

An Analysis of *Aimai* Behavior in Meiko's Character in the Film *Solanin* (2010), Adapted from Inio Asano's Manga

¹Mahanael Ega K, and ²Budi Santoso

¹Dian Nuswantoro University, Semarang, Indonesia

²Dian Nuswantoro University, Semarang, Indonesia
(312202201089@mhs.dinus.ac.id)

Abstract. The film *Solanin*, adapted from a manga by Inio Asano, portrays the lives of young adults in Japan, characterized by uncertainty, identity exploration, and complex emotional dynamics. One concept that can be used to understand this complexity is *aimai*, which refers to the tendency to express meaning indirectly, ambiguously, and contextually in both communication and behavior. This study aims to identify and describe the forms of *aimai* behavior and to analyze the factors underlying its occurrence in the character Meiko in *Solanin* (2010). This research employs a descriptive qualitative method, with data collected through documentation of the character's dialogues and behaviors in the film. The analysis applies an analytical framework that categorizes *aimai* into four interrelated dimensions: linguistic, behavioral, emotional, and moral-social. The focus of this study is to examine how these forms of *aimai* are manifested in Meiko's interactions, as well as to explore the factors influencing their emergence within the context of Japanese social and cultural life. The findings indicate that *aimai* functions not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a psychosocial and cultural strategy employed by Meiko to cope with life pressures, maintain social relationships, and navigate tensions between personal needs and social expectations. Factors such as uncertainty in determining life direction, social pressure as a young adult, and Japanese cultural values—such as *wa*, *enryo*, *uchi-soto*, and *honne-tatemae*—contribute to the emergence of *aimai* behavior. This study contributes to the development of *aimai* research by offering a film-based perspective and by enriching the understanding of the relationship between ambiguous communication, identity formation, and emotional dynamics in Japanese culture.

Keywords: *aimai*, ambiguity, Japanese culture, communication, *Solanin*

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Human behavior is shaped through continuous interaction between individuals and their social environment, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between personal intentions and social expectations. In this context, culture plays a crucial role in influencing how individuals express themselves and interpret meaning in social interactions. Language, in particular, not only functions as a tool of communication but also serves as a marker of social and cultural identity, reflecting individuals' social background and group membership (Santoso, 2017). Ting-Toomey (2012) argues that cultural frameworks regulate emotional expression and communication styles, while Hofstede (2010) highlights how cultural differences produce distinct patterns of interaction, ranging from direct to indirect forms of communication.

Japanese society is often characterized by values such as *wa* (harmony), *haji* (shame), and a strong emphasis on maintaining interpersonal balance. These values encourage individuals to regulate their behavior and communication in ways that avoid conflict and preserve social harmony (Sugimoto, 2014; Yamada, 1997). As a result, communication in Japanese culture tends to be indirect, nuanced, and context-dependent.

Within this cultural framework, the concept of *aimai* emerges as a key communicative and behavioral strategy. *aimai* refers to ambiguity or vagueness in expression, which is not perceived as a weakness but as a socially appropriate means of maintaining harmony and avoiding confrontation (Davies, Roger; Ikeno, 2002; Sugimoto, 2014). This phenomenon is widely represented in Japanese cultural products, including films, novels, and manga, where characters often navigate tensions between personal desires and social expectations (Napier, 2016).

One such representation can be found in the film *Solanin* (2010), adapted from Inio Asano's manga, which portrays the life of Meiko, a young adult struggling with uncertainty, life direction, and self-identity. Her tendency toward hesitation, indirect expression, and emotional ambiguity reflects the manifestation of *aimai* within both personal and social contexts.

Despite the prevalence of *aimai* in Japanese communication, studies that specifically examine its representation in film—particularly through character analysis—remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to (1) identify the forms of *aimai* behavior exhibited by Meiko and (2) analyze the factors that contribute to their emergence within the narrative and cultural context. By focusing on a film adaptation, this study contributes to the development of *aimai* research and offers insights into the relationship between ambiguity, identity formation, and cultural values in contemporary Japanese society.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Previous studies on *aimai* in Japanese communication have primarily examined its manifestation in everyday interactions and popular media, particularly anime. These studies highlight that *aimai* is closely related to practices such as *kuuki wo yomu* (reading the atmosphere) (Mayasari, Dian; Widiarti, Sri Wahyu; Aibonotika, 2025), where meaning is conveyed implicitly through silence, intonation, and nonverbal cues. Such findings demonstrate that ambiguity functions as a social strategy to maintain harmony (*wa*) and avoid direct confrontation in interpersonal relationships.

