

# Cultural Key Terms and Politeness in Communications in Israel

Yoshimi Miyake

## Introduction

My intention in this paper is to compare the Israeli and Japanese way of communication by comparing some of their “cultural key terms”. I will discuss politeness and directness in conversation styles and also attempt to interpret the Israelis’ attitudes to politeness.

One of my strategies in attempting to describe a certain culture is to look at “cultural key terms”. These are the terms which are often mentioned, cited and used in everyday life. These terms are also the ones which bind the mentality and behavior of the members of a culture (Ortner 1981, Wierzbicka 1997).

## 1. “Chutzpah”

Wierzbicka (1997) discussed *amae* (cf. Doi 1971), *enryo*, *wa*, *on* and *giri* as Japanese cultural key terms which cannot be translated into English. Katriel (1986) described the Israeli straight way of talk using the Arabic originated term *dugri*. In this section, I will describe the term *chutzpah* and its variations (*khutzpe*, *chutzpa*, *chutzpah*, *hutzpa*, *chuzpe*) as one of the Israeli cultural key terms. *Chutzpah* is a word of Hebrew or Aramaic origin, appearing a few times in the Talmud. Its intention and connotation has evolved throughout history.

*Chutzpah* can be translated into English as “utter nerve, effrontery”. The reason why the term *chutzpah* is considered a cultural key term is because I have heard expressions which contain the term quite often in the public sphere. Some Israelis say that *chutzpah* is the key metaphor for Israel, although it is significant that the term *chutzpah* is often used as a term for criticizing somebody for his/her behavior.

An English-English dictionary defines *chutzpah* as follows:

*chutzpah*: gall, astonishing guts, cheekiness, cheap things, worthless things, nerviness

People are often criticized for showing *chutzpah* when they cut in line, behave in a rude manner or show no consideration for others in the public sphere; such behavior is met with ‘*Eize chutzpah!*’ “What *chutzpah!*” and this can be heard frequently be it on the streets, in post offices, at bus stops,

in cultural halls, etc.

The term *chutzpah* is used in various European languages and in American English. A German colleague of mine said that he believed the word was a term borrowed from Hungarian. Some Americans also use the term, although they are probably unsure where it comes from. According to English-Japanese dictionaries, *chutzpah* is defined as follows:

*Chutzpah*

図々しさ、あつかましさ (口語) (Iwanami)

zuu-zuu shisa, atsukamashisa (colloquial)

‘arrogance’

ひどい厚かましさ、鉄面皮 (Kenkyu-sha)

hidoi atsukama-shisa, tetsu-mem-pi

‘extreme arrogance, shameless’

## 2. Four Categories of *Chutzpah*

*Chutzpah* has four categories. The first category is simply *chutzpah*, i.e. simple behavior similar to *gasut* ‘rudeness’, which is often equated to ‘*chutzpah*’. Simple *chutzpah* could be behavior such as bothering people in public, shouting in public, etc. When arguing or fighting, children often call each other:

(1) *Chutzpan!* – A male with *chutzpah* character

*Chutzpanit!* – A female with *chutzpah* character

The second category of *chutzpah* is lack of consideration for others as seen in examples (2) to (5), which I observed when on a bus in (2), when walking along a street in Zichron Yaakov in (4), and when standing in front of a shopping mall in Tel Aviv between 2005 and 2010.

(2) A man refused to relinquish a vacant seat next to him, after an elderly woman asked him to do so. The woman yelled at him, “*Eize chutzpah!*”.

(3) A large pick-up truck blocked a narrow street so that other cars could not enter. Seeing the situation, an elderly woman yelled at the truck driver, “*Eize chutzpah!*”.

(4) There was only one entrance or only one line for a ticket office at the top of a long line of people, who claimed, “*Eize chutzpah!*”.

(5) There was only a single officer at a security check point telling people to open their bags, but did not help close the bags after checking them. Several people started yelling at the security officer: “*Eize chutzpah! Ma ata oseh?*” (“*What chutzpah! What are you doing?*”).

This kind of verbal attack shows that Israelis actually consider *chutzpah* acts negatively, and referring to them as *chutzpah* could be a source of accusation. Observed incidents in which *chutzpah* was uttered are not few.

The third category is self-justification and rejecting accusations. The following situation indeed confused me, because a *chutzpah* act was denied by the person accused, by labeling the accuser's behavior in turn as *chutzpah*.

(6) When a couple cut in line in front of a cashier, the woman behind the couple told them not to; the couple then accused the woman of committing *chutzpah* because she was not tolerant enough to let them cut in line.

A similar thing happened to me when a man cut in line in front of me at a train station ticket office and I said, "It's my turn!" and he replied accusingly, "*Chutzpanit!*".

The fourth and last category is similar to the third. However, it is different from category 3 in that the *chutzpah* person manipulates a possibility of forgiveness, using his/her *chutzpah* behavior despite the fact that he did something wrong.

