tentative" (Rinnert and Kobayashi, 1999: 1174)[10].

The linguistic link between indirectness, vagueness and ambiguity seems to be connected to the notion of politeness in the case where, in order to save the face of the interlocutor the speaker tends to be not very clear and give different options in the interpretation of the sentence. In this way the face of the interlocutor will be saved and the speaker would not have the direct responsibility for committing a FTA.

In the scheme below there have been reported, indeed, all the possible strategies (off record), claimed by B&L (1987) to avoid to do a FTA in a direct way.

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10 RINNERT, C. & KOBAYASHI, H., "Requestive hints in Japanese and English", *Journal of Pragmatics*, nº 31, 1999, pp. 1173-1201.
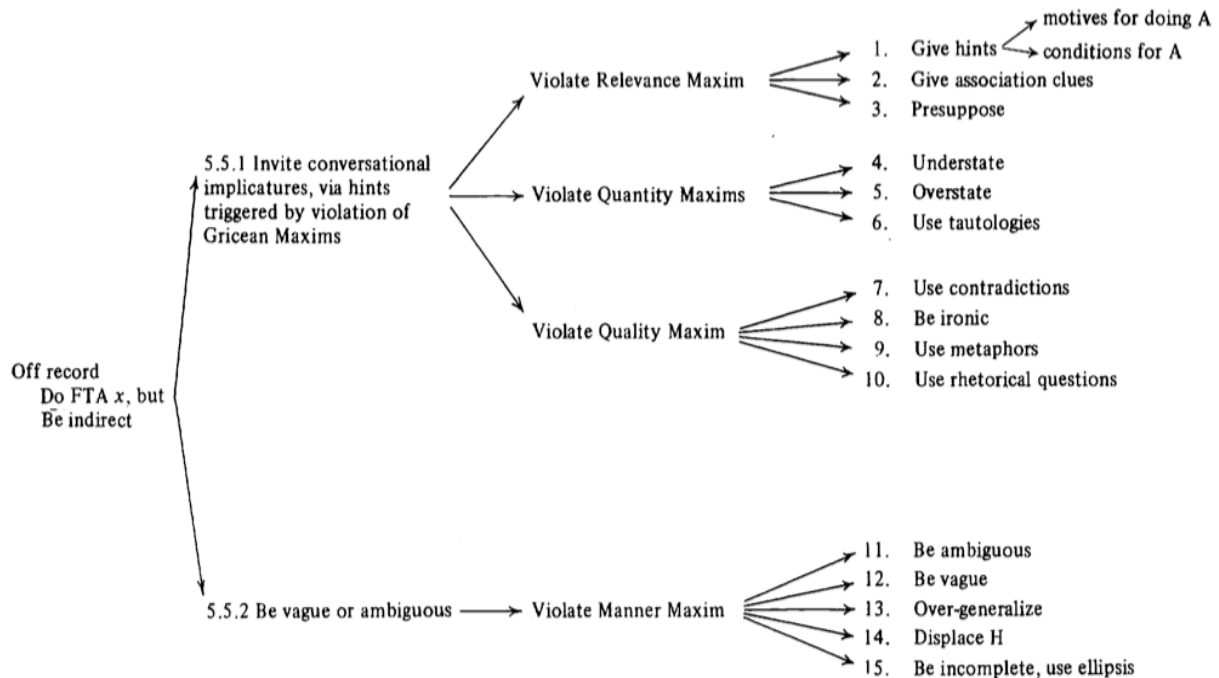
Fig. 2: **Chart of strategies: Off record (B&L, 1987).**

B&L (1987) categorizes the strategy of ambiguity and vagueness among the off record acts (as shown in the figure above). According to their definition: "a communicative act is done off record if it is done in such a way that is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act" (B&L, 1987:211).

Therefore the speaker has the tendency to maintain himself outside the real meaning of the speech act by returning any understanding responsibility to the hearer. In other words: "if a speaker wants to do an FTA, but wants to avoid the responsibility for doing it, he can do it off record and leave it up to the addressee and decide how to interpret it" (B&L, 1987:211).

These off record expressions are represented, indeed, by all the indirect utterances and uses of a language, as included by B&L (1987) in the chart.

How does the system work? And how the strategies will be involved in an off record speech act? "The basic way to do this is to invite conversational implicatures by violating, in some way, the Gricean Maxim of efficient communication" (B&L, 1987:213).

By arguing that, there is a violation of what are called "cooperative principles". As it has been argued by Tsuda (1993: 64)[11]: "These principles explain how hearers are able to interpret speaker's intentions. Grice (1975) calls such principles conversational maxims".

In the specific case of the Maxim of manners, which represents the violated principle in ambiguity speech acts, it refers to 1) avoid obscurity 2) avoid ambiguity 3) be brief 4) be orderly. As Tsuda (1993) concludes: "In short, these maxims specify what participants have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational, co-operative way: they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information" (B&L, 1987:102-3 in Tsuda, 1993:64).

In order to violate the Gricean Maxim if a speaker wants to do a FTA in an indirect way he should give some hints and hope that the hearer picks up on them and thereby interprets what are the real intentions and meanings of the speaker (B&L, 1987: 213).