Other studies have focused on the linguistic dimension of *aimai*, showing how expressions such as *chotto*, *maa*, and *dou kana* are used to soften refusal, delay decisions, or express hesitation indirectly (Syaharani, Shintya Auliya; Pratita, 2020). From a pragmatic perspective, ambiguity in Japanese communication is not considered a deficiency but a deliberate strategy rooted in politeness and sensitivity to social context. These studies consistently emphasize that *aimai* operates not only at the linguistic level but also in behavioral and social domains.

From a theoretical perspective, *aimai* can be understood as an intentional form of ambiguity used to regulate interpersonal relationships. In studies of Japanese communication, ambiguity is not viewed as a deficiency, but as a culturally embedded strategy that prioritizes social harmony over explicitness and allows meaning to be negotiated through context (Davies, Roger; Ikeno, 2002; Sugimoto, 2014). This perspective reflects the high tolerance for ambiguity commonly associated with Japanese society, enabling individuals to avoid direct rejection, reduce social tension, and maintain interpersonal balance.

Furthermore, communication behavior cannot be separated from cultural identity. Santoso (2017) emphasizes that language functions as a marker of social and cultural identity, reflecting individuals' social background and group membership. This perspective supports the view that *aimai* is not merely

a communicative technique but also a reflection of cultural values and identity construction within Japanese society.

In this study, *aimai* is analytically categorized into four interrelated dimensions: linguistic, behavioral, emotional, and moral-social. This classification is developed based on broader theoretical perspectives on Japanese communication, including pragmatics, high-context culture, and socio-cultural values. These dimensions are closely linked to key cultural concepts such as *wa* (harmony), *enryo* (restraint), *uchi-soto* (in-group vs. out-group distinction), and *honne-tatemae* (private feelings vs. public expression), which shape how individuals manage expression and interaction in different social contexts.

Despite the extensive discussion of *aimai* in previous studies, most research has focused on anime or everyday communication contexts. For instance, a study on the anime *Flying Witch* demonstrates how *aimai* is reflected in casual interactions through indirect expressions, silence, and nonverbal cues that maintain interpersonal harmony (Oktavia, Devi Haryanti; Sinaga, Mangatur; Suri, 2022). While this study provides valuable insights into the everyday and informal use of *aimai*, it remains limited to light, slice-of-life interactions and does not fully explore the complexity of emotional conflict and identity formation.

Moreover, prior studies tend to emphasize linguistic aspects, while fewer examine the interplay between ambiguity, emotional dynamics, and psychosocial development in young adult characters. Film, as a medium with more realistic narrative and psychological depth, has received comparatively less attention in *aimai* research.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing the forms and underlying factors of *aimai* behavior in Meiko's character in the film *Solanin* (2010), offering a perspective that integrates cultural, psychological, and narrative dimensions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the manifestation of *aimai* behavior in Meiko's character in the film *Solanin*. The analysis focuses on how ambiguity is expressed through both verbal and nonverbal communication within the narrative context.

The unit of analysis consists of Meiko's dialogues and selected scenes that reflect *aimai* behavior. These include linguistic expressions, emotional responses, and behavioral patterns that indicate indirectness, hesitation, and ambiguity in communication.

The data source of this study is the film *Solanin* (2010), adapted from Inio Asano's manga. Data were collected using a documentation method by repeatedly watching the film, identifying relevant dialogues and scenes, and transcribing segments that demonstrate *aimai* behavior. The collected data were then categorized into four analytical dimensions: linguistic, behavioral, emotional, and moral-social *aimai*. This categorization is constructed as an analytical framework in this study, drawing on broader perspectives in Japanese communication, pragmatics, and socio-cultural theory.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. First, data display, in which selected dialogues and scenes were organized to identify patterns of *aimai*. Second, data description, where each instance was explained in relation to its narrative and communicative context. Third, data interpretation, in

which the findings were analyzed using the theoretical framework of *aimai* to examine the underlying factors influencing Meiko's behavior.

This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how *aimai* operates as a communicative and cultural strategy within the film, particularly in relation to interpersonal interaction, emotional dynamics, and socio-cultural context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The film *Solanin* (2010), adapted from Inio Asano's manga, portrays the lives of Japanese young adults navigating uncertainty, life direction, and identity formation after graduation. The narrative centers on Meiko, whose character is marked by hesitation, emotional restraint, and a tendency to avoid direct expression in interpersonal interactions.

