

The Light Stuff

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Decoding the Japanese

Code 1: Yes means yes, and no does not exist

At a recent dinner, my husband and I were chatting with a university professor, a Japanese fellow who has lived and worked in Europe and the US. We talked about cross-cultural differences in communication styles, and in particular the legendary habit of the Japanese of taking excessive care to avoid saying 'No'.

He explained, 'In general, Yes is the only affirmative answer, anything else should be taken as a No!'.

He then told us an anecdote. A friend of his in Tokyo was organising a farewell party, and sent out an email in which the invitees were asked to answer the simple question, 'Would you like to come to the party'. Two choices were given to answer this question:



- (a) Yes.
- (b) Yes, but I may be busy!!!

He was not in Tokyo at this time and replied to the email, respecting the code, 'Yes, but I am in the US'.

*Illustration by
Anders Holmqvist*

Please note, even the question is framed in a way that the responder can avoid saying the N-word.

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Code 2: Do not let cultural differences stop us from relating as people

And while we are visiting the 'Land of the Rising Sun' for discussions on communication, I would like to relate a short story from several years ago when I was working with a Japanese client. As

those of you who have done this know, the requisite end of the day evening dinner can be quiet difficult when trying to socialise.

Sure enough, I was at one of these dinners and somehow ended up in a corner of the table next to a particularly taciturn Japanese gentleman. Well, I may be known for being able to talk to anyone, but this was a real challenge as this particular case had fairly limited English skills and was in any case never very talkative. So we sat there studying the menu intensely and occasionally making point-less small talk.

However, I could not help but notice that the necktie he was wearing had small silhouettes of battleships on it. As a fan of neckties with small pictures on them (a great tradition from years ago that has unfortunately become much less common today), I was rather intrigued, as usually one sees ties with school crests or little animal figures or sports logos – but battleships? Still, I was not sure how to ask him, but my curiosity eventually overwhelmed me and I asked him what was on his tie. He told me it was the battleship his father had served on in WWII. Now I was even more curious, because this is not really your usual necktie decoration – especially in Japan, which has had a strong non-military policy for many years – so without really thinking, I blurted out, 'That is interesting, would you mind if I asked you a question about your personal opinion?'. Much to my surprise and delight, he looked at me very seriously, straight in my eyes, and replied,

I would be most honored if you would ask me a question about my personal opinion.

For the rest of the evening, we had a lively discussion about militarism in modern Japan, much to the amazement of the rest of the table.

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