As B&L claims: "Rather than inviting a particular implicature, the speaker may choose to go off record by being vague and ambiguous (that is, violating the Manner Maxim) in such a way that his communicated intent remains ill-defined [...] by using what is technically indirectness, the speaker will have given a bow to the hearer's face and therefore minimized the threat of the FTA" (B&L, 1987:225).

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11 TSUDA, S., "Indirectness in Discourse: What Does It Do in Conversation?", *Intercultural Communication Studies*, vol. III, (1), 1993, pp. 63-74.

As it has been argued by Tsuda (1993): "indirectness is preferred for two main reasons: to save face if a conversational contribution is not well received, and to achieve the sense of rapport that comes from being understood without saying what one means" (Tannen 1989:23 in Tsuda, 1993:66-67). This behavior seems to be present in Japanese communication interaction.

As Tsuda (1993) points out:

> "When there is no face-threatening act involved in the interaction, the Japanese tendency to value understatement is not hazardous to communication. People understand each other without saying much. But when face-threatening acts and the power relation are involved, the Japanese way of valuing indirectness can prevent the issues from being fully and clearly discussed, because little information is exchanged in order to avoid confrontation and it usually works favorably only to the people in power." (Tsuda, 1993: 73)[12].

Among Japanese there is, indeed, the cultural tendency to avoid saying things directly in order to limit discussions which could break up the internal harmony between members of the same group. Indirectness and vagueness are of course preferred to directness in many occasions. In B&L (1987) politeness studies Japanese is usually considered be as a deferential linguistic society.

The use of honorifics as the wide range of polite expressions seems to be more present in Japanese than in other languages. Giving deferences is part of the negative politeness strategies as well as using ambiguous and vague expressions seems to be related to the off record acts. If it is true that Japanese society could be considered as a deferential one is it also true that Japanese are used to result more ambiguous than European or American? Does it represent only a perception or is it

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12 TSUDA, S., "Indirectness in Discourse: What Does It Do in Conversation?", *Intercultural Communication Studies*, vol. III, (1), 1993, pp. 63-74.

a reality? The use of indirect and ambiguous expressions in Japanese is more often found than in other languages? Does it depends on culture or is it just a generalist impression of foreigners? How do Japanese use these expressions and in which occasions? What is the real meaning behind that use?

If it is true that Japanese is a polite language and off record act are one of the possible strategies to do an FTA, is it also true that Japanese use such expressions to result more polite or do they use it also in other contexts? Which is the limit between doubt and courtesy by using such expressions?

2.3 Scope and aim of the present work.

Starting from the B&L theory on the universals of politeness and, more specifically, from the assumption that ambiguous, vague and indirect expressions seem to join the off records act to do a FTA related to linguistic strategies, this work will represent an exploratory attempt to see how and when Japanese use some of these expressions to reply to invitations and which is the real meaning behind such use. Whether Japan has been always considered as a *keigo* society, where honorifics and hierarchy still determine and underline the rules of internal ranking positions (Nakane, 1970)[13] it has also been considered as one of the favourite society where ambiguity and indirectness are wide used in order to maintain the *wa* or "internal peace." (Davies & Ikeno, 2002)[14].

3. Previous studies on the concepts of ambiguity, vagueness and indirectness.

There have been written quite a lot of studies about cultural differences between the way of communication of Japanese related to other cultures in the world. The results usually agree about the objectivity that those from collectivistic

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13 NAKANE, C., *Japanese Society*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd.,1970.

14 DAVIES, R. J., IKENO, O., *The Japanese Mind. Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*, New York, Tuttle Publishing, 2002.

cultures tend to promote equivocal communication tactics in order to smooth social difficulties and promote the in-group peace (Bello, Ragsdale, Brandau-Brown & Thibodeaux, 2003: 179)[15].

By contrast, in more individualistic cultures such as the American one, the situation where "face" could be lost is more connected with the personal failure. Hence, in the collectivistic cultures: "this notion suggest that those from high-context cultures might be more accepting (than those from low-context cultures) of verbally equivocal and indirect messages because they make better use of context and non-verbals to aid in the interpretation of the verbal aspects of interactions" (Bello, Ragsdale, Brandau-Brown & Thibodeaux, 2003: 180).

Japan has a unique culture and while analysing lexemes from a linguistic perspective it is fundamental to underline all the extended cultural aspects which exist from a sociological analysis. As reported by Nakai (2002): "One of the distinguishing characteristics of Japanese communication that results in the perceived difficulty is the use of ambiguous expressions" (異文化コミュニケーション研究, 2002: 99)[16].

It is relevant to note that ambiguity and vagueness are both features of Japanese culture. Japanese usually do not say things directly or just prefer to use other ways to express their thoughts. For instance, silence represents one of the possible communicative features which are more widely used in Japanese communication. However, silence could be considered as a specific socio-cultural characteristic which determine conversation between Japanese as it has been explained by Ishii and Bruneau in Nakai (2002): "North American societies, for example, are so

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15 BELLO, R., RAGSDALE, J.D., BRANDAU-BROWN, F.E., THIBODEAUX, T., "Cultural Perceptions of Equivocation and Directness: Dimensional or Unique?", *Intercultural Communication Studies XV* (3), 2006, pp.179-188.

