Positive Politeness Strategies – in Everyday Japanese Conversation

Yuka Shigemitsu[*1], Yasumi Murata [*2], Yoko Otsuka[*3]

Abstract

In the field of sociolinguistics, studies of the Japanese language have often highlighted its honorific system, claiming this to be a reflection of a hierarchical society. Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1978, 1987) regarded the unique honorific system as evidence that Japanese is a negative politeness oriented language. Besides being vertically structured, however, Japanese society places great emphasis on group harmony. Consensus within the group overrides any hierarchical differences individuals in the group may have. Such "group first" attitudes may be considered as what Brown and Levinson define as positive politeness, namely, sharing common ground and having camaraderie. We argue that these are indeed manifestations of the less commonly researched phenomenon of positive politeness in Japanese. In this paper, we examine the following five linguistic phenomena in Japanese: 1) Topics, 2) inductive development of talk, 3) co-constructions, 4)backchanelling, 5) pauses. The results of our quantitative and qualitative analyses of the above phenomena suggest that these four features function as positive politeness strategies in Japanese verbal behavior.

1. Introduction

The linguistic politeness phenomena have been researched from the various perspectives during the last thirty years. Among many researchers, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) is said to have weightiness in this field and has a great influence on politeness research.

This paper is also based on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. They regard politeness phenomena as linguistic strategies in order to redress Face-threatening act. According to them, politeness strategies have two kinds of redressing strategies: positive and negative. It is important to note that 'politeness (face want)' is universal even in the different societies and cultures, but 'politeness strategies' are varied in the different societies and cultures.

2.   The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to argue for the positive politeness strategies in Japanese ordinary conversation styles which are observed frequently. Brown and Levinson (1987:245) said that the Japanese has negative-politeness cultures due to the formalized morphosyntactic honorific systems: style and forms. The choice of the style depends on the relationship among the participants of the conversation. However, FitzGerald (2003: 169), argued that East and South East Asian cultures stressed positive face. It is needless to say that the Japanese culture is included in these cultures. Some researchers are investigating recently how Japanese Positive Politeness is expressed. Most of them discuss it based on the data analysis to examine whether the Brown and Levinson's strategies are found in Japanese.

In this paper, we take the comprehensive approach to positive politeness, not to relate Japanese data to the fixed strategies by Brown and Levinson.

3. Common announcements in a public sphere

Before we go to the data analysis, we will illustrate below common formulated announcements in a public sphere that are observed frequently in public space in Japan. The purpose of these announcements is to show that the service attendants have much consideration toward customers. It is different from the responsibility of a manufacturer or clerks, institutions, service attendants for harm or injury, which results from a defective product or failure of service. These announcements are not intended for the service attendants to express their surrender of individual responsibility. Some people from other countries complain they are treated as a small child when they hear those formulaic Japanese expressions below. But the service attendants have no intention to treat the customers like a small child. They just consider the customers' feeling. This consideration is comprehended as positive politeness.

(1) *Ame de suberiyasuku natte orimasu. Oashimoto ni gochuui kudasai.*
'The surface of the floor is very slippery, please be careful not to slip.' (at a station, department store)
(2) *Nagai sukaato no kata wa hasamarenai youni gochuui kudasai.*
'Those wearing long skirts, please be careful not to get your skirt caught in the moving steps.' (at an escalator)
(3) *Okosama to te o tsunagi chuuou ni otachikudasai.*
'Please make sure to hold your child's hand and stand in the center of the step.'(at an escalator)
(4) *Owasuremono no nai youni imaichido gokakunin kudasai.*
'Please check again to ensure you are not leaving anything behind.'(to alighting passengers on a train)
(5) *Oori no kata wa botan de oshirase kudasai.*
'Please press the button when you wish to get off.'(in a bus)
(6) *Oorino kata wa basu ga tomatte kara otachi kudasai.*
'Please stand up only after the bus comes to a halt.'(in a bus)

4. Data

We specifically look into English and Japanese conversations from a conversation management strategy perspective, highlighting how much transfer from one's native language has taken place when speaking in a second language and the overall effect such transfer has on the conversation in terms of rapport building among the participants. One uses a strategy because it is polite to do so. But it sometimes triggers miscommunication and a break down of conversation. We have analyzed English conversations between Americans and Japanese and also between Chinese and Japanese. We have videotaped ten international conversations for our ongoing research. Recording #1 and #2 and #3 have been selected for the analysis in this paper. The participants are selected who met the following criteria.