These characteristics make Meiko a relevant subject for analyzing *aimai* behavior, as her communication patterns frequently reflect ambiguity, indirectness, and internal conflict. The following sections examine the forms of *aimai* manifested in her character, categorized into linguistic, behavioral, emotional, and moral-social dimensions.

1. Linguistic *Aimai*

Linguistic *aimai* refers to ambiguity that emerges through lexical choices and incomplete or indirect expressions, allowing speakers to avoid explicit statements while maintaining interpersonal harmony. This form of *aimai* is evident in Meiko's use of hesitation markers, unfinished utterances, and metaphorical expressions.

One example appears when Meiko responds to Taneda's decision regarding his band:

Meiko: 「あの、でもさ……」

Romaji :

Meiko : "ano, demo sa..."

Translation :

Meiko : "Um, but..."

This utterance remains incomplete, as Meiko is interrupted before she can articulate her full response. The use of *ano* as a hesitation marker and *demo* as a contrastive conjunction signals an intention to express disagreement or concern. However, the absence of a completed clause creates ambiguity, leaving the intended meaning open to interpretation.

Within the context of the scene, this ambiguity reflects Meiko's internal conflict. The unfinished utterance opens multiple possible interpretations: it may indicate hesitation to disagree, emotional uncertainty about Taneda's decision, or a desire to avoid disrupting the emotional balance of the interaction. However, given the situational tension and Meiko's relational position, the utterance most strongly suggests her reluctance to directly confront Taneda.

This hesitation is influenced by both interpersonal and cultural factors, particularly her concern for maintaining harmony and avoiding direct opposition. Rather than stating her position explicitly,

Meiko suspends her utterance, allowing her meaning to remain implicit. This reflects linguistic *aimai*, in which ambiguity emerges from incomplete or indirect linguistic structures, enabling meaning to be conveyed through context rather than explicit expression.

Another example can be seen in Meiko's use of metaphor:

Meiko: 「まあ、もっともっと迷子みたいもんだしね。まだまだ迷ってばかりだけど。」

Romaji :

Meiko : “Maa, motto motto maigo mitai mon dashi ne, mada mada mayotte bakari dakedo.”

Translate :

Meiko : “I've always been like a lost child. I'm still lost.”

Here, the term *maigo* (“lost child”) functions as a metaphor rather than a literal description. While the statement appears casual and aligned with the conversational tone, it carries a deeper existential meaning related to Meiko's uncertainty about her life direction. The ambiguity lies in the gap between the surface-level expression and its underlying emotional significance.

The ambiguity in this metaphor lies in its layered meaning. On one level, it presents a casual and self-deprecating remark; on another, it reveals a deeper sense of existential uncertainty and lack of direction. This duality allows for multiple interpretations, including emotional vulnerability, self-reflection, or an attempt to downplay personal struggles. However, in the broader narrative context, the metaphor most strongly reflects Meiko's ongoing confusion about her life direction and identity as a young adult. The use of metaphor serves as a linguistic strategy to soften the weight of this uncertainty, making it more socially acceptable to express. This indicates that her use of linguistic *aimai* is shaped not only by personal emotional conditions, but also by a tendency to regulate self-expression in accordance with social expectations.

Overall, these examples illustrate that linguistic *aimai* in Meiko's character functions as a communicative strategy to express hesitation, concern, and existential uncertainty without direct confrontation. The ambiguity present in her utterances allows for multiple interpretations, while still reflecting dominant meanings shaped by context. This behavior is influenced by both internal factors—such as emotional uncertainty—and external factors, including the cultural emphasis on maintaining interpersonal harmony. Through incomplete utterances and metaphorical language, Meiko negotiates between personal expression and social sensitivity, reflecting both her psychological condition and the broader communicative patterns of Japanese society.

2. Behavioral *Aimai*

Behavioral *aimai* refers to ambiguity expressed through actions, silence, and nonverbal responses rather than explicit verbal communication. In this form, meaning is conveyed implicitly through behavior that avoids direct confrontation or clear emotional expression.

One example can be observed when Meiko meets her mother at the station:

Meiko: 「なんでいきなり来るかな？」

Romaji :

Meiko : “Nande ikinari kuru kana?”

