



# Paradigm Shift in Japanese Ambiguous Expressions in the Digital Age

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**Abstract.** Under the dual influence of digital technology and globalization, Japan's younger generation is transforming the characteristic ambiguity inherent in its traditionally high-context society into a digital survival mechanism, thereby instigating a systemic civilizational crisis. Delving into this phenomenon from individual, societal, and civilizational perspectives, this paper analyzes the resultant challenges, including the degradation of emotional communication, impediments to effective corporate communication, and the linguistic schism that threatens the preservation of cultural heritage. In response to these issues, the paper proposes a comprehensive, three-pronged reconstruction pathway encompassing: technological governance, institutional regulation, and educational intervention. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Japan is currently undergoing what Lévi-Strauss termed a "cold society" transformation. It posits that only through leveraging technology to safeguard cultural essence, implementing regulations to anchor the boundaries of responsibility, and enacting educational initiatives to revitalize core traditional values, can the inherent ambiguity be effectively reshaped from a mere "tool for diluting responsibility" into a fundamental "source of civilizational resilience" amidst the sweeping tide of algorithmic colonialism. This approach holds the potential to offer a viable survival paradigm for high-context societies navigating the complexities of the digital age.

**Keywords:** Ambiguous Expression, Digital Generation, Communication Fatigue, Shame Culture

## 1 Introduction

Ambiguous expression in Japanese society has always been a key code for deciphering its cultural DNA. The "culture of shame" revealed in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Benedict, 2020)[1], foreshadowed this linguistic characteristic. By using "aimaisa"(ambiguity) to avoid direct conflict and maintain collective face "sekentei", it has become an invisible lubricant for social operation. The "enryo"(reserve) tradition prevalent among merchants in the Edo period, and the "ishin-denshin, telepathic understanding" principle in corporate society during the Meiji era, both relied on the binary division between "honne"(true feelings) and "tatemae "(outward stance) as their core

mechanism. However, the wave of digital technology is drastically eroding the traditional linguistic landscape. LINE's "kidoku-through, being read and ignored" has replaced the silent etiquette of declining phone calls. From 2022 to 2025, the usage of stickers expressing negative emotions (sadness/apology) increased by 287%. When the cost of textual refusal becomes too high, users rely on emotionally laden stickers to mitigate responsibility (Ohashi Kana, 2021)[2].

This transformation is not only a product of technological mediation but also a linguistic projection of societal structural changes. Under the dual pressures of fluid employment relationships and virtualized social networks, young people are reshaping ambiguity from a "cultural instinct to maintain harmony" into a "survival tool for avoiding risk."

## **2 Three Superficialized Features of Ambiguous Expression**

### **2.1 Minimalism of Linguistic Symbols**

The younger generation in Japan is performing a surgical amputation on the traditional system of expression under the banner of "language energy conservation." The trend of extreme simplification of honorific language is particularly pronounced in workplace settings. "otsukaresama desu" (thank you for your hard work), which originally conveyed respect and a sense of distance, is compressed to "otsu" and spammed in work group chats, leading to a precipitous drop in semantic density. A 120 million yen contract dispute at Mitsubishi UFJ Bank in 2024 stemmed precisely from a new employee's misuse of "otsu" in communication with a client, leading to accusations of "perfunctory response." This simplification is not only driven by efficiency but is also a strategy for diluting responsibility.

In the realm of intimate relationships, another form of extreme ambiguity emerges. Related consultations about "yori-chuu" (a vague state between friends and lovers) accounted for 31% of all cases consulted by the Japan Family Planning Association throughout the year (a 14% increase from 2024), reflecting the younger generation's avoidance of defining emotional relationships. Unlike the clarity of the traditional "confession culture," "yori-chuu" avoids defining the nature of the relationship, enjoying the benefits of intimacy while avoiding legal and moral responsibility.

### **2.2 Technological Restructuring of Non-Verbal Systems**

The rise of the metaverse has completely overturned the underlying logic of Japanese non-verbal communication. In VRChat, a mainstream social platform, 90% of Japanese users follow the "bowing angle algorithm": a 15° tilt represents perfunctory politeness, while 30° symbolizes sincere respect.