- American and Chinese participants should not be familiar with Japanese language, custom and culture.
- American and Chinese participants hardly ever contact with Japanese people.
- Japanese and Chinese participants are required to have relatively higher English skills either with English proficiency certification, high score record of TOEIC or TOEFL test, a graduate of one of the top-rank Universities.
- Japanese participants should not have experience of living overseas.
- All participants should not be English-major.

● They should have not met before.

The participants' profiles are shown in Table 1. As for the occupation, the American participants belonged to a US Army camp in Japan. They were selected because they lived separately from Japanese citizens, in an enclosed area. They were not heavily involved in the Japanese way of life, culture and customs since they are frequently transferred from one country to another. So they were not familiar with Japanese conversational styles. As for the Chinese participants, they were graduate students studying in a University in Japan. Their Japanese ability was not high, so they communicated in English with their graduate educators in English.

Table 1 Participants' profiles

Recording # 1   One American and one Japanese
J1 (Japanese No. 3) Male, 40s, works for a pharmaceutical company. Non English Major but he has been involved in numerous meetings with English speakers and undertaken many overseas business trips. He is not good at social talk.
A1 (American No. 3) Male, 50s, Office Clerk at a US Army Camp in Japan, has lived in Japan for two years in total.
Recording #2   Two Americans and two Japanese
J2 Male, 40s, Ph. D, Assistant Professor, teaching physical education at a University in Tokyo Suburban area, Non-English major, has written several papers in English and has presented oral and poster presentations in English in conference.
J3 Male, 40s, Ph. D, Assistant Professor, teaching mathematics at a University in Tokyo Suburban area, Non-English major, and has written several papers in English and translated several English books into Japanese.
A2 Male, 60s, school teacher in US army camp, has lived in US army camp in Japan for several years.
A3 Male, 40s, office clerk at a US army camp in Japan. It turned out that he is married to a Japanese woman.
Recording #3   Two Chinese and two Japanese
J2 the same as above
J3 the same as above
C1 Chinese (male) Ph.   D student. Non-English major. No Japanese ability. Talks with his professor in English.
C2 Chinese (male) MA student, Non-English major. Japanese ability is not bad.

As for the Japanese participants, J1, J2 and J3, their English reading and writing skills were fairly good. But they complained that they had difficulties in speaking in English, even though they have sufficient knowledge of grammar and a rich vocabulary. Among the Japanese participants, J1 is a businessman who frequently has a chance to speak in English through his business trips, a teleconference. making overseas phone calls in English. The other two of the participants (J2, J3) are professors at a university in Japan. They write their academic papers in English and read resources in English. However, J2 and J3 in Video #2 hardly ever talked with native English speakers even though they have high ability of

reading and writing skills in English.

All participants except J2 and J3 in Recording #2, who work at the same university, were meeting for the first time for the recording. J2 and J3 belonged to a different division and seldom met each other on campus.

5 Findings from our conversational analysis

5.1 Topics

According to Hori et. al., (2005) the interpretation of topic changes in conversation is greatly different between the Americans and the Japanese. Americans change topics frequently in order to find common topics that the speakers can share. Japanese and Chinese, however, hesitate to change topics, because they believe that it is rude to change the topic offered by the interlocutor. Table 2 shows the number of topics raised by the Americans is more than the number by the Japanese. Japanese are more willing to go along with whatever the addressee introduced as a topic and they change topics. The Japanese let others introduce topic and Japanese go along with topic. They did not reject the topic raised by others.

Table 2: Topics observed in conversations between American and Japanese (Hori, et. al. 2005)

group	Total number of topics	Topics raised by A	Topics raised by J	Impression of J by A
1	19	11	8	Good
2	16	13	3	Very bad

(A…Americans   J…Japanese)

Table 3 shows that the Japanese also preferred talking about their personal experiences to giving opinions. This is more likely to bring about rapport – another positive politeness strategy. Stating one's opinion might create conflict but opinions will create shared feeling between Speaker and Hearer. In this sense, talking about opinions is showing positive politeness.

Table 3: Contents of topic   (Hori, et. al. 2005)

Contents of Utterances	Americans	Japanese
Say opinion	10	1
Restate other participants' opinion in his/her own words	13	0
Tell his/her own experiences	6	11

5.2 Inductive development of talk

5.1 shows that American tend to talk about opinions and they give their definite opinions but Japanese often talk about experiences. This difference could create some misunderstanding in intercultural interaction between Japanese and American. In our data, we also observed that Japanese tend to talk about their experiences even when being asked for his opinions. In (7), the American asked the Japanese participant 'Do you travel a lot outside Japan or stay?' J1 started his answer, "Well, um, recently, I don't have much time but" which was going to lead to the conclusion after he would give some more words.