(7) Episode 1. A man, having killed his parents, asked for mercy from the court, on the grounds that he had now become an orphan.

(8) Episode 2. An abusive husband, asks his wife for help, while beating her.

From socio-psychological points of view, people who indulge in *chutzpah* are often those who cannot control their own behavior. Several Israelis I talked to said that *chutzpah* behavior is considered childish and less engaged in social interaction. Children should be gradually socialized and not have recourse to *chutzpah*.

### **3. *Chutzpah* and Insider vs Outsider**

To outsiders, Israelis' lack of empathy toward them appears distinctive. Interestingly however, this *chutzpah* attitude is more tolerated outside the domestic domain. Acts of *chutzpah* should not occur between insiders such as family members and very close friends. Israelis say that they would not do anything *chutzpah* at home or when they were with their relatives. It should be noted that acts of *chutzpah* occur in the boundary space between insiders and outsiders in a situation where everybody recognises a certain behavior norm but somebody does not follow it.

Acts of *chutzpah* are observed more often in public, outside the actor's inner circle. On the other hand, linguistic politeness is observed more among family members and friends. So when Israelis behave with *chutzpah* in front of non-Israelis, it gives the impression that Israelis are arrogant or rude.

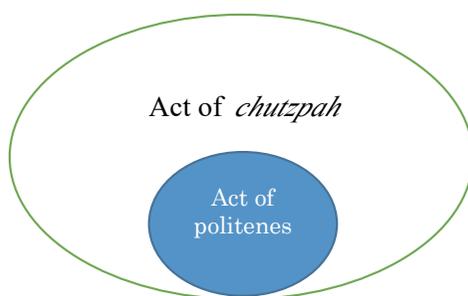


Figure 1. Act of *chutzpah*

As opposed to a simple native connotation, American English *chutzpah* can be rather positive. Even when the speaker or writer may feel that *chutzpah* is associated with rudeness or arrogance, s/he thinks that its use is necessary in order to reach his/her goal. This use of *chutzpah* occurs especially when writers or speakers describe themselves. Alan Dershowitz pointed out the importance of being *chutzpah* and how it has supported his life in his book entitled *Chutzpah* (Dershowitz 1991).

The term *chutzpah* seems to have been used often to describe toughness and guts of certain people. However, *chutzpah* is used to describe people's selfishness or contradictory but aggressive linguistic behavior as in (12).

I have discussed behavior described as *chutzpah* in this section and whether *chutzpah* is counter-politeness. In the next section, I will discuss the relation between the idea of politeness and *chutzpah*, then discuss the similarities and differences between Israeli and Japanese attitudes towards what is politeness.

#### **4. Chutzpah, Politeness, and Impoliteness**

In terms of the traditional studies of linguistic politeness, Lakoff (1973) defined the principles of politeness as follows:

1. Do not impose.
2. Give a choice.
3. Make a person feel good.

These three principles are rather ambiguous. The first two principles of giving a choice and not imposing will make a person feel good. These principles seem to have come from the author's background, based on the idea that the conversation participants are in a horizontal or equal relationship, and that all participants are sociable and communicative. Lakoff's principles of

politeness may not fit the Israeli way of conversing. Israelis tend to impose, thinking that imposing will help the others, or make the other person feel good, while at the same time, give abundant choices generously.

Brown and Levinson (1987) divide the attitudes to politeness into two kinds: positive politeness and negative politeness. These positive-negative dichotomy models might help us understand the idea of Israelis and Japanese politeness.

According to Blum-Kulka (1992), Israeli politeness is strongly positive politeness, which manifests itself in mitigation and nicknaming. Adding *motek*, *metuka chamud/a* 'sweetie, honey', adding *bevakasha* 'please, you're welcome' or flattering compliments are polite acts, according to Blum-Kulka (1992). Again, interestingly, these positive expressions politeness are observed more often in family conversations, for example between a mother and her children.

In this way, intimacy and solidarity is manifested in Israeli linguistic politeness. For the Japanese, on the other hand, nicknaming is avoided as it is considered too informal, too friendly or even threatening, unless the conversation participants have a close relationship.

Japanese politeness is that of negative politeness as described by the term *enryo*, distancing from others in order not to offend them. Also the expression *meiwaku o kakenai* is repeated to children by parents as they grow up. The object *hitosama ni* 'to outsiders' is also emphasized. From this point of view, Japanese politeness is extremely negative politeness. Positive politeness is observed for example in dialogues in corporations and convenience stores between salespersons and customers, and in vertical relationships, that is, between subordinates and their bosses.

I observed that the Israeli attitude of assertiveness and straightforwardness is observed in public space dialogues. As a result of this straightforwardness, Israeli politeness often manifests itself in humorous exchanges as in the examples below:

In (14), A (who informed me of his experience on the same day) was driving a car but got stuck on a steep road. He had to go down the slope but was scared that if he made a mistake, his car might go over the cliff. A middle-aged man B happened to be passing by. A asked B to give him instructions on how to do U-turn.

