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Criticisms in English and Japanese in Academic Writing / 1

Criticisms in English and Japanese in Academic Writing

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Introduction

Evaluative language plays a significant role in academic discourse. Depending upon how language is used to evaluate and comment on the writer's own and other researchers' academic contributions, the writer claims authority, establishes credibility and creates interpersonal relationships within an academic community. In examining evaluative language used in book reviews, Hyland (2004) analysed praise and criticism as semantic units or speech acts. Hyland's analysis included different categories (e.g. content, style, author) that received most and least evaluations; the ratio of praise and criticism across different disciplines; the positioning of praise and criticism (opening or conclusion); and type of mitigation devices used for evaluative acts. In addition, he investigated the relationship between the positioning of praise or criticism, the author's stance, and the reviewer's relationship with the author.

Contrastive analyses of academic discourse have pointed out cultural variations in linguistic devices and structures used in individual genres and their underlying cultural conventions. For example, Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza, (2004) made a trilingual comparison of negative evaluation collected from book reviews in English, French and Spanish. As units of analysis, modal verbs expressing possibility (e.g., would, may, might, could, etc), semi-auxiliary verbs (e.g., to appear, to seem), and nouns, adjectives, and adverbs related to the modal verbs (e.g., perhaps, probably) were used. Qualitative analysis of "emotionally charged" expressions was also conducted.

Variation between Asian and Western cultures is a much-researched topic, particularly indirectness in discourse. While it is often assumed that indirectness is more prevalent in Asian cultures as compared to Western cultures, some studies on contrastive rhetoric in academic writing have shown the contrary. For example, Kong (2005) analysed the use of evaluative statements about third party ideas in English and Chinese research articles and found that, despite the stereotypical view of the Chinese as indirect and implicit, Chinese writers showed a tendency to use more explicit linguistic devices to evaluate with less frequent mitigations. Kong attributed the difference to the possibly different role relationships between the writers and their audience and different politeness strategies involved in the two languages. That is, Western writers abide by “deference politeness system” (Scollon & Scollon, 2000), which is marked by a high social distance and a low power difference, and interact with the readers as “equals”. In contrast, Chinese writers tend to use more explicit and direct statements as part of their involvement strategy to gain in-group membership and consolidate close relationships with potential readers in the academic community. In recent years, a number of contrastive analyses of academic writing in English and Chinese has emerged but research on English and other Asian languages, including Japanese, is still scanty.

The present study aims to contribute to this discussion by providing empirical evidence on the use of evaluative language, in particular, criticisms, in English and Japanese academic book reviews.

Why Book Reviews?

Book review has been identified as an important and unique sub-genre of academic discourse (Hyland, 2004; Salager-Meyer & Alcaraz Ariza, 2004; Salager-Meyer, Alcaraz Ariza & Pabon Berbesi, 2007). So far, the most comprehensive analysis of book reviews is Hyland's work (2004) on 160 book reviews collected from 28 academic journals across different disciplines including science, social sciences and humanities, all published in 1997. Hyland has shown how writers of book reviews in English used evaluative speech acts and various mitigating devices to soften critical statements. He further observes that although all academic genres are evaluative, book reviews are most explicitly so as they convey public evaluation of the author's academic merits and standing by his or her peers and they indirectly influence the reputation of the author.

While the primary function of the book review is evaluative, the nature of the author's stance, the interpersonal relationships between the reviewer and the book author, and the conventions used are culture specific. Depending upon the linguistic and social conventions governing interpersonal relationships and hierarchies in the academy, some book reviewers' stance could be more authoritative, and present more critical views than others. The amount and manner of giving praise and criticism may also differ. For example, in one of the few contrastive studies currently available, Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza (2004) found that French book reviewers tended to adopt a more

authoritative and expert voice, Spanish book reviewers tended to use more sarcastic language, while English book reviewers presented criticisms more personally. Hence, the direct transfer of conventions from one language to another may lead to inaccurate projections of the writer's stance, misinterpretations of the book author's academic credibility and of the value of the book being reviewed. It may also adversely affect collegiality within an academic community. A study of the use of linguistic devices in different cultures to minimize the face-threatening effects of evaluative statements in book reviews would provide insights for understanding how interpersonal relationships in academia are managed in these cultures.

This chapter reports on a study on book reviews, focusing on criticisms. It examines whether Japanese criticisms are given more indirectly than English criticisms in book reviews. It explores the range of mitigation devices for giving criticisms in each of the two languages. It then focuses on distinctive linguistic devices used in Japanese criticisms in book reviews for establishing the author's stance, and managing interpersonal relationships between the reviewer and the book author.

