Self-presentation in Japanese conversation:
Self-assertiveness and Repair

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Harmony is a core cultural value inherent to East Asian cultures. Generally, East Asian cultures strive to maintain harmony in every verbal behavior. It is assumed that Japanese desire to 'be the same as others' is a priority in everyday life. In previous studies, use of self-referential terms is more often observed when a speaker mentions his or her negative self-impressions and experiences. Speakers use self-referential terms as a way of portraying a humble attitude within social contexts. Thus, it is concluded that self-referential terms are more acceptable when speakers express themselves in a physically or mentally lower position. However, people have wants to be approved of. Generally, to praise oneself in conversation is not considered to be an acceptable practice in Japan, even though people may privately wish for approval. Therefore when the speakers would like to mention their superior situation, they incline to use different people's view. If speakers unintentionally praise themselves, it is found that they repair their utterances during the course of the conversation. Of additional importance, comprehension of a strategy used by speakers and referred to as repairing offers the key to an understanding of the negative societal view of self-assertiveness.

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is a strategy for self-assertiveness in Japanese conversation. Also, self-repair of the self-referential terms employed by Japanese personalities during the course of TV interviews is discussed. Self-referential terms are terms with which a speaker designates himself or herself in their utterances or sentences. From a grammatical perspective, the Japanese language does not always require a subject (an agent or a performer) in a sentence or in a phrase. Since such a zero-output of the subject is customary, use of self-referential terms are supposed to be marked. It is argued that identifying himself or herself in talk is associated with self-assertiveness that is disgusted in Japanese society. Frequent use of self-referential terms is often perceived by the listener to mean that the speaker has a potent self-assertive impression.

However, self-referential terms are often observed when a speaker mentions his or her negative self-impressions and experiences (Shigemitsu 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000). Moreover, it has been found that speaker tries to repair their utterances if they have some miss usage of self-referential terms during the course of conversation in order to try to avoid self-assertive atmosphere. This paper will support the study of 'harmony' which is thought to be a core cultural value inherent to East Asian cultures (Wei & Ide, 2000).

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2. Self-presentation in Discourse

Self or identity has been studied for a long time from various aspects. 'Identity' sometimes means one and the same. It has also come to mean 'social' and 'ethnic identity.' Identity has 'uniqueness.' However, each unique human being is a complicated patchwork of ever changing personal attributes and relations. The self, as the singularity we each feel ourselves to be is not an entity. Rather, it is a site, from which a person perceives the world and a place from which to act. From the psychological scope, "selves are fictions." Certain features of the flow of activity picked out in our way of speaking and writing as entities, as if they had an existence (Harré : 1998).

In the field of sociolinguistics and pragmatics, John Gumperz (1982) in the book *Language and Social Identity* shows how ideology enters into face-to-face speaking practices to create an interactional space. He insists that the study of language as interactional discourse demonstrates that these parameters are not constants that can be taken for granted but are communicatively produced. Thus, his premise is that identity is created through the communicative process.

As identity is produced through the communication, people try to control how they present their identities according to each context. This paper tries to show evidence how Japanese people show their self in a public. It can be said that self is constituted of continuum of self-images. So speaker can present his or her private self to public self. To each listener, speaker can show his or her identity to a certain extent according to the relationships and context. Listener may show her the most private self to their family. On the other hand, he or she may not show it to a stranger.

Generally, East Asian cultures strive to maintain harmony in every verbal behavior. In Japan, as people try to hide their inferiority, they also try to conceal their superiority and stress affinities among the group. In order to mitigate the discomfort that is caused from the differences among members of a certain group, a humble attitude is most often employed in Japan. In fact, self-assertion is avoided in verbal behavior.

3. Data

The data was video taped and transcribed from a live television talk show, "*Sutajio paku kara Konnichiwa* (Hello from the Studio Park)," which is broadcast every weekday afternoon. One male professional interviewer and one female assistant interviewer interviewed one guest[1] each day. Guests on this program are usually singers, actors, and others who work mainly in the entertainment industry.

It is recognized that the interview setting may differ from natural conversation in the following ways. 1) Guests on talk shows are well known for their stage and on screen talents. They are selected to do interviews because they are leading figures in society, getting attention in dramas, movies and on stage. Generally, television viewers and fans also give high regard to people in the entertainment industry, often believing that they are without any shortcomings. 2) The talk show focuses on guests' recent activities in the first 30 minutes, while the second half of the interview traces their success story back to their childhood; how they became such a star with national recognition. 3) The entire tone is casual, with each interview full of praise for each guest. 4) It is well known that, in the Japanese entertainment industry, aspiring actors, singers and the like are

mentored by highly regarded professionals in the field. It is the duty of these hopefuls to find a variety of ways to serve their mentors, with the goal of one-day receiving recognition and recommendation. The relationship between the two is one of power, whereby the degree if power the mentor holds is contingent upon the age-differential and his of her popularity and length of career. The traditional Japanese politeness system is inherent to this relationship and, therefore, inherent to the entertainment industry. Aspiring talents must ascribe to the traditional Japanese behavioral rules that, while unwritten, hold true.