(14) A: Could you help me?

B: Do I have a choice?

In the dialogue (15) below, the father of a 7 year old girl Or, asked her classroom teacher whether she could leave the class for about an hour in order to attend her two year old sister's birthday party at the day care centre.

(15) Father: Can Or leave the class for about an hour to attend her little sister's birthday party at the day care centre?

Teacher (holding out her hand): If you pay me.

(16) A asks if the bus they are in is going to the parking lot where A needed to go:

A: Does this bus go to the parking lot?

B: This bus does not go farther than the parking lot.

(17) A asks how to get into a shopping mall where all the doors seem to be locked because it is Shabbat.

A: Where is an entrance door?

B: Just there if you push it.

Besides answering humoristically to a question, Israelis are eager to give information even when they are not asked to do so. Israeli strangers also show concern for others, as in (18).

(18) I was about to purchase a few pastries at supermarket bakery, when a woman spoke to me.

A woman: You know, the bakery next door is better and cheaper than here.

(19) Illustrates the concern which a security personnel showed me, when I (A) was about to go back to Israel from Japan where I had returned for a few weeks, via Bangkok. In order to confirm that I really resided in Israel, a security man started asking a few questions about bank and health insurance systems I was using:

(19) Security man: Which bank are you using?

A: *Bank Hapoalim*

S: It's not such a good bank. Use *Bank Leumi*.

S: Which health insurance are you in?

A: *Klalit*.

S: You know, *Meuchedet* is better.

A: Why?

S: Well, it is just better.

Examples (18) and (19) illustrate the concern that Israelis show towards foreigners. They wish to help them by giving useful information, but this might make foreigners, especially Japanese, feel confused and uneasy.

Japanese in Israel are sometimes shocked and bewildered by Israeli behavior. A female student, who had studied at the University of Haifa in 2015 and 2016, described an unforgettable experience

she had had in Israel as follows:

(20) ‘When I was riding in a tram in Jerusalem, a woman sitting next to me started to talk to me: “You know, those people [pointing at *Haradim*] do not even have to pay for the train ride tickets. Isn’t this upsetting? They are wasting tax we pay.”

‘I was surprised (*bikkuri shita*) that a stranger should suddenly talk to me in this way. She even looked angry.’

The Japanese student was surprised by the behavior of this Israeli woman who seemed to treat her like a close friend. This Israeli woman was severely criticizing the Israeli situation to an Asian stranger. For a Japanese person used to Japanese politeness which distinguishes between insiders and outsiders, this Israeli’s attitude of treating a stranger like an insider was confusing.

It should also be noted that Israeli politeness favors intimacy and honesty. It has little to do with power relationships. Any Israeli might accuse any other Israeli for doing or saying *chutzpah*.

Israelis think that they should curb their *chutzpah* attitude. Japanese also think that they should not be impolite. However, the significant difference is that Israelis are not concerned with the power relationship between interlocutors, whereas Japanese on the other hand accuse people of lower status of being impolite younger people, subordinates, and women must be more polite than elders, bosses, and men. Besides the vertical relationship, Japanese must be more polite to those people who do not belong to their own category, such as their family members, coworkers, etc.

One of the reasons why non-Israelis consider Israelis impolite, is because politeness is particularly associated with intimacy and solidarity between Israelis. In other words, they tend to be less attentive to politeness with strangers than with intimates.



Figure 2. Israeli Politeness

## 5. Conclusion

This paper attempted to describe one of Israeli’s cultural key terms *chutzpah* from the politeness point of view. We also attempted to compare Israeli politeness and Japanese politeness.

Israelis do not blindly respect linguistic politeness although they have a Hebrew term for

politeness, *nimus*, a noun from an adjective *menumas/menumaset* ‘polite’. Performatives such as *toda* ‘thank you’, *bevakasha* ‘please, you’re welcome’ and nicknaming and mitigating is necessary for interlocutors to make the other person feel good. However, Israelis respect an assertive attitude of offering help or giving information, regardless of whether it is toward people they know or do not know. On the other hand, Israelis think that they should avoid *chutzpah* acts. They severely criticize those who act with *chutzpah*.

Japanese people might feel shocked, and could get upset, which might lead to a negative evaluation of Israelis, as Israeli interlocutors even talk to Asians as though they were speaking to insiders. But at the same time, some Asians have positive feelings concerning their Israeli experiences because they feel as though they were treated as insiders, as peers. And although they may sometimes have negative feelings about Israeli linguistic behavior (= invasion of the inner circle), they never feel isolated or distanced.

Being with Japanese, Israelis might feel comfortable not being threatened by a Japanese invasion of their inner circle, but at the same time they can often feel isolated and distanced when they are in Japan. In this way, the principles of politeness, power relations and social distances between speakers are related to each other.

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PART IV : Israeli & Middle Eastern Literature, Israeli Culture and Japan

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