The Study

In the study reported in this paper, the questions addressed were:

- 1) Are criticisms and praises in English academic book reviews more direct than those in Japanese academic book reviews?

- 2) What kind of mitigation devices are used to produce indirect criticisms in English and Japanese academic book reviews?
- 3) What linguistics devices used in Japanese book reviews when making criticisms are less frequently used, or not at all, in English book reviews.

Methodology

The data used consisted of book reviews in four linguistics journals, two in English *Language* and *Linguistics* and two in Japanese *Nihongo no kenkyuu* (Study of Japanese language) and *Nihongo bunpou* (Japanese Grammar). They were chosen as two of the reputable linguistics journals among English and Japanese speaking academic communities. 20 English and 20 Japanese book reviews were selected from those journals in the last five years (i.e., 2002-2007).

Two main criteria were used to select book reviews from the two English and two Japanese journals mentioned above. First, book reviews which were written by a single reviewer were chosen. This was to ensure that lexico-grammatical features were consistently employed. Second, book reviews were on single authored books. This is because edited books and single-authored books are likely to differ with respect to the spectrum of criticisms provided in book reviews. While Japanese reviewers were all native speakers of Japanese, it was difficult to ascertain whether English reviewers were all native-speakers of English. It is assumed that by and large reviewers writing in English conformed to the norms shared by English speaking readership.

“Criticisms” have been characterized by Tsui (1994) as discourse acts that convey negative evaluations directed at the addressee or a third party. Hyland (2004) characterises criticisms in book reviews specifically as negative judgments or statements that deny authors or editors credit for their work. Accordingly, “criticisms” in the corpus were identified in the 20 English and 20 Japanese book reviews. They were then categorised into “direct” and “indirect” types in each language. Indirect criticisms were negative evaluations which were accompanied by mitigation devices while direct criticisms were those that were not.

Four categories of mitigation devices were identified, three of which were drawn from Hyland’s (2004) analysis of criticisms in book reviews. They were (a) “praise-criticism pairs” (b) “hedging” (c) “other attribution”. The fourth category, “personal attribution”, was drawn from Myers’ work (1989). The fifth category included those which did not fall into any of the four categories. A “praise-criticism pair” is a criticism prefaced by a praise that serves to soften the face-threatening effect of the criticism. An example from the data is “Despite its many useful features, there are certain gaps and weak areas...” [Lang 10]. “Hedging” such as “could”, “possibly” and “seems” is employed to mitigate the face-threatening effect of critical comments. “Personal attribution” (such as “I think” and “to my mind”), as pointed out by Myers (1989), mitigates the criticism by specifying that it represents the writer’s personal opinion rather than an objective quality of the book¹. It acknowledges that others may hold an alternative view which is equally valid. “Other attribution” diffuses the criticism by shifting the source of the critical comments elsewhere. An example from the data is “One

can question whether ... are optimally clear] [Lang 10] where the reviewer shifts the source from him/herself to a generic member of the research community.

Findings and Discussion

Direct and indirect criticisms. From the 20 English and 20 Japanese book reviews, 170 and 118 instances of “criticism” were identified respectively. 57 out of the 170 English, i.e., approximately 33.5%, were “direct” or without any mitigation devices whereas 30 out of 118 Japanese criticisms, i.e., approximately 25.4 %, were without any mitigation devices. The results show that there is a higher percentage of direct criticism in English book reviews than in Japanese reviews as far as these two samples are concerned. What is perhaps more interesting is the way indirect criticisms were realized in both languages.

The following is a break-down of the mitigation devices used to make indirect criticisms:

[Insert Table 1 here]

The figures show that sensitivity to the face-threatening effect of criticism was demonstrated in book reviews in both languages. While there was a higher percentage of criticisms in English book reviews that were prefaced by praises than those in Japanese book reviews, there was a lower percentage of hedges in the former than in the latter. The most notable difference was found in the category “others”.

A further analysis was conducted on this category. It was found that two major sub-categories were found in English “others”: “Expression of sympathy” (e.g.

“Unfortunately, no recordings are available for...” [Lang 4]; (see Meyers, 1989); 7 instances or 4.8 percent of the total instances of mitigation devices) and “Conditional clause” (e.g. “It would have valuable if P had devoted close attention to...”[Lang 9]; 6 instances or 4.1 percent of the total instances of mitigation devices). For Japanese “others”, four major sub-categories: “Self-denigration” (9 instances or 7.9 percent of the total instances of mitigation devices), “Recasting problems as potential for future research” (8 instances or 7 percent of the total instances of mitigation devices, “Expression of sympathy” (6 instances or 5.3 percent of the total) and “Conditional clause” (5 instances or 4.4 percent of the total). were found.