16 NAKAI, F., "The Role of Cultural Influence in Japanese Communication: A Literature Review on Social and Situational Factors and Japanese Indirectness." *異文化コミュニケーション研究*, Tokyo, Kanda University of International Studies, 2002, pp. 99-122.

involved in linear progression that even flashes of silence are filled with action and doing. In these cultures, silence is viewed as dark, negative and full of "no things"- all of which are considered socially undesirable" (Ishii & Bruneau, 1988: 310 in Nakai, 2002:101)[17].

As Tannen argues (1985) speaking about the concept of silence: "if indirectness is a matter of saying one thing and meaning another, silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something" (Tannen, 1985:97 in Nakai, 2002: 102). By continuing the discussion Nakai (2002) reports: "to the Japanese, language is a means of communication, whereas to the people of many other cultures it is the means" (Kunihiro, in Ishii 1984:65 in Nakai, 2002:102). There is, indeed, a different conceptualization in the meaning of silence between Japanese and other cultures.

Moreover, among non-verbal strategies used in Japanese communication there can be found also laugh and hesitation since that words are not always considered as the main way of expression.

Discussing about cultural features which interact in the linguistic choice of being ambiguous or indirect it results necessary to explain the concepts of *amae, uchi*and *soto, honne* and *tatemae.* In Japan there is the tendency to distinguish between *uchi* and *soto*, inside and outside. Relationships are usually determined by considering these two aspects of in or out groups relationships.

In a considerably closed society such as the Japanese one, people are used to consider themselves in relation to a relevant group they join to. It comes from the ancient cultural feature that Japanese had to cooperate in order to survive in the

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17 NAKAI, F., "The Role of Cultural Influence in Japanese Communication: A Literature Review on Social and Situational Factors and Japanese Indirectness", 異文化コミュニケーション研究, Tokyo, Kanda University of International Studies, 2002, pp. 99-122.

society. As Mickova (2003)[18] argues:

> "In such social structure individualistic ambitions and efforts have to be suppressed. It functions in both ways- the group does not allow the individual to behave independently regarding such behavior as selfish, and the individual adapts his behavior to the group, since he does not want to lose the benefits it guarantees him. In other words he is scared to be excluded." (Mickova, 2003: 136).

The concept of *uchi* and *soto* is connected, indeed, with the one of *amae*. *Amae* represents the desire and the need to be loved, to be considered as part of a group or a community, to be accepted by the others. Japanese usually has many difficulties in saying no directly to the others because they are scared to break up the relationships and, in some ways, be pushed away from the group (Davies & Ikeno, 2002)[19].

Japanese have thus the tendency to maintain and respect the harmony, better known as *wa.* In order to preserve the harmony and the internal balance between the members of a group it results necessary suppressing their own personal and individualistic ambitions and behave appropriately. As it has been reported by Mickova (2003) in her argumentation: "Communication in such society is required to be indirect. It is a must demanded by the commonly shared value of harmony." (Mickova, 2003:137)[20].

Of course also Japanese have feelings even though they not easily express it, especially in formal environments. There is a distinction, indeed, between *honne* and *tatemae*, between the true thoughts and feelings *(honne)* and what is considered more appropriate to do in order to not break the harmony in a group

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18 MICKOVA, L., "The Japanese Indirectness Phenomenon", *Asian and African Studies*, nº 12, (2), 2003, pp. 135-147.

19 DAVIES, R.J. & IKENO, O., *The Japanese Mind. Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*, New York, Tuttle Publishing, 2002.

20 MICKOVA, L., "The Japanese Indirectness Phenomenon", *Asian and African Studies*, nº12 (2), 2003, 135-147.

(tatemae). If *honne* is used only in the family, intimate friends and with inner-circle people, *tatemae* is always used in formal occasions and with people of out-group.

There have been conducted many sociological studies on these concepts which represent a relevant characteristic of Japanese culture in order to better realize why Japanese seem to be more indirect and why foreigners have usually a perception of not better understanding their thoughts and feelings.

Barbara Pizziconi (2009)[21] and Michael Haugh (2003)[22] conducted relevant studies about the perception of Japanese communication especially in relation to ambiguity, vagueness and indirectness.

Pizziconi (2009) considered some relative variables in the perception of Japanese as ambiguous by interviewing two Japanese students specialized in linguistics. During the interview emerged some clear vague and indirect lexemes that naturally occur in Japanese conversation but she highlighted the possibility that, although these lexemes express ambiguity and evasiveness, it does not mean that Japanese is more ambiguous than other languages.

She claims that Japanese seem to be ambiguous when speakers want to be vague and decide deliberately to be indirect. As argued in her paper: "we judge people based on the way they talk and against our parameter of 'normality', i.e. the normalized behaviours that we are familiar with" (Pizziconi, 2009:244). As reported in her article by Clancy: "it is widely recognized that the communicative style of the Japanese is context dependent, indirect, rich in connotation and evasive

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21 PIZZICONI, B., "Stereotyping Communication Styles In and Out of The Language and Culture classroom: Japanese Indirectness, Ambiguity and Vagueness", In: Gómez Morón, Reyes and Padilla Cruz, Manuel and Fernández Amaya, Lucía and De la O Hernández López, María, (eds.) *Pragmatics Applied to Language Teaching and Learning*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp. 221-254.

