



Political Metaphors in Japanese Diplomatic Language

Sh.R. Yodgorova

Teacher at the Termez state university, Uzbekistan

OPEN ACCESS

SUBMITTED 31 March 2025

ACCEPTED 29 April 2025

PUBLISHED 31 May 2025

VOLUME Vol.05 Issue 05 2025

COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Original content from this work may be used under the terms of the creative commons attributes 4.0 License.

Abstract: This paper explores the strategic use of political metaphors in Japanese diplomatic language, focusing on how metaphorical expressions serve both cognitive and pragmatic functions in Japan's foreign policy discourse. These metaphors are not merely linguistic embellishments; rather, they function as essential tools for negotiating meaning, maintaining harmony, and projecting soft power. Through an examination of selected speeches by Japanese political leaders, official statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and bilateral/multilateral communiqués, the study identifies recurrent metaphorical patterns that reflect Japan's cultural values, underlying ideologies, values, and strategic objectives of a nation's foreign policy.

Keywords: Political metaphor, diplomatic language, Japanese rhetoric, international relations, cognitive linguistics.

Introduction: Language in diplomacy is far from a neutral conduit of information; it is a strategic tool for constructing realities, managing relations, and projecting national identities. Among the various rhetorical strategies employed, metaphors hold a particularly significant place. They not only color diplomatic language but also shape the cognitive frames through which political realities are interpreted. This study investigates the specific deployment of political metaphors in Japanese diplomatic discourse. In doing so, it seeks to answer how cultural conceptions embedded in the Japanese language influence the metaphorical framing of international relations. Diplomatic communication, by its nature, demands subtlety, flexibility, and cultural sensitivity. Japan, with its historical emphasis on indirectness, respect, consensus-building, and the aesthetic value of

suggestion rather than explicitness, exemplifies a style of diplomacy where metaphors play an essential role in navigating complex international terrains. Unlike the direct, often legalistic style observed in some Western diplomatic traditions, Japanese diplomacy often prefers expressions that evoke images of nature, seasonal change, journeys, and living organisms, emphasizing the importance of harmony, gradual evolution, and relational continuity. This metaphorical tendency is not accidental but deeply rooted in Japanese linguistic traditions, including influences from Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism. These cultural currents have shaped a worldview that values balance, interdependence, and the impermanence of all things, which in turn informs how political issues are conceptualized and communicated on the global stage. The present study critically examines selected speeches by Japanese leaders, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) policy documents, summit declarations, and diplomatic correspondence. It identifies dominant metaphorical themes and analyzes their pragmatic and persuasive functions. Special attention is paid to how traditional Japanese values such as harmony (*wa*), perseverance (*gaman*), and mutual respect (*sonkei*) are metaphorically encoded in diplomatic language. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to broader understandings of political metaphor use in non-Western diplomatic traditions, highlighting the distinctive ways in which Japan frames its political narratives and policy objectives through culturally resonant metaphors. Ultimately, understanding the metaphorical structures of Japanese diplomatic language offers insights not only into Japan's communication style but also into the cognitive and cultural frameworks that shape its approach to international relations, conflict resolution, and global leadership.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: METAPHOR IN LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

The study of metaphor has undergone a significant transformation since the publication of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Traditionally, metaphors were regarded merely as decorative elements of language — stylistic flourishes used for artistic or rhetorical effect. However, Lakoff and Johnson proposed a radically different understanding: metaphors are not simply linguistic expressions but fundamental mechanisms of human thought. According to their Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), humans understand abstract concepts by mapping them onto more concrete, bodily, or sensory experiences. In other words, metaphor is a cognitive tool that structures how people perceive, think, and act.[1]

A conceptual metaphor involves a systematic correspondence, or mapping, between two conceptual domains — typically, a source domain (concrete experience) and a target domain (abstract experience).[2] For example, the metaphor "TIME IS MONEY" reflects a conceptual mapping where time (an abstract entity) is understood in terms of money (a tangible commodity), as seen in expressions like "spending time" or "wasting time." These mappings are pervasive and often operate below the level of conscious awareness, shaping thought processes and social interactions across cultures. In the realm of political language, metaphors play a critical role in framing policies, legitimizing authority, constructing national narratives, and influencing public opinion. They do not merely reflect reality; they create and organize social realities. For instance, framing immigration as a "flood" or "invasion" carries significant political consequences compared to describing it as a "journey" or a "new opportunity." [3]