While “expression of sympathy” and “conditional clause” were also found in Japanese book reviews, there were two other major sub-categories that were specific to Japanese. They were “self-denigration” and “recasting problems as potential for future research”. In addition to these, “attribution of problems to the next generation” appeared to be more prominent than in English book reviews, although only a few instances were found. We will discuss how the three types were used as mitigation devices in Japanese academic book reviews in the following section.

Self-denigration.

Example 1

- (1) 学問に完熟はあり得ない。室山語彙学とても例外ではない。改善の余地を残しているのはいうまでもない。だが、以下は、著者への注文というより

は、現行範型内を低回するむしろ評者自身の問題として一、二の問いを発しておく。[J13]

[Translation: There is no perfection in scholarship. *Muroyama* lexicology is no exception. It goes without saying that it leaves room for improvement. However, I will raise some questions below as problems that the reviewer myself, who have been reflecting backwards and forwards within the existing paradigm without being able to propose a new one, need to address, rather than as requests to the author.]

In this example, the book reviewer criticizes the book author by pointing out that his book needs improvement and indicates that he will raise some questions. Apart from mitigating the criticism by generalizing the lack of perfection to all scholarship, the reviewer positions himself as the one, and not the book author, who needs to address the questions himself. The reviewer denigrates himself as a researcher who has been constrained by the existing state of knowledge without being able to achieve a breakthrough. The self-denigration suggests that both the reviewer and the book author need to solve the problem, thereby establishing solidarity between them. By shifting the criticism from the book author to the reviewer himself, the face-threatening effect is minimized.

Example 2

- (2) 評者を含む多くの研究者は、状態述語に関わる概念…をあまりにも無規定に使ってきた。残念ながら、そのようなところが本書でも見受けられる。

[J9]

[Translation: Many researchers in this field, including the reviewer, have been using the key concepts related to stative verbs often without defining them.

Unfortunately, this weakness is observed in this book.]

In example (2), the reviewer criticizes the book for using concepts without defining them. The criticism is softened by generalizing it to other researchers as having the same problem. In addition, the book reviewer's self-denigration as among those researchers committing the same mistake softens the criticism and serves to establish solidarity between the reviewer and the book author.

Recasting problems as potential for future research. There were also instances where other linguistic devices were used together with self-denigration, such as recasting problems found in the author's book as potential for future research and being apologetic about the criticisms made.

Example 3

- (3) 最後に、蛇足ながら、もう一言 ... また 蛇足のさらに蛇足ながら、このような性格の研究書であるから、巻末に索引があれば、読者の便に資するところ大であったろう。

以上 評子の理解の未熟な点においては、ひたすら 海容を希う次第である。しかし、未解決の課題が残されていたとしてもそれはとりもなおさずこの分野の研究が今後の進展の可能性を孕んでいるということである。ここに蒔かれた一つ一つのテーマの種が今後大輪の花をさかせることを祈念している。 [J10]

[Translation: Lastly, although it is a superfluous remark, I wish to add one more comment In addition, although it is another superfluous remark in addition to the previous superfluous comment, it would have been very useful for the reader if the author had included an index at the end of the book.

To conclude, I entirely beg for the readers' tolerant forgiveness for my immature understanding. However, even though there are some unresolved problems in the book, this nonetheless means that research in this field has a great potential for advancing our knowledge ...

I pray that seeds of each theme planted in the present book will bloom a big flower in the future.]

In example (3) above, the reviewer's self-denigration “蛇足” (literally meaning adding legs to snakes, i.e., superfluous remarks) is used as a preface to the subsequent criticism. By calling her own comment as superfluous, the reviewer belittles her criticism by presenting her comments as superfluous and unsuitable. The reviewer thus minimises her authority and saves the face of the book author.

It is interesting that in concluding the book review, the reviewer apologises by denigrating her comments as “immature understanding”. The speech act of “apology” here is significant that it is used in “closing” as a global strategy to alleviate the face-threat of the entire book review and to establish harmonious interpersonal relationship rather than for addressing any particular local instances of criticisms. It is interesting that “apology” is used in Japanese book reviews to alleviate face-threat, while “praise” is typically used for this purpose in English review texts (e.g. Hyland, 2004; Johnson, 1992). As the focus of this chapter is on mitigation devices used in local instances of criticism, the use of apologizing as a global discourse act will be discussed in another paper.