(7) [Recording #1]

A1:   I think everybody has those dreams of having nice –no –um house, couple of cars, and um-and be able to travel. So-**so on vacation do you get to travel -do you travel a lot outside Japan or stay?**

J1:   **Well-um- recently I-I don't have much time but**, yeah, I like –like to ..

A1:   **Where is your favorite place that you like to travel to?**

J1:   Well- um in Japan, I like to um I like to go to sea, to swim, and um uh –and um go to maybe with-with my daughters-my daughters are small so, I try together with them. This inductive way of discourse structure makes the other participant to share the story. So it might be said that his is also showing a kind of positive politeness.

A1 in (8) expected J1 to answer 'yes' or 'no'. But J1 started to talk about 'a story' in which he would be going to conclude his story 'yes' or 'no' but he failed it.

(8) [Recording #1]

A1:   Uh so uh so do the Jap- do you like uh American style movies like-

J1:   Yes uh-huh

A1:   Do you like the action, or do you like the drama, or do you like the comedy.

J1:   **Well-um I see many many many types, uh recently I went to see uh Chicago.**

A1:   Uh-huh.

J1:   That's –that's a combination. (laugh)

In (9), the Japanese was going to talk about his own car first, and then to explain what types of cars he wanted to drive.   But the American regarded the Japanese person's response as the direct answer to his question.   The American thought that the Japanese had not understood the question and asked the same question again.

(9) [Recording #1]

A1:   So, What type of cars do you want to drive?

J1:   Excuse me?

A1:   Cars, what type of cars do you want to drive? Automobiles.

J1:   **Oh my –my car is Toyota.**

A1:   Uh-huh.

J1:   **It's –it's very compact car.**

A1:   **Uh-huh, do you- would you like to drive a bigger car or..?**

J1:   Well, uh- yeah I- I hope so. If-if I have money (laugh)

A1:   I think everyone uh-uh m-my dream, I said that there's an Alfa Romeo down there, fortunately they don't sale those –well they do but- they cost very much but uh-uh um I-I like to have BMW two seats roadster and if I could ever afford it. It's too expensive.

All examples above show that the Japanese prefer talking about their personal experience to giving opinions. It means that they would like to share a personal story with other people. So it might be said that it is a strategy of bringing about rapport.

5.3 Co-construction

Co-constructions refer to dyadic patterns of conversation in which a second speaker syntactically completes what their partner started saying. Japanese generally express rapport by inferring what the other participants think and saying it. Sometimes listeners fill a word or a phrase at the end of the speaker's sentence. Due to this custom, Japanese often make incomplete utterances as if the listener already knows what the speaker is going to say, and does not finish the utterance as it may sound redundant. In (4), J1 faded out the utterance out smiling and laughing, as in (10).

(10) [Recording #1]
J1: And okay and uh – we- wore, we wore a very casual style but uh American people have a shirt and a necktie and seeing our-our style for meeting- and the next day it was contrary **(laugh)**, so it's **(laugh)**
A1:   But I had experi- but I had that experience when I was in Italy.

By ellipsis, Japanese participants can show an expectation that the listeners share the same anticipation toward the end of the story or outcome. By laughing, the story was marked as fun and enjoyable. So ellipsis and ellipsis plus laughing have an effect of positive politeness in a way since they create in-group atmosphere and exaggeration in the talk. The fact that American did not respond to this style is that he did not regard such Japanese conversational strategies as showing positive politeness.

5.4 Back-channeling

Back-channeling can be seen extremely frequent in Japanese. Back-channeling is a device to let the other person know that s/he is listening. It can be defined as short, non-lexical utterances by an interlocutor who is primarily playing a listener's role while the other interlocutor is speaking. The Japanese makes greater use of back-channels than English speakers.

Both of the Japanese in Group #2 did not talk much compared the American but one of them Japanese used back-channels the most frequently among the participants, and the proportion of the number of back-channels to that of words produced by the Japanese is 22.5%.   The Japanese tried to participate in the conversation by using many back-channels.   In this respect, the back-channels are not just a signal of showing the one is listening, but they have a function of developing the cooperative interaction.   The back-channels acknowledge the addressee's talk without commitment.