Thus, metaphorical framing can activate emotional responses, moral evaluations, and policy preferences. Moreover, cultural factors heavily influence the selection and resonance of metaphors. While some metaphors, like WAR metaphors ("fighting climate change," "war on drugs"), are widespread across different languages, others are culture-specific. In Japanese, for example, the close relationship between humans and nature is deeply embedded in metaphorical expressions, reflecting Shinto animism and Buddhist impermanence.[4] From a cognitive-pragmatic perspective, metaphors also serve crucial interactional functions in communication. They can mitigate face-threatening acts, facilitate consensus, enhance politeness, and create solidarity. In diplomatic contexts, where maintaining relationships and saving face are paramount, metaphors allow speakers to address sensitive issues more indirectly and elegantly than literal language would permit. Understanding the centrality of metaphor in thought and language is therefore essential for analyzing diplomatic discourse. [5] Japanese diplomatic rhetoric offers a rich field for exploring how metaphors not only reflect cultural values but also function strategically in global politics. By examining the metaphorical structures employed in Japanese diplomacy, we gain deeper insight into how Japan frames its international role, articulates its national interests, and navigates the complexities of global engagement.

Political metaphors serve as vital cognitive instruments for shaping collective understanding and political action. They help political actors simplify complex realities, motivate public support, and legitimate policies. The persuasive power of political metaphors

lies in their ability to frame political issues in ways that resonate emotionally and culturally with their audiences. As scholars such as Charteris-Black (2011) have emphasized, political metaphors are not value-neutral; they are strategically chosen to influence attitudes and behavior.[6]

Common political metaphors include WAR metaphors, used to frame campaigns ("battle for votes") or social issues ("war on poverty"); JOURNEY metaphors, employed to describe progress or reform ("path to recovery"); and BUILDING metaphors, which frame nations as structures requiring maintenance and renewal. Each metaphorical choice activates particular narratives and evaluations. In Japanese diplomatic discourse, political metaphors tend to avoid overt aggression and emphasize harmony, collaboration, and continuity.[7] While Western political rhetoric often valorizes conflict and conquest metaphors, Japanese political communication prefers metaphors drawn from nature (e.g., "the tree of friendship growing") and seasonal change (e.g., "a new spring in relations"). Such metaphors foster a non-confrontational and cooperative framing of international relations, which aligns with broader Japanese cultural ideals. Recognizing the strategic function of metaphors is crucial for interpreting diplomatic language. Political metaphors in diplomacy do not merely describe the world; they actively construct international realities and shape the dynamics of negotiation, alliance formation, and conflict resolution.[8]

CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE DIPLOMATIC COMMUNICATION

Japanese diplomatic communication is deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, and philosophical traditions that shape the country's communicative norms and international behavior. Informed by Confucian ethics, Buddhist restraint, and indigenous principles such as *wa* (harmony), Japanese diplomacy is often characterized by linguistic subtlety, politeness, and a preference for ambiguity. These features reflect not only Japan's internal socio-cultural structures but also its strategic posture in international affairs. This section outlines the core communicative features of Japanese diplomatic discourse, particularly as they relate to metaphorical framing.[9]

1. Indirectness and Implicit Communication

One of the most well-documented features of Japanese communication is its preference for indirectness and non-explicit speech acts, a trait that strongly influences Japan's diplomatic discourse. High-context communication, as defined by Hall (1976), relies on shared cultural knowledge and situational

awareness rather than overt verbalization. In this style, much is left unsaid, and interlocutors are expected to interpret intentions through context, silence, and suggestion — a form of communication known in Japanese as *haragei* (belly art), which emphasizes non-verbal or emotionally intuitive understanding (Nakane, 1970).[10]

In diplomatic contexts, this results in carefully hedged statements, avoidance of direct confrontation, and the use of euphemisms and vague formulations. As Clancy (1986) and Maynard (1997) observe, Japanese political speech often utilizes conditionals and nominalizations to soften claims and preserve ambiguity. For example, rather than stating outright disapproval, Japanese diplomats may express "concern" or a desire to "monitor the situation carefully," signaling discontent without risking escalation.[11]