Translation :

Meiko : “Why did you suddenly come?”

After this brief response, Meiko’s mother explains that she is in town for a reunion and prefers to stay at Meiko’s place rather than paying for an expensive hotel, adding that Meiko should be available since it is the weekend. Following this, Meiko falls silent, takes her mother’s bag, and walks ahead without further explanation. Although her actions appear neutral and functional, they implicitly convey discomfort and emotional distance. The absence of verbal clarification creates ambiguity regarding her stance—whether she accepts, resents, or feels burdened by her mother’s visit.

However, within the situational context—particularly the suddenness of her mother’s visit and the implicit expectation placed upon her—Meiko’s behavior most strongly reflects a sense of emotional discomfort and reluctance to openly express dissatisfaction.

This response is influenced by both interpersonal and cultural factors, including her role as a daughter and the expectation to remain polite and accommodating. Her silence allows her to comply externally while withholding her internal feelings, demonstrating how behavioral *aimai* functions as a strategy to maintain harmony without direct verbal negotiation. Within this context, Meiko’s silence functions as a strategy of conflict avoidance. Rather than expressing her dissatisfaction directly, she shifts to physical action, thereby limiting further conversation. This reflects behavioral *aimai*, where meaning is embedded in nonverbal conduct rather than explicit language.

A second example appears in Meiko’s interaction with Ai:

Meiko: 「ねえ、アイちゃん、種田は頑張って大人になろうとしても……」

Ai: 「だとしたら？」

Romaji:

Meiko : “Nē, ai-chan, Taneda wa ganbatte otona ni narou to shite mo……”

Ai : “datoshitara?”

Translation:

Meiko : “Hey, Ai-chan, even though Taneda is trying hard to become an adult……”

Ai : “if he has done it?”

Meiko initiates an emotionally loaded statement but leaves it unfinished, and when prompted to continue, she remains silent. This interruption of communicative action represents another form of behavioral *aimai*. Rather than clarifying her thoughts, Meiko withdraws from the interaction, suggesting hesitation and emotional uncertainty.

The ambiguity in this scene does not stem from linguistic structure, but from Meiko’s decision to discontinue communication. Her silence opens multiple possible interpretations, including feelings of guilt, confusion, or an attempt to avoid confrontation. However, within the context of her relationship with Taneda and the emotional tension present in the scene, her silence most strongly reflects a tendency to avoid directly confronting complex feelings she is not yet ready to articulate. At the same time, it functions as a protective mechanism, allowing her to distance herself from the emotional weight of the conversation while maintaining interpersonal harmony. This behavior is influenced by her emotional uncertainty and her difficulty in articulating complex feelings, particularly in situations involving interpersonal sensitivity.

A more intense instance occurs during her conflict with Taneda:

Meiko: 「そんなの、種田（たねだ）らしくないよ。」

Romaji:

Meiko : “Sonna no, Taneda rashiku nai yo.”

Translation:

Meiko: “That's not like Taneda at all.”

After expressing this brief emotional response, Meiko states that Taneda is no longer “being himself.” This remark triggers Taneda’s emotional outburst, in which he raises his voice and expresses frustration, accusing Meiko of placing pressure on him and failing to take action in their relationship. In response to this direct confrontation, Meiko falls silent. This silence becomes the dominant communicative act, signaling both emotional pressure and withdrawal, while allowing the tension to remain unresolved. The ambiguity of this silence lies in its multiple possible interpretations. It may indicate a sense of guilt for having indirectly contributed to Taneda’s frustration, a feeling of being overwhelmed and unable to respond, or a deliberate choice to avoid escalating the conflict further. However, within the context of Taneda’s emotional intensity and the imbalance in their interaction, Meiko’s silence most strongly reflects her tendency to avoid direct confrontation when faced with emotionally charged situations.

In this case, silence (*chinmoku*) functions as a defensive and adaptive strategy. It emerges not only from emotional strain, but also from her hesitation and uncertainty in responding to Taneda’s accusations. By remaining silent, Meiko both protects herself from further emotional exposure and maintains a level of interpersonal harmony, even at the cost of leaving the conflict unresolved. This illustrates the concept of behavioral *aimai*, where nonverbal restraint replaces explicit communication in situations of interpersonal tension. This response is shaped by both internal emotional pressure and the unequal dynamics in their interaction, where Taneda’s dominant expression further limits Meiko’s ability to respond directly.