4. Results and Discussion

4. 1. *Frequency of self-referential terms*

One-hundred and twenty-one utterances containing agents of the verbs or objects of the verbs from eight different episodes of *"Sutajio Paku Kara Konnichiwa"* (approximately 400 minutes in total) were obtained. They total 17.5% of all utterances. All of these agents or objects could have also been deleted to make grammatically acceptable utterances.

One finding that emerged is that self-referential terms have explicit customary usage. Only 5.0% of the utterances introduced this positive self-image, that is an "I-am-Superior" image. On the other hand, the results show that 66.9% of the utterances, in which the speaker expresses a negative "I-am-inferior" self-image, contain self-referential terms.

4. 2. *Expressing self-image by shifting the point-of-view*

It is interesting that, in the data, only six of the utterances containing self-referential terms express a positive self-image. What is especially noteworthy is that, in all but one case, when the speaker talks about his or her own positive characteristics, he or she uses the vantage point of another person.

(1) Abe : *5 nensei made wa itsumo ichiban ichinensei no toki kara*

youchien no Abe wa ashiga hayai **toiu koto de**

'**It was said** that Abe ran fast till 5th grade since he was in 1st grade, or even in kindergarten...'

(Abe: 6)

As can be seen, Hiroshi Abe is the speaker in example (1). If he were to have mentioned the fact that he ran fast from his own point-of-view, it would have sounded boastful. An attitude of self-satisfaction is weakened by using another person's acknowledgement of the speaker. In examples (2) and (3), a shift in point-of-view is combined with use of the word *"guzen"* or *"tamatama"*, both meaning "accidentally" or "by chance", to further portray a humble attitude when mentioning one's own accomplishments or positive attributes.

(2) Uchino: *Kazoku geimu no Morita san ga* **guzen** *mitete kudasatteite*

kondono haru tleiu eiganiwa **Uchino** *ni dete hoshiito*

'Film Director Morita of "Family Game" **happened to** watch

and he asked **Uchino** to perform in his new movie titled HAL.'

(Uchino: 159)

In example (2), the part of speech '*Uchino-ni dete hoshii* (he would like to have Uchino in his

film)' can be understood as being Mr. Morita's direct speech, such as 'ϕ want Uchino in my film'. The symbol ϕ indicates where there would occur a subject in an English phrase, hereafter.

(3) Uchino : *Sorede **tamatama** konkai wa hutarikko no sakka no*

Ooishi shizuka san ga Moriyama Shirou yaku o sagashiteita

*tokoro eigakan de haru wo mite **Uchino** da toiukotode*

'Then Ms. Shizuka Oishi, the writer of *Futarikko* (twins), was looking for an actor for the role of Shiro Moriyama, when **she happened to** see HAL in a movie theater 'Let **Uchino** do it!'

(Uchino: 163)

Masaaki Uchino deserves to be proud of his leading roles in a movie and in a TV drama. However, by using another person's point-of-view coupled with word "accidentally", he intentionally conceals the pride he may secretly wish to display.

The following example is a very rare occurrence. Here, the speaker uses an I-type self-referential term to express a positive self-image. This is the only such instance in all of the utterances with self-referential terms from the present data.

(4) Inoue: *Sono mae ni BS de katsudou shashin no onna tte iu dorama ga*

*attan desu. Sorega kikkakede **boku**-ga erabaretamitai na*

'Before that, it seemed that there was a good chance of being in a

drama called Katsudo Shashin no Onna (a woman of a movie).

So I was chosen for the drama.'

(self-referential terms + positive self-image)

(Inoue: 145)

4. 3. *Self-Repair*

Of additional importance, comprehension of a strategy used by speakers and referred to as repairing offers the key to an understanding of the negative societal view of self-assertiveness. Generally, to praise oneself in conversation is not considered to be an acceptable practice in Japan, even though people may privately wish for approval. If speakers unintentionally praise themselves, they repair their utterances during the course of the conversation. The symbol ✓ shows the point at which a repair occurs.