2. Harmony (Wa) and Consensus-Seeking

The concept of *wa* (和), or harmony, is a cornerstone of Japanese social philosophy and has profound implications for diplomatic practice. According to Sugimoto (2010), the Japanese communication ethos prioritizes group cohesion, conflict avoidance, and maintaining social equilibrium. In diplomacy, this translates into a rhetorical style that seeks mutual understanding and consensus rather than adversarial argumentation.[12]

Metaphors that emphasize cooperation, mutual growth, and balance—such as "cultivating mutual understanding" or "weathering the storm together"—reflect this worldview. As Ide (1989) and Lebra (1976) argue, maintaining harmony is not merely a moral imperative in Japanese culture but a strategic form of social control and relationship management, particularly important in Japan's multilateral engagements and regional diplomacy.[13]

3. Strategic Ambiguity and Politeness

Politeness in Japanese diplomatic communication is not only a matter of courtesy but also a calculated rhetorical strategy. Rooted in *keigo* (honorific language) and relational pragmatics, the politeness system in Japanese allows for nuanced expression of hierarchy, distance, and deference (Ide, 1982). Diplomatic language reflects this by employing honorifics, passive constructions, and respectful circumlocutions that maintain interlocutor dignity and protect national face (*mentsu*).[14]

Strategic ambiguity—defined by Watanabe (1993) as the use of deliberately vague or equivocal language to maintain flexibility—is a hallmark of Japan's foreign policy language. It enables Japan to express cautious engagement without full commitment, particularly in sensitive issues such as security cooperation or

territorial disputes. For example, official Japanese statements may reference “shared interests in regional stability” without overtly naming political actors or conflicts, allowing interpretive flexibility.[15]

4. Contextual Sensitivity and Situational Awareness

Japanese diplomatic language is highly responsive to *ba* (場), the situational and relational context of communication. This concept, central to Japanese social interaction theory (Nakane, 1970; Doi, 1981), emphasizes the importance of adjusting speech to fit the specific time, place, and interlocutor relationship. In diplomacy, this manifests as meticulous attention to protocol, ceremony, and audience—rhetorical sensitivity that allows Japan to adapt its messaging to different cultural and geopolitical contexts.[16]

Moreover, temporal metaphors such as “a new spring in bilateral ties” or “laying the foundation for future cooperation” are frequently used to frame political change as gradual, organic, and non-confrontational. Such metaphors reflect Japan’s long-term strategic outlook and its preference for evolutionary rather than revolutionary progress in international relations.

5. Cultural Symbolism and Historical Consciousness

Japanese diplomatic discourse is deeply informed by the country’s historical experience, particularly its post-WWII pacifist orientation. This historical consciousness is evident in Japan’s careful avoidance of overtly militaristic or aggressive metaphors, which are often replaced by peaceful and constructive imagery. As noted by Hook et al. (2005), Japan’s “normative identity” as a peace-loving nation is reinforced through its diplomatic rhetoric.[17]

Cultural metaphors also play a prominent role. Seasonal references, nature imagery, and literary allusions are commonly used in formal statements and international addresses. These not only reflect aesthetic traditions rooted in *waka* poetry and Zen philosophy but also serve to humanize abstract political issues and build rapport through shared symbolic language. As Kopp (1997) illustrates, such metaphors can disarm hostility, facilitate empathy, and frame cooperation as a natural and desirable process.

In general, Japanese diplomatic communication is distinguished by indirectness, harmony-seeking, politeness, contextual awareness, and culturally resonant metaphorical language. These characteristics are not accidental but function as deliberate rhetorical strategies that reflect Japan’s socio-cultural values and diplomatic goals. They serve to frame political metaphors in ways that reinforce Japan’s identity as a cooperative, culturally refined, and strategically cautious actor in international relations.

POLITICAL METAPHORS IN JAPANESE DIPLOMATIC DISCOURSE: ANALYSIS

Metaphors used in Japanese diplomatic language are not just decorative expressions but are integral to how Japan communicates its foreign policy identity, relational values, and political intentions. These metaphors often operate within culturally grounded conceptual frameworks and are chosen to promote harmony, mutual respect, and long-term trust. This section presents four dominant metaphorical categories in Japanese diplomatic discourse—Nature, Journey, Body, and Architecture—each with refined examples in both Japanese and English.