22 HAUGH, M., "Japanese and Non-Japanese Perception of Japanese Communication", *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, nº5, (1), 2003, pp. 156-177.

in denotation" (Clancy, 1986 in Pizziconi, 2009:223). By arguing that, Clancy means that the natural tendency of the Japanese is represented by preferring the silence rather to the words, the inclination to be more inexplicit and to not say thing directly (*hakkiri iwanai*). And she adds: "clearly, Japanese style of communication can work only in a rather homogenous society in which people actually can anticipate each other's needs, wants and reactions" (Clancy, 1986 in Pizziconi, 2009:224).

Pizziconi (2009) continues her considerations by stating: "anyone with a certain degree of familiarity with Japan and Japanese language will find some aspects of this commentary undoubtedly true-- but some other excessively stereotypical and overgeneralizing" (Pizziconi, 2009: 225)[23].

If indeed we can surely admit that Japanese language has undeniable vague and ambiguous linguistic nuances, it is also relevant to declare that the perception of ambiguous characteristics depend on the interpretation of non- Japanese native speakers. It is fundamental to not generalize the concept that Japanese is more vague or more indirect than other languages. Indirectness is not the only feature of Japanese language. It cannot promote ambiguity but of course it can express ambiguity if there is the intention to be vague (Pizziconi, 2009: 249). "The degree of indirectness we perceive is also a function of participants' goals and expectations (our frames) and therefore it is an emergent property of specific interactions" (Pizziconi 2009:249)[24].

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23 PIZZICONI, B., "Stereotyping Communication Styles In and Out of The Language and Culture classroom: Japanese Indirectness, Ambiguity and Vagueness", In: Gómez Morón, Reyes and Padilla Cruz, Manuel and Fernández Amaya, Lucía and De la O Hernández López, María, (eds.) *Pragmatics Applied to Language Teaching and Learning*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

24 PIZZICONI, B., "Stereotyping Communication Styles In and Out of The Language and Culture classroom: Japanese Indirectness, Ambiguity and Vagueness", In: Gómez Morón, Reyes and Padilla Cruz, Manuel and Fernández Amaya, Lucía and De la O Hernández López, María, (eds.) *Pragmatics Applied to Language Teaching and Learning*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

Haugh (2003) conducted a study on the perception of Japanese communication by administering two questionnaires to native and non-native speakers of Japanese. He agrees with Pizziconi concerning the non-generalization of the idea that Japanese is always been considered as more vague than English especially from a linguistic perspective and there should be done a distinction between the words ambiguous, vague and indirect.

In relation to the issue Haugh (2003) argues that: "This is not to say that Japanese communication is not vague at times, but examination of supposed examples of vagueness in Japanese indicate that the claim that Japanese communication is characteristically vague is over-stated" (Haugh, 2003: 158). There are indeed cases where English has been considered as being more indirect than Japanese (Haugh, 2003:158)[25].

The study of Haugh (2003) which was realized by administering a questionnaire has produced interesting results. In fact, generally talking, the perception that foreigners have about Japanese is a slightly different if compared to the one of Japanese native speakers.

As reported by Haugh (2003) in his argumentation: "The perceptions of Japanese communication held by the Japanese surveyed are thus characterized by the belief that Japanese communication is vague and indirect."(Haugh, 2003:166). However he claims: "Non-Japanese may perceive certain examples of elliptical or indirect utterances as vague, when Japanese in the same situation would be able to infer and clearly understand the speaker's meaning (Donahue, 1998; Sasagawa, 1996 in Haugh, 2003: 169).

Although the results of the survey conducted by Haugh (2003) demonstrates that

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25 HAUGH, M., "Japanese and Non-Japanese Perception of Japanese Communication", *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* nº 5, (1), 2003, pp. 156-177.

both Japanese and non-Japanese speakers perceive Japanese as more vague and indirect than English, the perception in the concept of vagueness and ambiguity achieved by Japanese seems to be weaker than the one of non-Japanese speakers. Moreover, as it has been assumed: "In the case of non-Japanese the perception that Japanese is vague may partially arise in some cases from a lack of sufficient proficiency in the Japanese to be able to use contextual cues and infer clear, unambiguous speaker meanings" (Haugh, 2003: 173)[26].

It results not easy to determine whether Japanese is linguistically more vague than other languages (such as English) but there is a common agreement in the perception that Japanese sounds to be more indirect than English, as it has been argued by Haugh (2003).

4. Methodology.

During my stay in Japan I had the opportunity to meet many Japanese and I always had the perception that they were often used to prefer ambiguous lexemes in conversation. This linguistic feature interested me a lot, even if I already knew that Japanese were not culturally used to say things so directly. Hence, I decided to ask to the Japanese which was the real meaning of such expressions and in which occasions they were more used to prefer one to another.

