

Some important points:

- Neither communication style is inherently better, more effective, or morally superior.
- It is a continuum, not a binary – everyone uses both to some extent, but at different frequencies and in different situations.
- There is cross-cultural variation in directness, with some cultures preferring one or the other style in general.
- There is also a lot of intracultural variation, affected by gender, age, personality and many other factors.

More Indirect speaking strategies (adapted from Storti's *Figuring Foreigners Out*):

- Understatement
- Changing the subject
- Saying yes
- Saying nothing
- Telling a seemingly unrelated story
- Asking a question in response to a question
- Returning to a previously agreed upon point
- Asking what the other person thinks when asked for an opinion
- Qualifying language (probably, perhaps, I think so, almost, maybe, etc.)
- Answering a previous question later in a conversation

Misinterpretation can happen both ways:

- Example: "There might be a little problem with your plan."
- If both speakers are direct or both are indirect, miscommunication is unlikely to occur, BUT...
- A person from a more direct culture listening to a more indirect speaker will hear: "I don't have any strong objections," when really the opposite was conveyed.
- A person from a more indirect culture listening to more direct speaker will hear: "I am very concerned and have an important critique for you to consider," when that was not the intended message at all.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal or silent communication can be subtle and depends on both speakers being able to understand the context of a situation and read between the lines to interpret the true meaning of a statement or response (or silence). Nonverbal communication channels are often an important aspect of indirect communication and can stand alone or be part of verbal communication. High context cultures may more often use indirect and nonverbal communication rather than direct verbal communication. When interacting with others from cultures that differ in direct vs. indirect and verbal vs. nonverbal communication, both sides must pay close attention to clearly understand the true meanings in a conversation. For example:

- A person from a more verbal culture may interpret silence as agreement or that there are no questions, when this may or may not be the case depending on other nonverbal cues
- Or, someone may agree verbally, but from their nonverbal reaction it may be clear that they do not actually agree

Let's practice "code-switching," or moving back and forth between different styles.

For each of the statements below, decide if it is more direct or more indirect, and then rewrite it on the other side of the continuum. Then, consider what form of nonverbal communication may be associated with the statement and situation from either the speaker or the listener(s); could the message be understood (or misunderstood) from nonverbal cues alone?

1. It is cold in here.

a. More direct or more indirect (circle one)

b. Code-switch:

c. Nonverbal cues (with or without verbal context):

2. We understand your proposal very well.

a. More direct or more indirect (circle one)

b. Code-switch:

c. Nonverbal cues (with or without verbal context):

3. I will try my best to get that done on time.

a. More direct or more indirect (circle one)

b. Code-switch:

c. Nonverbal cues (with or without verbal context):

4. I'd like to make one small suggestion.

a. More direct or more indirect (circle one)

b. Code-switch:

c. Nonverbal cues (with or without verbal context):

5. Does anyone have any other ideas?

- a. More direct or more indirect (circle one)
- b. Code-switch:

- c. Nonverbal cues (with or without verbal context):

6. It is very late.

- a. More direct or more indirect (circle one)
- b. Code-switch:

- c. Nonverbal cues (with or without verbal context):

It's all about context and perspective: Whether statements are perceived as direct or indirect, and correctly interpreted in light of nonverbal context (silent communication), in the end, depends upon the speaker and the listener in any given situation!

Additional Japan-specific background: In the Japanese culture, the communication style can be more indirect or ambiguous, as well as rely on understanding nonverbal cues within the context of a given situation, compared to a typical "Western" culture. Indirect or ambiguous communication in Japan is intended to maintain harmony, for example, to avoid directly saying "no". This is sometimes referred to as Aimai (曖昧) meaning vagueness or ambiguity. Related to this, Japan is often referred to as a high context culture in which the information relies more on the context and people involved and less on the actual verbal message; whereas, in a low context culture the verbal message contains the primary information. Silence can be valued and accepted in conversation, and can have various meanings depending on the situation. This implicit or silent communication style may be referred to as haragei (腹芸) or ishin densin (以心伝心).

For example:

- When asked "How are you?" or "How did you do on a test?" a typical response may be "Maa-maa", meaning "Not so bad" in English. This ambiguous expression has a range of meanings, and needs to be interpreted in context using, for example, facial expressions (smiling or frowning), tone (sound sad or excited), or other body language (appears upset or happy).
- If you ask someone "Would you like to go to dinner now?" and they respond with "OK, but I am not very hungry" you should consider based on the situation and nonverbal cues if they really mean "Yes, let's go now", "Yes, but let's go a little later", "I don't really want to go to dinner today", "I don't really want to go to dinner with you", or something else.
- Silence for Japanese can reflect thinking or consideration of an issue, whereas Westerners are often uncomfortable with silence during a conversation. In a meeting or discussion situation it is important to allow adequate time to reflect on a topic and often to specifically ask individuals if they have any questions. In these scenarios, Westerners may take silence as agreement, whereas Japanese may be deeply considering the issue and waiting respectfully to share their viewpoint when asked. In this case there may be no or very subtle nonverbal cues (e.g., small head nod in agreement, head shake or questioning/confused look in disagreement or to add comment, small sigh or "hmm" to represent disagreement, etc.).
- Short video about nonverbal communication in Japan (there are many others too):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSr0bVGGfrE>

For more information see: Davies, Roger, and Osamu Ikeno. *The Japanese Mind*. Tuttle Publishing, 2002.