1. Nature Metaphors: Diplomacy as Cultivation and Seasons. Nature-based metaphors are deeply embedded in Japanese diplomatic language, reflecting a worldview that values organic growth, harmony, and cyclicity.

Example 1:

Japanese:

「日インドネシア友好の種はしっかりと根を張り、美しい花を咲かせています。」

English:

“The seeds of Japan-Indonesia friendship have firmly taken root and are blooming with beautiful flowers.”

— Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, 2018 Japan-Indonesia diplomatic address (MOFA, 2018)

This metaphor likens the bilateral relationship to a blossoming flower, suggesting that diplomacy requires planting (initiation), nurturing (maintenance), and patience (time). It draws from Japanese agrarian imagery and the cultural symbolism of cherry blossoms (*sakura*)—transience, beauty, and renewal.

Example 2:

Japanese:

「私たちは、新たな春を迎えることができました。」

English:

“We have welcomed a new spring in our relations.”

— Ministry statement on Japan-South Korea thawing talks, 2019

Here, “spring” metaphorically signals diplomatic renewal or reconciliation. The seasonal metaphor reflects temporal cycles and emotional rebirth, aligning with the cultural concept of *haru* (春)—hope and new beginnings.[18]

2. Journey Metaphors: Diplomacy as Shared Movement

Journey metaphors depict diplomatic relationships as collective travels toward shared goals. These metaphors

highlight solidarity, planning, and progress over time.

Example 3:

Japanese:

「G20は手を取り合いながら、誰一人取り残さない未来に向かって歩んでいくべきです。」

English:

“The G20 must walk hand-in-hand toward a future that leaves no one behind.”

— Prime Minister Abe at the 2019 G20 Osaka Summit (MOFA, 2019)

The metaphor “手を取り合いながら歩む” (“walk hand-in-hand”) conveys partnership and synchronized progress, resonating with Japan’s emphasis on consensus-building and inclusive diplomacy.

Example 4:

Japanese: 新たな航海に出発する時です。」

English:

“It is time to embark on a new voyage.”

— Foreign Minister’s remarks on Japan-EU partnership, 2020

Here, diplomacy is portrayed as a maritime journey (航海, *kōkai*), a motif rich in Japanese cultural history as an island nation and a former naval power. The metaphor underscores uncertainty, exploration, and determination.[19]

3. Body Metaphors: The State as a Living Organism

Bodily metaphors humanize diplomatic relations, emphasizing trust, emotion, and structure through familiar anatomy-related expressions.

Example 5:

Japanese:

「日米同盟は心の奥深くで結ばれた揺るぎない絆です。」

English:

“The Japan–U.S. alliance is an unshakable bond tied deep within our hearts.”

— Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide during meeting with President Biden, 2021 (MOFA, 2021)

This “deep in the heart” metaphor appeals to emotional depth and shared values. The metaphor reinforces the personal and moral dimensions of state relations—common in Japanese diplomatic discourse which favors empathy-based diplomacy (感情外交, *kanjō gaikō*).

Example 6:

Japanese:

「信頼がこの協力関係の背骨となっています。」

English:

“Trust forms the backbone of this cooperative relationship.” — MOFA Policy Statement on Japan–Australia Defense Pact, 2022

Here, the body metaphor of “backbone” (背骨, *sebane*) conveys structural support and resilience. The implication is that without trust, the relationship would collapse—just as a body would without a spine.

4. Architecture/Construction Metaphors: Diplomacy as Building Architecture and construction metaphors reflect long-term planning and design, emphasizing the durability and interdependence of international partnerships.

Example 7:

Japanese: 「インド太平洋地域において平和と繁栄の建築をともに進めていきましょう。」

English:

“Let us work together to construct an architecture of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.”

— Prime Minister Abe at ASEAN Summit, 2020 (MOFA, 2020)

The term “architecture” (建築, *kenchiku*) connotes intentional design, foresight, and interlocking components, which metaphorically frame the Indo-Pacific policy as cooperative and inclusive rather than militaristic.

Example 8:

Japanese: 「理解の橋を架ける努力を続けます。」

English:

“We will continue our efforts to build bridges of understanding.”