Therefore, after an accurate study of the literature conducted on Japanese ambiguity and vagueness, I decided to realize a semi-structured questionnaire taking into exams some lexemes of Japanese ambiguity which are commonly used in conversations in order to respond to ordinary invitations between friends. I opted for a semi-structured questionnaire in order to let the people free in answering to the questions, which could be used in a sociolinguistics analysis

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26 HAUGH, M., "Japanese and Non-Japanese Perception of Japanese Communication", *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, nº 5, (1), 2003, pp. 156-177.

approach. The interview-style method would have been result more complicated especially considered that the people whom I gave the questionnaire were not linguistic experts and while it would have generated many misunderstandings it would also have been very difficult to categorize the relative answers.

Therefore, I decided to realize a questionnaire with fixed answers (3 choices)- although there was the possibility to reply to all of them by marking a circle- and I also left a space for some personal considerations an the end of each one. In that way, I did not force people to reply so strictly to the questions proposed considering the personal variables involved in such survey's topic. The questionnaires were distributed after an accurate explanation in order to give them the possibility to fill it out in a separate environment.

All the respondents (n=33) who completed the questionnaire was resident in Japan, in the Kansai areas of Kyoto, Osaka and Shiga Prefectures. 20 of the respondents were female while 13 were male. The male age average was around 43 (between 20 and 70 years old) and the female was around 42 years old (between 18 and 68 years old). The vast majority of them joined the Hippo-Family Clubs with me during the homestay experience.

The questionnaire, written in Japanese, was distributed from February to March 2016, while I was in Kyoto. It was distributed in a paper format.

4.1 Survey explanation.

In this section I will illustrate which has been the questionnaire's enquire, which lexemes have been included in the survey and which answers have been chosen. The enquire was about expressions of ambiguity which are often used to appear in Japanese in order to reply to invitations. It has been asked to the participants to mark the answer one, two, three or all of them- in the case it would

have resulted necessary- and leave, if possible, a comment by explaining the reasons of their choices.

The questionnaire has been structured in nine different points where there have been reported a variety of lexemes which Japanese use in standard conversation. The style is very informal, as it could appear in friendship dialogues.

The lexemes analyzed were about nine as there have been reported in the answers 「まだわからない」、「もしかしたら...かもしれない」、「...かな」、「ちょっと...かな」、「ちょっと...分からないな」、「...たら...かな」、「考えとく」、「たぶん、まあまあ」 literally translatable in English as: "I do not know yet", "It is possible that...", "Maybe it is difficult", "Maybe it is a bit difficult", "I do not know the plans", "If I...maybe..", "I will think about that", "Perhaps" and "Pretty much". The questions reported are always the same 「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」- "Can we meet up this Saturday?" exceptionally for the last question (n.9) which reports a different sentence: 「この映画をすごく面白いらしいけど見に行きたい?」- "This film sounds interesting, do you want to watch it?".

The possible answers are fixed for all the questions**:** 「本当に分からない」, 「分かってるけど行くかどうかをまだ決められない」, 「ことわりたいけど失礼だと思って言わない」 and underline different aspects of ambiguity: "I really do not know", "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not", "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite so I prefer to not answer".

5. Survey results and discussion.

Question 1

Aさん: 「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない？」

あなた:「今週の土曜日時間があるかどうか**まだ分からない**」

A: "Can we meet up this Saturday?"

You: "I do not know yet if I have time this Saturday"

Answer	Women	Men	Total
• "I really do not know"	16	7	● 23
• "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not"	14	6	● 20
• "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite so I prefer to not answer"	9	6	● 15

Comments:

-本当に分からない時その表現を使う。I usually use this expression when I really do not know my plans.

-予定が分からないので。I do not know my plans.

Question 2

Aさん:「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」

あなた:「もしかしたらバイトが入る**かもしれない**」

A: "Can we meet up this Saturday?"

You: "It is possible that I have part-time job."

Answer	Women	Men	Total
• "I really do not know"	14	6	● 20
• "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not"	8	7	● 15
• "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite so I prefer to not answer"	7	6	● 13

Comments:

-バイトがあったら出来ないので。When I do not know if I have to work.

-本当に分からない時その表現を使うけど、決められないときも使う。I use this expression when I do not know yet my plans and sometimes when I cannot decide.

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Question 3

Aさん:「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない？」

あなた:「今週の土曜日バイトが入るので難しい**かな**」

A: "Can we meet up this Saturday?"

You: "Maybe this Saturday it is difficult because I have part-time job"

Answer	Women	Men	Total
• "I really do not know"	3	4	● 7
• "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not"	7	2	● 9
• "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite so I prefer to not answer"	9	7	● 16

Comments:

-行けない時よく使う。I use this expression frequently when I cannot go.

-無理だけど失礼だと思うのでたぶんはっきり言わない。だから難しいとか厳しいも使う。難しい使ったらもっと優しい感じ。 I use this expression when I cannot go but I do not say it too directly so I prefer to use difficult(*muzukashii*)*.* It is a smoother way to say that "I can't".

Question 4

Aさん:「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」

あなた:「**ちょっと**難しい**かな**」

A: "Can we meet up this Saturday?"