In (5), if Abe would not have repaired his phrase, he would have said 'boku ni tanonda (he asked me / I was asked to give a speech)'. But he changes the point of view from that of his own to that of his friend. So he repaired the utterance to say 'Could you make a speech?'

(5) Abe : *Rikkouho surunde **boku**, ✓ **Abechan** yattekurenai to enzetsu nannte yattakoto*

*naoyo **ore** dekinaiyo*

'(ϕ =One of my friends) was going to run for the election of the school congress,

I, ✓ Abechan, make a speech? ϕ have never given speech before, **I cannot.**'

(Abe: 18)

In example (6), the repair occurs at the discourse level. During the interview with Maki Ichiro, the topic of discussion is her tall height and good figure. Ichiro herself recognizes her tall height to some extent in her response because it is an observable fact. However, she does not

complete this utterance. Rather, she suddenly shifts the focus to Kurara Haruka, another well-known member of Takarazuka musical group. Haruka does not directly relates to the topic of discussion. However, by comparing herself with Haruka, Ichiro emphasizes her negative traits rather than her positive characteristics. Ichiro drews the viewers' attention to the fact that she is shorter than Haruka. It should be noted that Ichiro uses self-referential terms when making this comparison.

(6) Ichiro: *onna yaku san yoriwa karoujite* **watashino hou wa** *sega,* √ *demo* **watashi** *wa Haruka san yori chiisain desu yo*

'φ be taller than the members of women's role, √ but I am shorter than Ms. Haruka, you know.'

(Subject absent + positive self-image and Subject present + negative self image)

(Ichiro: 204)

Example (7) is also a discourse level repair. After the interviewer praises Tamasaburo Bando, Bando admits that he is worthy of notice in the world. Then, immediately after, he regrets saying this and repairs what he has said by using the self-referential term jibun (of myself).

(7) Interviewer: *Tamasaburo san wa sekai kara chumoku o uketeiru*

'Tamasaburo-san (you) are worthy of notice in the world.'

Bando: *Hai soudesu. Hai soudesu nannte* **jibun** *kara.*

'That's right. (φ had better not say 'Yes, that's right' **of my self**. Sorry.'

(Bando: 153-154)

In example (8), Mayumi Ogawa, who takes the role of 'Yodo' in a TV drama, requests that attention be given not to herself, but to 'Yodo', the character. She does this in response to the interviewer admiration for her performance. She avoids the praise by separating herself (Ogawa san) from her role as 'Yodo'. She designates herself with a third-person referential term, 'Ogawa san (Ms. Ogawa)'.

(8) Ogawa : *Sore wa soune soudesuka haa* **ogawasan** *dake de naku gamen no* **Yodo** *o*

'It is so. Do you think so? Well, (do not watch only **Ogawa-san** (**me**), watch **Yodo** in the drama.'

(Ogawa: 19)

5. Conclusion

Self-referential terms are more acceptable when speakers express themselves in a physically or mentally lower position. This explains why asserting a negative self-image is acceptable. Speakers use self-referential terms as a way of portraying a humble attitude within social contexts. This also offers a substantiated explanation for why the Japanese culture is inclined to be offended by self-assertiveness. The Japanese desire to 'be the same as others' is a priority in everyday life.

The Japanese believe that belonging to a group is important. They do not seem to like to stand out in everyday life. Average citizens in society tend to think that people in the entertainment industry do not belong to their same group or social class. Although people with careers in entertainment do indeed stand out because of the nature of their positions, they strive to belong to the same group or societal class as ordinary people. They try to convince the public that they belong

to the same group as their viewers. It is rather a restrictive harmony.

In this paper, the use of self-referential terms in TV interviews has been the focus. Admittedly, the Japanese avoid standing out in public. However, it is not to be denied that they have a desire to be praised. A future direction of this study is to investigate the differences in public self-expression and private self-expression. As a result of this investigation, we will learn in what contexts Japanese are permitted to assert a positive self-image.

Acknowledgment:

Notes:

1. The data is from a live TV talk show, "Sutajio Paku kara Konnichiwa (Hello from the Studio Park)". The data was recorded from January 1998 to March 2000.
Participants:
Interviewers (One male professional interviewer and one female assistant interviewer)
Interviewees (One guest who works mainly in the entertainment field)

Hiroshi ABE (an actor, 30's)   Tamasaburo BANDO (a Kabuki actor, 40's)

Maki ICHIRO (an actress, 20's)   Charu INOUE (an actor, 20's)

Akiko KUNO (an actress, 40's)   Go MORITA (a singer/actor, teens)

Mayumi OGAWA (an actress, 50's)   Masaaki UCHIYAMA (an actor, 20's)

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