Overall, these examples demonstrate that behavioral *aimai* in Meiko’s character is predominantly realized through silence and the suspension of communicative action. Rather than indicating passivity, these behaviors function as strategic responses to emotional pressure, enabling Meiko to avoid confrontation, delay decision-making, and maintain relational balance within socially sensitive situations. These patterns are influenced by a combination of internal factors—such as emotional uncertainty, hesitation, and psychological pressure—and external factors, including interpersonal dynamics and cultural expectations related to harmony and conflict avoidance. As a result, Meiko’s silence operates not merely as absence of speech, but as a meaningful communicative strategy within the framework of behavioral *aimai*.

3. Emotional *Aimai*

Emotional *aimai* refers to a form of ambiguity that does not primarily arise from linguistic structure, but from the speaker’s unstable, conflicted, or indistinct emotional state. This type of *aimai* is characterized by unclear internal positioning, mixed feelings, and the inability to firmly determine one’s own emotional stance. Rather than expressing feelings directly, the speaker often softens, redirects, or disguises emotional tension through seemingly light, neutral, or even contradictory responses. In the context of Japanese communication, emotional *aimai* frequently emerges when

individuals attempt to process their own feelings while avoiding direct confrontation or explicit emotional exposure.

An example of emotional *aimai* can be seen when Meiko responds to a question about her future after quitting her job. When her friend points out the uncertainty of immediately finding something new, Meiko replies:

Ai: 「すぐに見つかるなんて保証、どこにもないんだよ。」

Meiko: 「気が向いたら、洗濯して散歩して、ああ、なんて自由。」

Romaji:

Ai: “Sugu ni mitsukaru nante hoshō, doko ni mo nai n da yo.”

Meiko: “Ki ga muitara, sentaku shite sanpo shite, aa, nante jiyū.”

Translation:

Ai: “There’s no guarantee you’ll find something right away.”

Meiko: “When I feel like it, I’ll do laundry, take a walk... ah, how free.”

At the surface level, Meiko’s response appears cheerful and relaxed, emphasizing freedom and spontaneity. However, this expression emerges in a context filled with uncertainty about her future. The emotional ambiguity lies in the mismatch between her outwardly positive tone and the underlying instability of her situation. This creates multiple possible interpretations: genuine relief after leaving her job, self-persuasion to believe in her own freedom, or a defensive attempt to mask anxiety. Considering Meiko’s overall narrative trajectory—marked by indecision and avoidance of future-oriented discussions—the dominant interpretation points toward emotional denial and concealment of anxiety. The expression of “freedom” thus functions as a fragile emotional construct rather than a stable state. This response is influenced by her uncertainty about the future and her need to psychologically cope with the consequences of her decision to resign. By framing her situation as “freedom,” Meiko attempts to stabilize her emotional state while avoiding direct acknowledgment of anxiety.

A second example appears in Meiko’s interaction with Ai:

Meiko: 「いいな、種田たちにはバンドがあって、あたしも早くなんか見つけたいとな。」

Romaji:

Meiko : “Ii na, Taneda-tachi ni wa bando ga atte, atashi mo hayaku nanka mitsukenai to na.”

Translation:

Meiko : “It’s nice that Taneda and the others have a band. I should find something soon too.”

Although this statement appears to express admiration and motivation, the emotional stance remains ambiguous. The utterance may reflect genuine encouragement, but it may also indicate anxiety, a sense of being left behind, or internal pressure to quickly define her own direction. The use of the vague term *nanka* (“something”) further reinforces this ambiguity, signaling Meiko’s inability to clearly articulate what she seeks. Within the broader narrative context, the dominant meaning leans toward emotional insecurity and unease. Meiko’s statement subtly reveals her awareness of her own lack of direction while simultaneously softening that realization to maintain conversational comfort.

This reflects an internal comparison process and social pressure, where Meiko measures her own progress against others. Her ambiguity emerges from the tension between external expectations and her lack of clear personal direction.

Emotional *aimai* is also evident in Meiko's confrontation with her mother:

Meiko's Mother: 「少しは人生考えなさい。」

Meiko: 「うるさいな、ちゃんと考えてるよ、自分の人生くらい。いつまでも子ども扱いしないでよ。あたしたちのこと、あたしたちで決めるもん。」

Romaji:

Meiko: "Urusai na, chanto kangaeteru yo, jibun no jinsei kurai. Itsumademo kodomo atsukai shinaide yo. Atashitachi no koto, atashitachi de kimeru mon."