You: "It is a bit difficult"

Answer	Women	Men	Total
• "I really do not know"	-	1	● 1
• "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not"	-	1	● 1
• "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite	18	9	● 27

so I prefer to not answer"			

Comments:

-上と同じ。Same as above.

Question 5

Aさん:「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない? 」

あなた:「ちょっと予定がわからないな…」

A:"Can we meet up this Saturday?"

You: "I do not know the plans"

Answer	*Women*	*Men*	*Total*
• "I really do not know"	12	9	● 21
• "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not"	10	3	● 13
• "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite so I prefer to not answer"	11	6	● 17

Comments:

-予定が分からない時使う。I use this expression when I do not know my plans.

-「ちょっと」を使うと、もっと優しい感じ。When I use *chotto*, it sounds smoother.

-本当に分からない時使うけど断りたい時も使う。I usually use this when I do not know but also when I want to say that "I can't".

Question 6

Aさん:「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」

あなた:「土曜日はバイトがなかったら行けるかな…」

A:"Can we meet up this Saturday?"

You: "If I do not have part-time job maybe we can meet up"

Answer	*Women*	*Men*	*Total*
• "I really do not know"	8	7	● 15
• "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not"	7	6	● 13
• "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite so I prefer to not answer"	9	2	● 11

Comments:

-上と同じ。Same as above.

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バイトがあるか予定がまだ分からない時使うけど理由を言う。断りたい時も時々使う。If I do not know yet if I have to work, I use this expression. But I usually say the reason. Sometimes I use this also when I want to turn down an invitation.

Question 7

Aさん: 「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」

あなた: 「**考えとく**」
A:"Can we meet up this Saturday?"

You: "I will think about that"

Answer	*Women*	*Men*	*Total*
• "I really do not know"	4	3	● 7
• "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not"	8	6	● 14
• "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite so I prefer to not answer"	14	6	● 20

Comments:

-断りたい時よく使う。I often use this when I want to turn down an invitation.

Question 8

Aさん: 「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」

あなた:「**たぶん**大丈夫」

A:"Can we meet up this Saturday?"

You: "Perhaps it is fine"

Answer	Women	Men	Total
• "I really do not know"	6	4	• 10
• "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not"	8	6	• 14
• "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite so I prefer to not answer"	1	-	• 1

Comments:

-行きたいと思う気持ちが強いけど、もし行けなくなると困るので、「たぶん行ける」、と言っておく。

I can go and I strongly want to go. But, I will be worried if just in case that I cannot go, so I use *tabun*.

Question 9

Aさん:「この映画をすごく面白いらしいけど見に行きたい?」

あなた:「**まあまあ…**」
A: "This film sounds interesting, do you want to watch it?"

You: "Pretty much"

Answer	Women	Men	Total
• "I really do not know"	8	4	• 12
• "I know but I cannot decide if I will go or not"	5	5	• 10
• "I would say no but I think it would be too impolite so I prefer to not answer"	13	6	• 19

Comments:

-たぶんその映画を見に行きたくないけどはっきり言わない。Maybe I do not

want to watch the movie but I do not say it directly.

-断りたいけど失礼だと思う。It could be impolite though I want to turn down an invitation.

-とっても見たい気持ちではない。It isn't so strong to feel to go, in this case.

In the tables above have been reported the results of the survey, divided into male and female and with a sum of the total. The number of the respondents of men and women was not equal but I decided it could have been interesting to report the number of the replies in parallel in order to see if there are some gender differences. Before starting to discuss the survey results it is important to highlight that it does not represent a quantitative research but a qualitative one, since that the number of the respondents was not so huge and it has not been possible to collect a large number of data.

As the table reports, the total of the respondent to the first question: Aさん:「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない？」あなた:「今週の土曜日時間があるかどうか**まだ分からない**」 seems to agree to the first reply 「本当に分からない」 in the case where the lexeme of ambiguity 「**まだ分からない**」 is usually used. A not so distant number of replies opted also for the second one 「分かってるけど行くかどうかをまだ決められない」 which underlines uncertainty but not a politeness strategy of saving the hearer's face. It is interesting to note that a fewer number of respondents also use this expression when they do not want to say "no" directly in order to not result as impolite. Regarding the second question:

Aさん:「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」あなた:「**もしかしたらバイトが入るかもしれない**」 the vast majority of the respondents seem to agree in particular with the first and the second answers 「本当に分からない」, 「分かってるけど行くかどうかをまだ決められない」 so it seems that when using the lexeme 「**もしかしたら….かもしれない**」 there is no attempt at saving

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the hearer's face. Also in this case only a lower number of respondents seem to use the expression to avoid direct refusals.

