

In a world of pretense, are Japanese just more honest about lying?

jt japantimes.co.jp/community/2014/04/23/voices/world-pretense-japanese-just-honest-lying

Like most people I know, I'm a truth-loving liar. I get upset about the lies of others — how dare they, do they think I'm stupid? — but then, caught in a pinch, I've had to bury my grandmother twice to get extensions on urgent projects. I've misrepresented my age, my weight and my girlfriend's hairstyle, and I cheer vacuous Facebook pics of identical bowls of ramen, just to finagle your "like" for my new motivational message. And no — no no — I cannot fathom what sort of doofus would jam the copier and then not have the guts to fess up.

The Japanese have a proverb that says lying is a means to an end: *uso mo hōben*. There can be candor in stating the obvious.

Except for those cocooned in denial, most people would agree that everyone lies. But while each culture has its own codes about how and to whom to do it, there is a notion that Japanese people are more insincere than others, that their concept of *tatemae* — which means that the true, honest self should be hidden behind public pretense — not only mandates but values deception. Ironically, the Japanese themselves, unversed in explaining their ways to others, can give ammunition to ethnocentric attacks.

Last year, a Japanese TV show surveyed people from 39 countries on whether they often told lies. Japan ended up ranking fourth — chasing Latino legerdemain in Peru, Argentina and Mexico — which stirred waves of vindication on the Internet.

"In Japan, nothing is what it seems. Nobody believes in anything they say," wrote an American on a blog discussing the news.

In defense of polite fictions, a netizen named Japanboy explained the demands of harmony: "Lying is only kindness, to help smooth life."

The quick Western retort: "What a load of crock!"

But if people admit to their own lying, doesn't that make them . . . well, honest?

The net sum of lying may be similar in Japan and America, but in their acceptance of life exigencies — and in their lesser reliance on language to define an objective truth — the Japanese may be more realistic, more charitable and forgiving about the role that deception plays in our social relations.

The West is conflicted about falsehoods. The second of the Ten Commandments and the New Testament condemn untruth categorically, marking deception of any kind as lies. Of course, since biblical times morality has become more nuanced. A canon of theologians and philosophers has set up baselines for true and false, mulling with

logical rigor whether lying can ever be justified. Despite exceptions, however, we still hold that untruth erodes public trust and corrupts our spiritual integrity, which isn't straying too far from the Gospel of Matthew.

Alas, no commandment forbids hypocrisy. In fact, according to Pamela Meyer, author of "Liespotting" and a popular Ted Talk alarmist, the U.S. in particular is facing a deception epidemic.

Meyer cites research that on any given day, Americans are lied to between 10 and 200 times (depending, perhaps, on TV exposure). Besides interactions with parents and spouses, the truth is most absent during introductions, with an average of three lies served up in the first 10 minutes. Whatever happened to the home of the straightforward?

Most likely, on first meeting strangers, Americans use pretense as a lubricant, not unlike the much-maligned *tatemae*. The Japanese gasp in awe at each platitude from a higher-up, while Americans fake they've seen movies that adorably feature your hometown. The main difference is shamming success: More than Japanese people, Americans pad their resumes with achievements, painting a two-month stint as a gofer as "extensive experience in office administration."

In his provocative book "The Varnished Truth," philosopher David Nyberg suggests we all give each other a break. Almost a proponent of Japanese tact, he holds that morality doesn't always require being honest — that in fact there are times when we like our truth kindly edited.

"Deception," writes Nyberg, "is an essential component of our ability to organize and shape the world, to resolve problems of coordination among individuals who differ, to cope with uncertainty and pain, to be civil and to achieve privacy as needed, to survive as species and to flourish as persons."

The Japanese crave authenticity, and yet they seem less expectant of truth. They may take for granted that, ruled by fear, desire and convenience as we all occasionally are, people will lie and pretend if they think it helps. Such embrace doesn't equal endorsement — surely not of untruth that harms others — but it might make the Japanese less concerned about seeing facades, about the loss of control, whether perceived or real, when we are acting on incomplete information.

Not to be seen as gullible fools, Western people have turned to science to smoke fibbers out of their holes. Since the first squiggly lines of the polygraph (which is also used in Japan, but — no kidding — only as multiple choice!) we have tried out hypnosis and truth serums, analyzed heart rates and facial expressions and even parsed out sentences and word choice, to where aspiring lie-spotters can choose from a range of titles such as "You Can Read Anyone" and "Never Be Lied to Again." Along with divorce litigation and Ponzi schemes, truth-seeking has become an industry.

But all this ado — all the clawing for full disclosure and the outrage and disappointment

at what we find — must strike the Japanese as absurd. We resolve to get to the bottom of things, whereas they ask what we mean by “the bottom.” In a sentiment echoed by Nyberg, they may think that sometimes truth is whatever works and gets everyone through the day.

Likewise, if you must deceive, make it quick. The Japanese play along with farcical protocol, but they keep personal lying short, to save face for the liar and avoid adding insult to injury. A fib may get cleared with a look in your eye that means “I get it, and let’s leave it at that.” There is no patience for lengthy excuses, which all too often are simply more lies we pile onto the first.

For an expatriate, not knowing the local modes of deception can be a problem — a lesson I learned the hard way.

One day, I planned drinks with a woman from work — nothing serious, but I enjoyed the innocent flirt — and I gave my girlfriend a story about a meeting. Struck by a sudden feeling of guilt, I kept lingering on the subject, learning again that a Japanese female is the hardest to fool on the planet.

Their intuition alarmed, American women bombard you with questions, which lets you see where the lie needs support. In other words, they cooperate. A Japanese woman, however — suspicious of language, that stooge of the two-timing wordsmith — holds your gaze in a silent accusation, unnerving with sheer ambiguity. You make the liar’s No. 1 mistake: embellish the humbug with details.

Yapping away like a hapless Pinocchio, losing faith in the power of words to make anyone believe in anything, you’re almost begging to be dismissed when you slip on an inconsistency and fly off into a deep hole of mess — the silence affording no hint of which part of your lie was ever in doubt.

When I came up for air, my girlfriend lowered her eyes and said merely, “I will believe you.” Defeated, I canceled the drinks — more feeble excuses still — and vowed never to meet with another woman.

Thus I agree with Nyberg, who says that “to live decently with one another, we do not need moral purity, we need discretion.” The authentic life is a ceaseless struggle. Let’s not make it harder than it needs to be.