Translation:

"Stop it, I've thought about it properly—my own life. Don't treat me like a child forever. Our life is ours to decide."

Here, Meiko's speech appears assertive and emotionally charged. However, the ambiguity lies in the discrepancy between the firmness of her words and the instability of her internal state. Her response can be interpreted as genuine anger, self-defense, or an expression of deeper anxiety triggered by her mother's expectations. Given Meiko's repeated hesitation and lack of clear life direction, the dominant interpretation suggests that her assertiveness functions as a defensive layer masking uncertainty. The repetition of self-affirming phrases indicates not confidence, but rather an attempt to reinforce a fragile sense of autonomy. This reaction is shaped by external pressure from familial expectations and internal insecurity regarding her life choices. Her assertiveness becomes a compensatory response to regain control over a situation in which she feels uncertain.

A further example occurs in a quieter, post-trauma context:

Ai: 「久しぶりにバイトして、疲れた？」

Meiko: 「うん。」

Romaji:

Ai: "Hisashiburi ni baito shite, tsukareta?"

Meiko: "Un."

Translation:

Ai: "Tired after working again?"

Meiko: "Yeah."

Meiko's minimal verbal response provides almost no explicit emotional information. However, this is accompanied by a nonverbal gesture—she leans her head on Ai's shoulder and closes her eyes. The ambiguity emerges from the imbalance between limited verbal expression and rich emotional implication. Her response may indicate physical fatigue, emotional exhaustion, or a need for comfort and support. Within the narrative context following Taneda's death, the dominant meaning points

toward deep emotional fatigue and unresolved grief. Meiko's reliance on nonverbal expression suggests an inability—or unwillingness—to articulate her feelings directly, while still seeking emotional connection. This behavior is influenced by emotional exhaustion and grief following Taneda's death, which limits her ability to verbalize complex feelings. As a result, nonverbal expression becomes a primary channel for conveying emotional states.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that emotional *aimai* in Meiko's character functions as a mechanism of emotional regulation and self-protection. Across different contexts—uncertainty about the future, social comparison, familial conflict, and grief—Meiko consistently avoids direct emotional articulation. Instead, she expresses her internal state through softened language, indirect statements, defensive assertiveness, or minimal responses supported by nonverbal cues.

These patterns are influenced by a combination of internal factors, such as emotional instability, anxiety, and unresolved grief, as well as external factors, including social expectations, interpersonal relationships, and cultural norms emphasizing emotional restraint and harmony. As a result, emotional *aimai* operates not only as an individual psychological response but also as a culturally shaped communicative strategy within Japanese society.

4. Moral Social *Aimai*

Moral-social *aimai* refers to a form of ambiguity that arises not primarily from linguistic structure or emotional instability, but from social considerations such as hierarchy, politeness norms, and relational harmony. In Japanese culture, individuals often avoid direct refusal or confrontation—especially toward those in higher social positions—in order to maintain *wa* (harmony). This tendency is closely related to cultural values such as *enryo* (restraint) and the awareness of *uchi-soto* distinctions, which encourage speakers to choose socially safe responses even when these do not fully reflect their true intentions.

An example of moral-social *aimai* can be observed in Meiko's interaction with her superior at work:

Meiko: 「課長、ちょっと.....気分が悪いんです。早退します。」

Romaji:

“Kachō, chotto... kibun ga waruin desu. Sōtai shimasu.”

Translation:

“Sir... um, I'm not feeling well. I'll leave early.”

This scene takes place after Meiko's superior sends her a message apologizing for his previous rude behavior and invites her to dinner as a form of compensation. Instead of directly accepting or refusing the invitation, Meiko provides a reason related to her physical condition and asks for permission to leave early. This situational context places Meiko in a dilemma between maintaining emotional distance and fulfilling expectations of politeness within a hierarchical workplace relationship.

The ambiguity in this case lies in the discrepancy between Meiko's stated reason and her underlying social motivation. On the surface, her utterance indicates a physical condition—feeling unwell—as justification for leaving. However, given the context of a dinner invitation from a superior following

prior tension, this explanation opens multiple interpretations. First, the statement may function as an indirect refusal, allowing Meiko to decline the invitation without explicitly saying “no.” Second, it may represent an attempt to maintain emotional distance from her superior while still adhering to workplace norms. Third, it can be interpreted as an act of social compliance, where Meiko prioritizes professional harmony and politeness over expressing her genuine feelings. Among these possibilities, the most dominant interpretation points toward the maintenance of hierarchical harmony. Meiko’s use of the softening expression *chotto* (“a little...”) and her reliance on a socially acceptable excuse reflect a careful negotiation of politeness. Rather than risking tension through direct refusal, she chooses a form of response that is normatively appropriate and unlikely to disrupt the relational balance.