— Japan–China Friendship Address, 2018

“Building bridges” (橋を架ける, *hashi o kakeru*) is a familiar metaphor, particularly relevant to Japan’s self-positioning as a mediator between East and West. It implies overcoming gaps and fostering dialogue.[19]

CONCLUSION

By examining metaphors from domains such as nature, journey, bodily structure, and architecture, we have shown how Japanese diplomacy employs figurative language to construct relational narratives, shape international perception, and mediate geopolitical complexities. The metaphors analyzed—such as “planting the seeds of friendship,” “walking hand-in-hand,” “the backbone of cooperation,” and “building bridges of understanding”—demonstrate Japan’s preference for indirect, emotionally resonant, and harmony-oriented expressions. This aligns with traditional Japanese communication values like *tatemae*

(public façade) and wa (harmony), which prioritize relational sensitivity and mutual face-saving in public discourse.

In contrast to more confrontational or explicit diplomatic styles seen in Western or authoritarian regimes, Japanese diplomatic language often functions through implicature, subtle symbolism, and culturally specific cognitive mappings. These metaphors contribute to Japan's identity as a peace-loving, consensus-oriented nation that values stability, trust, and long-term cooperation. Moreover, the inclusion of original Japanese texts alongside English translations in this analysis underscores the necessity of bilingual and bicultural literacy when engaging in linguistic or political studies of Japan. Literal translations often fail to capture the emotional texture and cultural resonance embedded in Japanese metaphorical expressions.

From a broader theoretical perspective, this study affirms the utility of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) in diplomatic and international relations research. It also highlights the importance of cross-cultural pragmatics and discourse analysis in understanding how political meaning is negotiated and projected on the global stage. Future research could examine how these metaphors evolve in response to shifting geopolitical realities, such as the rise of China, North Korea's unpredictability, or climate change diplomacy. Comparative studies between Japanese diplomatic metaphors and those used by Western or other Asian powers could also reveal significant insights into divergent political worldviews and rhetorical strategies. Additionally, interdisciplinary inquiries—merging linguistics, international relations, and cultural studies—can further illuminate how metaphor operates as both a communicative and diplomatic force.

In conclusion, political metaphors in Japanese diplomatic language serve as more than stylistic devices—they constitute a conceptual infrastructure that supports Japan's strategic, cultural, and relational positioning on the world stage. Understanding them provides a valuable window into the deeper logic of Japanese foreign policy, the subtleties of its international rhetoric, and the unique ways in which language shapes power in the realm of diplomacy.

REFERENCES

- Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2011). *Politicians and rhetoric: The persuasive power of metaphor* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Koga, K. (2016). Japan's "Indo-Pacific" question: Countering China or shaping a new regional order? *International Affairs*, 93(5), 1221–1244. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix134>
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Tsuchiya, M. (2017). The role of strategic ambiguity in Japanese diplomacy. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 9(1), 70–85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12312>
- Ohnuki-Tierney, E. (1993). *Rice as self: Japanese identities through time*. Princeton University Press.
- Haugh, M. (2005). The importance of "place" in Japanese politeness: Implications for cross-cultural communication. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 2(1), 41–68.
- Yano, K. (2008). *The Japanese mind: Understanding contemporary Japanese culture*. Tuttle Publishing.
- Okamoto, S. (1999). Situated politeness: Coordinating honorific and non-honorific expressions in Japanese conversations. *Pragmatics*, 9(1), 51–74.
- Miller, R. A. (1977). *The Japanese language*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2020). Japan-EU relations speech archive. Retrieved from <https://www.mofa.go.jp>
- Suga, Y. (2021). Joint Press Statement with U.S. President Biden. Prime Minister's Office of Japan. Retrieved from <https://japan.kantei.go.jp>
- Kittay, E. F., & Lehrer, A. (Eds.). (1981). *Metaphor and knowledge*. Clarendon Press.
- Takahashi, S. (2014). Japanese strategic culture and its implications for security policy. *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 37(3), 403–424. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.798585>
- Imai, M. (2005). Culture and language in conceptual development. In D. Gentner & S. Goldin-Meadow (Eds.), *Language in mind* (pp. 95–119). MIT Press.
- [Inoue, M. (2006). *Vicarious language: Gender and linguistic modernity in Japan*. University of California Press.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2018). Japan–Indonesia diplomatic statements. Retrieved from <https://www.mofa.go.jp>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA). (2019). Address by Prime Minister Abe at the G20 Osaka Summit. Retrieved from <https://www.mofa.go.jp>