There is, however, a difference in replies in the third and fourth questions where there have been reported two relative similar lexemes: Aさん:「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない？」あなた:「今週の土曜日バイトが入るので難しい**かな**」,「ちょっと難しい**かな**」 where the use of the ambiguous and dubitative particle「**かな**」has been presented alone and with the word「**ちょっと**」. The majority of the respondents seems to agree with the third answer 「ことわりたいけど失礼だと思って言わない」 hence there is a strong attempt at saving the hearer's face by saying that "maybe it could be difficult, or maybe it could be a bit difficult" to realize the wants of the interlocutor. By using this expression Japanese avoid to say "I can't" so directly and remaining in the vagueness of " it is difficult". Only a few number of respondents, in the first case of「難しい**かな**」should use the expression also when they effectively do not know or have not decided yet. It is interesting to underline that, in the case of「**ちょっと**」there is a strong agreement for the third reply and the number of respondents for the first and the second is completely irrelevant. In the question number five: Aさん: 「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」あなた:「**ちょっと**予定が**わからない**な...」 the agreement seem to opt for the first answer 「本当に分からない」 and a not so distant number of the respondents seem to use the lexeme also when deciding to be polite with the interlocutor. Therefore, whether there is no attempt to save the hearer's face there could be cases where the situation could be exactly the opposite. In any case, the use of「**ちょっと**」seems to give a different nuance to the sentence by a tendency to be not direct. According to the question number six: Aさん: 「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」あなた:「土曜日はバイトがなかっ**た ら行けるかな**...」 it seems that a slightly majority of respondents tend to use the

particle 「たら」with no attempt at saving the hearer's face but the difference is not so wide with a number of them that use the latter as a face saving strategy. In the question number seven: Aさん:

「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」あなた: 「考えとく」the attempt at saving the hearer face by avoiding to do a FTA (B&L 1987) is quite evident even if a not so relevant number of the respondents still use the lexeme 「考えとく」when effectively they do not have decided yet something. In the case of question number eight: Aさん:「今週の土曜日一緒に遊びに行かない?」あなた:「たぶん大丈夫」it is evident that the use of 「たぶん」seems not to be related with uncertainty, even if a few number of respondents has opted for the reply number one or two but a more consistent number of them does not reply at all or left a comment by claiming that they will go for sure and that the feeling of certainty is quite strong. This is not the case of the last question: Aさん: 「この映画をすごく面白いらしいけど見に行きたい?」 あなた:「まあまあ...」where there is effectively a strong inclination to use this lexeme in situation where there is an evident attempt at saving the hearer's face by not resulting too direct.

5.1 Considerations.

As it has been introduced in the previous paragraph, the aim of this survey is not to give a number of data but it represents an attempt to ask to Japanese which are the cases where they use these common sentences in order to reply to invitations. The survey has been conducted by using qualitative research methods and it cannot be taken as a sample of data. Nevertheless it is interesting to note how Japanese have replied to the questions proposed and which are the tendencies in using such lexemes.

From a broader point of view, it could be argued that the use of the lexemes presented in the questions number one and two 「まだ分からない」,

「もしかしたら….かもしれない」　underline an effective nuance of uncertainty, and they are usually preferred by natives when there is a real doubtful situation or when they do not know effectively if they can promise something to the hearer. Among the comments, in fact, people usually underline that they use the first and the second lexemes when they are not sure about a promise or they do not know their plans yet.

Of course, this is not the case of the lexemes used in question number three and four　「難しいかな」,「ちょっと難しいかな」　which are more widely used in cases of non-direct refusal and when there is effectively the attempt to not say "I can't" in more direct way. Of course the use of the lexeme *muzukashii* which literally means "difficult" could even generate a confusion to the foreigners which are used to think that maybe there could be something that could effectively create some "difficulties" and do not interpret the sentence as an impossibility. It is interesting to note that among Japanese natives the meaning of that sentence is very clear and it represents a "direct" refusal (Mickova, 2003)[27].

In the comments reported below the answers people wrote that the use of *chotto* and *muzukashii* represents a smoother way to avoid to say "I can't" or "It is impossible" in a more direct way.

In the case of questions number five and six　「ちょっと…わからないな」, 「たら」the data report an interesting evaluation. Although the tendency shows an inclination for the effective " do not know" the number of the respondents of the third answer is not irrelevant. Especially in the case of *chotto* which seem to underline the indirectness of sentences where the attempt to not be direct would be more strongly marked, as it has been reported also in the comments.

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27 MICKOVA, L., "The Japanese Indirectness Phenomenon", *Asian and African Studies*, nº 12, (2), 2003, pp. 135-147.

In questions number seven and nine the tendency of using the lexemes 「考えとく，まあまあ…」 does not seem to generate any doubt in the attempt of being smooth and gentle with the interlocutor by not saying "no" directly and in the comments people underlined that, especially in the case of 「考えとく」 the attempt is to avoid to be rude speaking with the interlocutor.

By contrast, it is very interesting to notice that in the case of question number eight, the use of 「たぶん」 does not generate any doubts. Even if there are case in which they do not know (unless very a few) the nuance of "maybe" in this case is very weak and the feeling of "yes" is strong, as it has been reported also in the comments. In fact, a large number of respondents do not replied at all to this question by claiming in the comments that they use "maybe" just in the case that, for any unexpected reason, they cannot accomplish their wants.

Despite all the revealed data and all the personal comments which usually tended to give a more exhaustive explanation of the chosen answer and which are basically related to remark the uncertain situation which could generate the use of one or another lexeme it is interesting to notice that the use of these vague expressions used in invitation present different meanings and nuances.