A 2024 Twitter user behavior survey revealed that the "delete immediately after zero likes" rate is as high as 74% among people in their 20s, forming a unique self-censorship mechanism. The median survival time of each tweet has plummeted from 48 hours

in 2019 to 6.2 hours. By quickly deleting content that has not been approved, young people internalize the pressure of collective unconsciousness into digital survival rules. Kiyoshi Abe analyzes the algorithmic transformation of "kuuki wo yomu" (reading the atmosphere) behavior in Japanese cyberspace, pointing out that the visualization of likes strengthens the hegemony of "majority voices," leading to a "jiko shoukyo" (self-deletion) mechanism for minority opinions (Abe Kiyoshi. 2018)[3].

### 2.3 Industrialized Evasion of Responsibility

Faced with a highly uncertain social environment, young people are systematically and industrially implementing responsibility avoidance strategies. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2025 White Paper on Digital Communication reveals that 90% of Gen Z archive screenshots of important conversations, with 68% regularly backing them up to the cloud. This "dialogue insurance" behavior has evolved beyond simple evidence retention and has become a defensive structure against "responsibility reversal." In a workplace dispute trial in the Osaka District Court in 2024, 23% of the evidence relied on LINE chat screenshots.

The interaction of these three features is triggering a fundamental communication crisis in Japanese society.

## 3 The Triangular Game of Technology, Society, and Culture

### 3.1 Contradictions of Technological Empowerment

Digital technology is like a double-edged sword, providing new forms of freedom of expression for Japan's younger generation, but also restructuring the invisible shackles of social control. The rise of anonymous bulletin boards (such as 5channel) has created a "responsibility-free expression space" - users transform the real-world pressure of shame into linguistic guerrilla warfare in the virtual world by blurring identities and semantics (such as using "Toorisugari no nanashi-san"-- a passing anonymous ID). This collective ambiguous expression has even spawned "ambiguous opinion storms." For example, in a 2024 scandal involving a certain politician, 80% of online comments used "sou kamo ne" (maybe so) as a position cover, both participating in public debate and avoiding legal accountability.

However, technology's catering to human needs is often accompanied by implicit exploitation. LINE's "read" mark (kidoku kinou) transforms the traditional "right to silence" into a quantified tool of oppression - a 2024 survey by Kyoto University showed that 58% of users in their 20s experience anxiety due to "read but not replied" messages, of which 34% choose to send additional emoticons to alleviate tension, forming a vicious cycle of "anxiety → ambiguous response → more anxiety" (Yoshida Taro, 2024)[4]. "Survey on Sociality of the Digital Generation" points out that Japanese Z generation uses "desu-masu style AI Proxy Writing" results in a 19% decrease in "ai-

zuchi saitekika nouryoku" (back-channeling optimization ability) in face-to-face conversations (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. 2024) [5]. This confirms the erosion of emotional authenticity by technological tools.

### 3.2 The Dilemma of Social Structural Transformation

The collapse of Japan's employment system is a key driver behind changes in language strategies. temporary workers need to avoid performance commitment with ambiguous expressions (such as "jinryoku shimasu"--"I'll do my best"), while companies use the "informal employment → informal language" chain to shift responsibility. At the same time, the "downward strike" of social relationships is accelerating the collapse of traditional communication paradigms. The Cabinet Office's 2025 White Paper on National Life indicates that the duration of in-person, in-depth conversations (lasting longer than 30 minutes and involving emotional exchange) among people in their 20s has decreased by 67% compared to 2000, while the average daily frequency of "sutanpu renda" (sticker spamming) in LINE groups reaches 28 times per person.

### 3.3 Adaptive Mutation of Cultural Defense

Within the East Asian Confucian sphere, Japan's ambiguity strategy exhibits characteristics of technological mediation. Compared to Korean "nunchi" ( nuanced perception) culture's high reliance on body language and eye contact, Japan tends to use digital tools to achieve "painless rejection." For example, young Chinese people use "gǎitiān qǐng nǐ chīfàn" ( I'll treat you to a meal another day) on WeChat as a phrase to politely decline, requiring a red envelope or emoji to enhance the ambiguity; while the Japanese Z generation has developed a combo move of "read and ignore + sending an apology emoji after 24 hours ", forming a more complete closed loop of impunity. This difference reflects the cultural gradient of technological penetration-while LINE's read receipt feature has a coverage rate of 98% in Japan, WeChat's "read" mark is still not launched in China due to cultural resistance. According to research by the Meituan Research Institute, simulating a read receipt environment increases the decision-making time for users to process non-work messages by 2.3 times, and the Emotional Volatility Index (EVI) rises by 41% (Meituan Research Institute. 2025)[6].