It is worth noting that the reviewer’s self-denigration appeared to be used as a means of positioning himself as humble. However, it was used in combination with three strategies by the reviewer to establish his authority in making the criticisms. First, they were offered by the use of *kango* “漢語” or words based upon Chinese characters such as “蛇足” and “海容を希う”, which were originally accessible only to a minority of (male) intellectuals and which, to this day, still suggest a high level of education. In Japanese culture, the use of *kango* and words based on Chinese is a means of claiming expertise implicitly. Second, the use of poetic language serves the same function. For example, the reviewer used the following poetic language: 大輪の花を咲かせることを祈念... (“I pray that seeds of each theme planted in the present book will bloom a big flower in the future”). By using language with poetic flavour, the reviewer was indirectly asserting herself as an authority in the field. Third, in Japanese culture, normally only writers with authority state their expectations for future development of the addressee without polite

forms. By saying that she prayed for the blossoming of the author's research without the use of polite forms, such as [ご] or "go-", as a respectful prefix in "ご活躍" [*go-katsuyaku* or "your flourishing"] and in "ご発展" [*go-hatten* or "your development"], the reviewer was indirectly claiming more expertise than the book author.

Attribution of problems to the next generation. In the previous section, it has been pointed out that a statement of expectations for future development or improvement redresses the criticism. Along similar lines, examples were also found in which the reviewer mitigated his criticism by delegating the task of addressing the problems to the future generation:

Example 4

- (4) しかし、多少の疑問点や注文がのこるとしても、それは 動詞とは何かを極めた著者から次の世代への「宿題」に違いない。

[Translation: However, although some questions and requests remain, they must be "homework", which is given to the next generation by the book author who has provided an in-depth insight into the essence of verbs.]

In this example, the reviewer suggested that problems with the book should be addressed by the future generation. His criticism was mitigated because the target of criticism was no longer the book author but rather the next generation. Attribution of the problems as tasks for the future generation linked the present and the next generations as

holding shared responsibilities for developing research in the relevant field. Further mitigation was achieved by describing the author's work as providing "in-depth insight". It is also noteworthy that in the example above, the reviewer's denigration of his own comments as haphazard was expressed in *kango* (漢語) to reclaim expertise.

In Japanese book reviews, a number of examples of recording future development/tasks were found. This indicates that intergenerational links in a given discipline may be valued as particularly important. The following is another example which is self-explanatory.

Example 5

- (5) このことは 何年も前から 主張され続けているにもかかわらず、今も強く胸に響く現実を我々は 重くうけとめなければならない。研究の発展のためには 先人は 試行錯誤を含めた結果を公開し、後進は それらを踏まえて 前に進まねばならない。 [J12]

[Translation: This (i.e. the need for the design of good quality questionnaires for the purpose of conducting research on dialects in Japan) has been argued for a number of years now. However, the grave reality is that no action has been taken. For an advancement of research, pioneers need to make results, including their trial and error, public, and juniors need to appreciate them before they go forward.]

Conclusion

The small scale study reported in this paper has shown that in the two samples of book reviews examined, while there were similar mitigation devices used in both Japanese and English reviews when making criticisms, there were certain kinds of mitigation devices that were seldom used in English reviews. These included self-denigration, recasting problems as potential for future research in the field and attributing problems identified to future generation. They softened the impact of the criticisms by conveying humbleness. In addition, statements of future development or future tasks were used not only to redress the face threatening effect of criticism but also to create solidarity among academics as collaborators who share the reasonability of advancing the research field. Intergenerational links also appear to be important. The data also shows that the use of mitigation devices in criticisms showed that there were more elaborate means to maintain harmonious human relationships and more complex interplay between hierarchical social relationship in terms of age, seniority and authority in academia.

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Endnotes

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¹Hyland (2004) refers to such a category as “personal responsibility”.

Table 1

Distribution of Mitigation Devices for Criticisms in English and Japanese Book Reviews

Language	Type of mitigation devices					Total
	(a) praise-criticism	(b) hedging	(c) personal attribution	(d) other-attribution	(e) others	
English	35 (24.1%)	49 (33.8%)	15 (10.3%)	20 (13.8%)	26 (17.9%)	145 (99.9%)
Japanese	16 (14.1%)	46 (40.7 %)	8 (7.1 %)	6 (5.3 %)	37 (32.7%)	113 (99.9%)