If *mada wakarai* and *kamoshirenai* are usually used to express a real uncertainty the use of *chotto muzukashii kana, kangaetoku, maamaa* presented in that particular and specific sentences does not seem to generate any doubts in the refusal.

This could represent, indeed, a problem of misunderstanding for non-native speakers of Japanese since that they could not perceive the real meaning of the sentence. It could happen because the use of such expressions, widely used also in other languages, can promote a different shade which is generally caused by cultural differences. Whether Japanese do not have the inclination of declaring

things -neither positive nor negative-in a direct way, these sentences represents, in some contexts, the easier way to avoid saying "I can't" so directly in order to not do a FTA, referring to B&L (1987) theory.

On the other hands, the use of *chotto… wakaranai* or *tara* seemed to have generated some perplexity also among natives since that the difference in the number of the respondents to the first, second and third questions seem not be too huge. Hence, it could mean that the use of the lexemes would present some variables depending on the situation and could not be generalized from a linguistic perspective. Of course the use of *tabun* that usually Westerners or Italian do not use so frequently seems to be preferred by the Japanese. In that specific case *tabun* does not mean "maybe" but it is widely used in order to underline that something can always happen suddenly and it could impede us to realize our wants.

In conclusion, considering all the personal variables involved in such survey's topic it could be argued that the tendency of Japanese to not resulting as being direct represent a perception of both Japanese natives and non-natives and it would be better connected with some peculiar characteristic of relevant cultural differences (Haugh, 2003)[28].

Of course, there are some evident stereotypes that could be moderated in order to have a more realistic perception of vagueness used by Japanese and in which cases there are overgeneralizations (Pizziconi, 2009)[29]. From a pragmatic perspective, considered the exploratory feature of such survey, it could be argued that there are specific cases where Japanese use some lexemes in order to avoid to say "no"

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28 HAUGH, M., "Japanese and Non-Japanese Perception of Japanese Communication", *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, nº 5, (1), 2003, pp. 156-177.

29 PIZZICONI, B., "Stereotyping Communication Styles In and Out of The Language and Culture classroom: Japanese Indirectness, Ambiguity and Vagueness", In: Gómez Morón, Reyes and Padilla Cruz, Manuel and Fernández Amaya, Lucía and De la O Hernández López, María, (eds.), *Pragmatics Applied to Language Teaching and Learning*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

directly and in order to avoid to threat the hearer's face (as reported in questions 3,4,7,9) but there are some cases where is not easy to understand well which is the limit between uncertainty and politeness (as in questions 5,6). By contrast, there seem to be some cases where the level of uncertainty is better underlined (as in questions 1, 2).

Finally, there is a unique case where the level of uncertainty, whilst marked by a vague lexeme (question 8) does not characterize any intention of resulting vague and ambiguous. It could be claimed, indeed, that Japanese is a language where lexemes of vagueness and ambiguity are often used in order to preserve the harmony but the limit between uncertainty and politeness is not always understandable considered the variables that could be involved in conversations, also depending on the contexts and situations analyzed.

However, as reported in the analysis above, the use of one or another lexeme could highlight a propensity to remark uncertainty or politeness, depending on the choice of the lexeme, the contexts, the situation and the relationships of the speaker involved. At this stage it is important to consider that there are many differences in the use of the lexemes and, of course, in the choice of some expressions in situations where the relationship between the speakers is not horizontal but vertical, as it could happen by analyzing conversations between *senpai-kohai* or between colleagues working in the same company. It is fundamental to restate that this survey analyses a friendly conversational context, as it can be found in *uchi* relationships between members who join the same social group. The choice of the words, the register of formality and the sentence typology could vary if the speakers involved in the conversation fulfill different social status and of course the replies could not be as the ones proposed.

6. Conclusions.

The present work, starting from the B&L theory of linguistic politeness strategies, has represented a qualitative empirical research in order to better understand which is the limit between uncertainty and politeness, from a pragmatic perspective. After a literature review of the previous researches on Japanese ambiguity *(aimaisa)* and the report of field studies, the purpose of the work has been mainly focused on some common lexemes used in daily conversations to reply to invitation through the administration of a questionnaire to natives.

From the questionnaire, with an accurate analysis of the results, seem to appear that the clear limit between uncertainty and politeness in the proposed lexemes' use is not always traceable- although the preference of one to another lexeme convey a more clarity in the meaning of the latter.

It emerged that there are cases where the level on uncertainty is stronger than the one of politeness and cases where the situation is basically the opposite, depending on the lexeme. However, even if a "universal" reply seems to be difficult to find, considered all the social and personal variables involved in the use of linguistic ambiguity, it is also clear that, by using one expression or another Japanese are generally inclined to express different feelings.

It would have been interesting to conduct further studies on linguistic politeness strategies, by interviewing and observing a bigger part of Japanese natives in order to arrive to determine data results by reporting a wider spectrum of analysed situations.

It is important to not forget all the cultural features which are always connected with such socio-pragmatic researches in order to better realize a complete study which always has to take into account about all the relative variables involved.

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