



Uchi-Soto 内外

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What is it?

Uchi-soto provides a way to describe how group membership changes across situations and over time by providing an important distinction differentiating those who belong to the group from others. *Uchi* うち (kanji: 内) is a Japanese word meaning "inside" (also pronounced *nai*). *Soto* そと (kanji: 外) is another word meaning "outside" (also pronounced *gai*). 外国人 *gai(koku)jin* for example, is a "foreigner." The association of these opposing terms may occur in different contexts. One relevant usage refers to "at home and abroad." *Uchi-soto*, namely "inside/outside," is a typical expression that does not convey a paradoxical vision of the world, but instead a very Japanese consideration of people and relationships. All people may be deemed *uchi* or *soto*, marking a difference between "in-group" and "out-group" members. One interesting aspect of *uchi-soto* concerns the linguistic consequences for gender relations, speech acts, representations, and conflicts.

Who uses the concept?

This term has only rarely been used in academic studies to date. In Japanese society, everyone is expected to have a fine awareness of such distinctions. Families are one example, with some members in the inner circle while others are clearly out. Professional relationships are similar: members of one's department at work are *uchi*, while other departments in the same company would be *soto*. Yet if the company starts a negotiation with another, this transforms all its members to an *uchi* state while *soto* then would apply to people in the other company. The implied flexibility of category assignment is what makes *uchi-soto* so useful a concept.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Appropriate behavior is situational: everyone attends to context in order to avoid conflicts and maintain harmony with others. In responding appropriately to existing relationships, speakers must constantly adapt their speech to each situation. The in-group has to show humility, as the out-group deserves signs of respect.

What work remains?

Many related paired concepts describe patterns of behavior within Japanese society. These include *honne-tatemae* (the distinction between what you feel and what you show others) and *omote-ura* (front/back). An intricate sense of who you are and who you are expected to be, or what you are and are not supposed to say or show others, obviously results from such considerations. It is unlikely that Japanese society is the only one to have such distinctions, even though others may not express the concept as concisely. Research is needed to discover the relevance of these concepts in other cultures. It would be ambitious but possible to conduct a worldwide survey.

Resources

- Bachnik, J.M., & Quinn, C.J. Jr. (Eds.). (1994). *Situated meaning: Inside and outside in Japanese self, society, and language*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Makino, S. (2002). *Uchi and soto as cultural and linguistic metaphors*. In R.T. Donahue (Ed.), *Exploring Japaneseness: On Japanese enactments of culture and consciousness* (pp. 29-64). Westport, CT: Ablex.