This behavior exemplifies moral-social *aimai* through indirect refusal shaped by social expectations. By invoking a physical condition, Meiko avoids explicit rejection while preserving the dignity of her superior and the stability of their professional relationship. The ambiguity is therefore not accidental, but strategically employed as a communicative resource to navigate hierarchical constraints.

From a broader perspective, Meiko’s response demonstrates how moral-social *aimai* is driven by external social structures rather than internal confusion alone. As a subordinate, she is aware that a direct refusal could negatively impact her professional image and workplace dynamics. Consequently, she suppresses her personal discomfort and adopts an ambiguous yet socially acceptable stance. This response is influenced by hierarchical workplace dynamics, social expectations of politeness, and the cultural norm of avoiding direct refusal. As a subordinate, Meiko is positioned in a role that limits her ability to respond openly, reinforcing her reliance on indirect communication.

Thus, the ambiguity in this data can be classified as moral-social *aimai* because it is rooted in considerations of hierarchy, politeness, and relational harmony. The utterance, while linguistically simple and polite, conceals a refusal motivated by social awareness. This reflects broader patterns in Japanese communication, where speakers adjust their expressions to meet social expectations and preserve *wa* (harmony), even at the cost of withholding their true intentions.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the forms of *aimai* and the factors underlying its emergence in the character Meiko in the film *Solanin* (2010). Based on the analysis of both dialogue and behavioral data, the findings indicate that *aimai* plays a central role in shaping how Meiko communicates, responds, and makes decisions across various life situations.

The analysis identifies four primary forms of *aimai* in Meiko’s behavior: linguistic, behavioral, emotional, and moral-social. Linguistic *aimai* is reflected in the use of vague, metaphorical, and indirect expressions, such as *ano*, *maa*, and other symbolic utterances that avoid explicit meaning. Through these expressions, Meiko conveys confusion and anxiety indirectly, allowing meaning to emerge through shared contextual understanding. Behavioral *aimai* is realized through nonverbal actions, including silence, delayed responses, and the avoidance of clear decisions, particularly in emotionally tense situations. Rather than indicating passivity, Meiko’s silence functions as a strategic response to regulate emotional expression, avoid confrontation, and manage situations in which she cannot articulate a definite stance. Although the observable behaviors are similar, their underlying motivations vary depending on the interactional context.

Emotional *aimai* appears in Meiko's tendency to obscure her internal emotional state, including feelings of confusion, anxiety, and sadness, in order to maintain relational stability. She frequently presents herself as composed or masks emotional tension through humor, casual remarks, or a calm demeanor, despite experiencing inner instability. This pattern reflects the dynamic between *honne* (true feelings) and *tatemae* (public expression), where personal emotions are moderated to avoid burdening others. Moral-social *aimai* emerges in response to social norms, politeness expectations, and hierarchical structures within Japanese society. In interactions with superiors or within professional contexts, Meiko tends to rely on indirect expressions, vague justifications, and implicit refusals. This form functions to preserve social relationships and maintain *wa* (harmony), even at the cost of suppressing personal intentions.

Furthermore, the emergence of *aimai* in Meiko's behavior is influenced by multiple factors, including her uncertainty about life direction, social pressures associated with young adulthood, her desire to avoid burdening others, and the broader influence of Japanese cultural values such as *wa*, *enryo*, *uchi-soto*, and *honne-tatemae*. In this regard, *aimai* operates as an adaptive strategy that enables her to navigate the tension between personal needs and social expectations.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that *aimai* in *Solanin* extends beyond a linguistic phenomenon, functioning instead as a psychosocial and cultural strategy that shapes Meiko's character development. It reflects processes of identity formation, life uncertainty, and the negotiation of interpersonal relationships within a Japanese cultural framework. This study contributes to the broader discourse on *aimai* by offering a perspective grounded in live-action film, and it provides a foundation for future research on the relationship between *aimai*, identity formation, and emotional dynamics in Japanese society.

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