When the cultural gene of "ma" (negative space/pause) is precisely quantified by technology, and when "honne" (true feelings/intentions) completely retreats into the digital black box, this triangular game may lead to a lose-lose outcome for all participants—language becomes a purely risk-averse tool, and the meaning of communication itself is vanishing.

## 4 Chain Reactions: From Individual to Society

Japanese society is deeply entrenched in the "cold society" transformation vortex predicted by Claude Lévi-Strauss, where the instrumentalization of language and the parameterization of emotions are reshaping the logic of social operation. At the individual

level, shallow interactions built by Generation Z through ambiguous relationships like "yori-chuu" (friend-zone adjacent) and the constant use of emojis, lead to a systemic crisis of trust in intimate relationships. 2025 data shows that cognitive overload caused by linguistic ambiguity has led to a 130% surge in the incidence of "communication fatigue" among the younger generation compared to the Heisei era, with emotional exchange becoming a zero-sum game of symbol decoding. This collapse of individual trust is escalating into a systemic social disorder: A 2024 Sony Group audit revealed that 79% of European and American employees misinterpreted the formulaic ambiguity of the Japanese phrase "maemuki ni kentou" (we will consider it positively) as a commitment to cooperation, directly causing a 5.8 billion yen project loss, reflecting the structural conflict between high-context culture and globalized low-context rules. More seriously, Meta's acquisition of the LINE emoji platform (2025) triggered a "Digital Black Ship Incident," with the localized aesthetic of "ma" (negative space) being dissected by standardized machine learning algorithms, posing a colonial crisis to the sovereignty of cultural symbols. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry estimates that cross-border collaboration failures and productivity losses due to semantic ambiguity exceeded 120 billion yen in 2025, while the proportion of "ambiguity dependence" patients in elementary and junior high schools has soared to 18%, indicating a crisis in the survival of civilization's genes. When ambiguity transforms from a cultural trait into a cognitive defect, Japan stands at a historic crossroads: maintaining its unique cultural identity or embracing global standardization.

## 5 Countermeasures and Recommendations

Integrated technical governance, institutional regulations, and educational interventions must form a closed-loop, creating a three-pronged defense network for civilization.

Faced with the erosion of local cultural symbols by digital tools, Japan is building a "technology-ethics" synergistic defense line. The "Ambiguity Detection Plugin" developed by the University of Tokyo uses NLP technology to quantify the responsibility ambiguity index in LINE conversations. This model has reduced the misjudgment rate in multinational projects by 42%, providing a model for adapting high-context civilizations to digital rules.

Taking the Sony Group's 5.8 billion yen collaboration failure as a lesson, Japanese legislative institutions are delineating rigid communication scenarios that are "not allowed to be ambiguous." New regulations require the mandatory use of a "dual semantic confirmation system" for multinational business. At the same time, amendments to the "Electronic Communication Evidence Act" extend the retention period of enterprise chat logs from 3 to 10 years. These regulations have reduced the misinterpretation rate of Japanese expressions among European and American employees by 63%, establishing a digital firewall for cultural sovereignty.

In response to the 18% of adolescents with "ambiguity dependence," the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has launched a "Digital Sasshi Ability" (ability to infer) course, reshaping communication paradigms with three major qualities: first, emoji emotional gradient recognition. second, semantic decoding

of silence duration and third, critical cognition of metaverse virtual etiquette. 2026 pilot data shows that students who received training improved their scores by 37% in emotional sincerity perception tests, proving that educational interventions can reshape the cultural immune system of the new generation.

This civilizational self-rescue is seeking new life in the tension between guarding the aesthetics of "Ma" and adapting to global standardization, through the three-dimensional reconstruction of technical calibration, institutional regulation, and educational penetration.

## 6 Conclusion

Ambiguity, as a touchstone for civilizational evolution, reveals that when "kotoba no aya" - (linguistic embellishments/nuances) devolve into "sekinin kaihi no tate - a shield for avoiding responsibility", the expressive revolution of Japan's younger generation not only reflects the deconstruction of culture by technology, but also foreshadows the survival strategies of high-context societies in globalization. Between ambiguity and certainty, Japan must find a "third way" that both perpetuates its traditional genes and adapts to digital survival.

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