Figure 1. Back-channels observed in conversations between American and Japanese
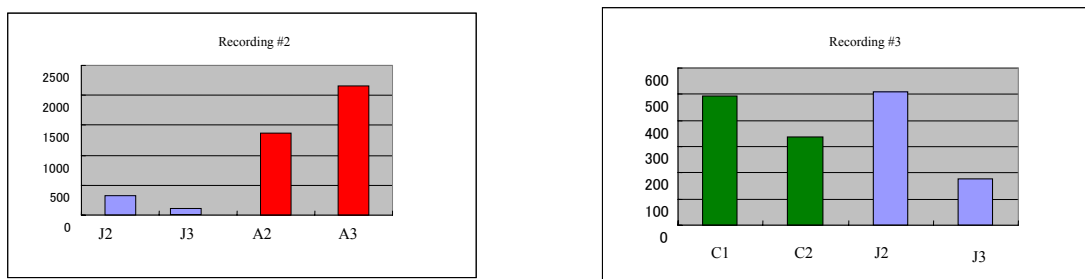
(11) [Recording #2]

A3:   … I'm a very avid baseball collector.

J2:   *Mhm.*

A3:   I have over one million, that's a lot of cards.

J2:   *Mhm.*

A3:   And I have like Ichiro's,

J2:   *Mhm.*

A3:   I'm a big Japanese fan too.

J2:   *Mhm.*

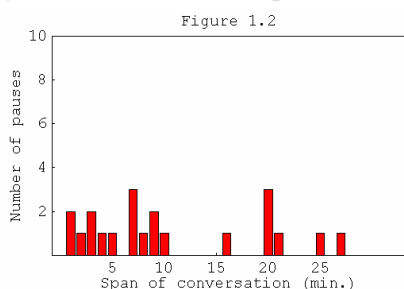A3:   So, I love, watch Ichiro I like the best… he's just great.

J2:   *Mhm.*

J2 did well in carrying on the conversation by using back-channeling. They make greater use of back-channels than English speakers In (11), J2 uttered many back-channels and tried to participate in conversation. However, there was not a good result. The use of back-channels played an important role for the Japanese and the Chinese in continuing the communication smoothly, based on the analysis of Recording #3. The back-channels acknowledge the addressee's talk without commitment. So it is concluded that it function as positive politeness strategy.

5.5 Pause

Americans and Chinese/Japanese have different perspective on pauses. Americans try to fill the gaps during the conversation and while only Americans are talking, few pauses are found. Chinese and Japanese do not mind long pauses. These different perspectives of pauses caused uneasiness and discomfort during the conversation.

American and Japanese develop unsuccessful management of communication. On the contrary, the conversation between Chinese and Japanese was successful even there were full of pauses as is shown in Figure 1.3.

Figure 2. American and Japanese   Chinese and Japanese (Original Hori et al, 2005)
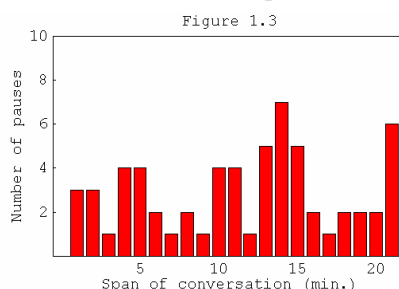
(12)   [Group 3] /=a brief pause   [ ] inaudible

J2:   In (-) in Harbin err are there ski area/ In Harbin

C1:   Yes, [yes]

J2:   [ski area/]

C2:   I can't ski   ((people laugh))

C2:   But er er I can ske [skate]

J2:   [ah skate] ah

         ((pause))

C1:   I was in college, I can skate((pause; speaker thinking)) sports(u) er in ((pause; speaker thinking)) cold winter. (--) er have to skate. Its students, it's students shop (choir?)

         ((pause; people don't understand))

J2:   ((chuckling)) I don't sorry I don't under understand

         ((pause))

J3:   Do native people in Harbin skate from when they are children skate and from home to school

C2:   Er I means skate(u) is like **((pause))** er for students is like English mathematic

         ((quiet laugh))

         ((pause, others trying to understand and guessing what C2 means))

What was happening during the pause in (12) is that all participants were seeking the meaning of what Song was saying without clarification question. After about five minutes, they dared to ask questions at last. During the following-up interview session, Japanese participants said changing topic and asking question are very rude behavior so they did not. Long pauses are not rude to some extent. This norm is thought to be shared by Japanese and Chinese so Japanese and Chinese pleasantly went on their talk without uneasiness. Asking question is ruder.

         When not understanding an utterance, Japanese speakers often kept silent. The metamessage of this quiet attitude is that the speaker is trying to come closer to the interlocutor's mind to seek what the interlocutor is going to say. This approach is to show positive politeness strategy.

6. Conclusion

         Through the intercultural communication and highlighting the way the Japanese transfer from their verbal behavior, we could obtain some positive politeness strategies which are unique to Japanese. But these strategies were misunderstood by English native speakers and created a feeling of distrust. In the future, it will be required to show the way of rapport building varies across cultures.

<References >

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