

Politeness Strategies Responses to Invitation Refusals by Japanese College Students

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An experiment to analyze invitation refusals was conducted on Japanese College students. This was to examine aspects of face threatening acts identified by Brown and Levinson. Questionnaires were distributed to ask respondents' reactions to the situation when the inviter perceived the invitee's negative response to the invitation. Three variables were designed in the procedures such as gender difference (male vs. female), interaction (same sex vs. opposite sex), and relative power (student vs. professor). Three typical patterns were identified in the results ... persuasion, resignation, and care. The findings in the results of female students supported the views of negative politeness and face threatening acts identified by Brown and Levinson.

1. Introduction

Samovar and Porter (1994) suggest that communication happens whenever someone responds to the behavior of another person and attributes meaning to it. It is an intricate matrix of interacting social acts that occurs in a complex social environment that reflect the way people live and how they come to interact with each other in their world. According to Grice's observation (1967), communication intends to establish the shared background of mutual knowledge on which the inference of communicative

intention seems to rely. The social interaction between people with different linguistic cultural backgrounds, however, often brings misunderstanding and impedes mutual communication. A great deal of mismatch between what is said and what is implied, frequently influenced by the nature of social relationship across cultures, can be attributed to politeness.

Brown and Levinson (1978) propose that politeness is universal in language usage, correlated with assumptions about 'face'—the individual's self esteem. The notion of 'face' consists of two kinds of desires or 'face wants'—the desires to be unimpeded in one's actions (negative desire) and the desires to be appreciated and approved (positive face). Strategies used to avoid or minimize the face threatening acts (FTA) are described as politeness strategies (1978). This is a crucial area when two different cultures or subcultures encounter each other. The strategies of invitation, especially when the inviter perceives the invitee's negative reaction, might react to the frames of social interaction based on culture-specific dimensions, influenced by the FTA. This paper, focusing on gender differences, demonstrates the strategies Japanese college students believe they would employ when the person whom the students invite is reluctant to accept their offer.

2. Politeness Strategies

2.1. Positive Face and Negative Face

The concept of politeness has emerged in sociolinguistics as one of central interest. It is profoundly related to the assumptions of 'face'. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), politeness strategies have been categorized into three divisions: 'positive politeness' (the expression of solidarity), 'negative politeness' (the expression of restraint) and 'off-record

(avoidance of unequivocal impositions), influenced by social determinants such as social relationship between the speaker and addressee and potential offensiveness of the message content. Brown and Levinson define 'face' as basic wants, which every member knows every other person's desires. 'Face,' the public self-image, has two aspects: negative face and positive face. The former indicates the want of every member that his or her actions would not be unimpeded by other, i. e. the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction. Positive face indicates the want of every member that his or her wants would be desirable to at least some others i. e. the positive consistent self-image or 'personality'. It also includes the desire that this self-image would be appreciated, approved and liked by others. The acts that threaten the face (the FTA) can be potential offensiveness to impede mutual social interaction in various cultural dimensions. Acts that threaten negative face include, for example, directions or orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminders, threats, warnings, dares and speaking about topics that put some pressure on the hearer. Giving advice, which in Japan is often regarded as a polite action or kindness, however, can impede the hearer's desire to be free from others and cause a heavy burden to the people in other culture. Typical examples of acts that threaten positive face are expressions of ridicule, disapproval, criticism, contempt, insults or disagreements. Proper perceptions concerning the FTA should be cultivated to avoid or minimize friction in our social life.

2.2. Social Distance and Gender Differences

Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest the following sociological variables as the assessment of an FTA. i. The 'social distance' (D) of the speaker (S) and the hearer (H) (a symmetric relation) ii. The relative 'power' (P) of S

and H (an asymmetric relation) iii. The absolute ranking (R) of impositions in the particular culture.

If S is too polite, he or she may insult H as a result of S's assumption that H's D or P is greater than it actually is, e. g. by switching from the usual T (tu) pronoun to the use of the formal V (vous) as dual identity in French. On the other hand, however, if S is too familiar, S may insult H as a result of S's assumption that D or P is smaller than it actually is. For example, in a positive-politeness cultures where there is greater desire for positive-face satisfaction than negative-face satisfaction S interacts with H in negative-politeness cultures where there is greater desire for negative face satisfaction than positive-face satisfaction. The latter may be offended by the former's too familiar attitude. Though these factors are cultural-specific variables, there still remains some doubt as to whether these three variables — P, D, and R can be only potential elements that explain complicated social and interpersonal behaviors.

Another important variable that has the possibility of influencing the assessment of the FTA is gender differences. Some empirical experiments that attempt to describe communication styles in the gender differences are conducted in recent years. Lakoff (1975, 1977a, 1979) claims that women are more polite than men, using more tag questions, hesitation markers and 'trivializing' adjectives. His views, however, have been criticized as not being based on empirical research. Tannen (1984, 1986) focuses gender-related stylistic variation, demonstrating the differences in sub-cultural levels of country of ethnic heritage, class geographic region, age, and gender. Tannen (1994), however, warns that the source of women's powerlessness can not be attributed to such linguistic styles as indirectness, taciturnity, silence and tag questions that have been claimed in previous

experiments (1994). Though distinctive gender differences related to women's special social position have not been clearly proved yet, they can play some roles in the assessment of the social interaction.

2.3. The Strategies of Invitation

The invitation strategies across cultures are an intriguing topic from the viewpoints of the FTA theory in politeness strategies. If the invitee who is invited by the inviter seems unwilling to accept the inviter's offer, what strategies does the inviter employ next stage? How do the sociological variables determine the relationship?

The sociological variables in the assessment of the FTA indicates that countries that emphasize equality in the social life, such as the U. S. A., can demonstrate different assessments in social power (P), compared with countries that put importance on seniority system, such as Japan. Furthermore, gender differences might be an influential factor in the social interaction. In a country where women are still regarded as powerless and dominated such as Japan, there might be significant differences in employing invitation strategies, depending on the degree of social power.

As Szatrowski (1994) suggests, the distinctive features in the discourse of invitation between Japanese and English are careful or attentive utterances and persuasive utterances (1994). For the former he identifies providing reasons for refusal, explaining why the invitation is inconvenient and negative assessment. The latter include reasons for acceptance, advantageous information, and positive assessment. It is often observed in Japanese utterances that the inviter that invites the invitee is attentive to the invitee's negative reaction, attempting not to impede the invitee.

In my research, I intend to investigate the following two research questions relating to invitation strategies.

a. What kind of strategies do Japanese college students employ when they perceive a negative reaction to an invitation?

b. Are there any gender differences demonstrated in the results, depending on the interpersonal differences in social power (symmetric relations and asymmetric relations)?

3. Method

3.1. Subjects

The subjects consist of 128 college students (49 males, and 89 females) aged from 18 to 21 years old at a private university in Ehime Prefecture. They are freshmen, sophomores, and juniors majoring in business administration, economics, law and English literature. Majority is from Ehime Prefecture.

3.2. Procedures

The questionnaires, containing four questions regarding invitation were distributed to the subjects in three classes. The subjects were allowed to answer the questions (Refer to the appendix). In preparing the questionnaires, pre-questionnaires were prepared to determine which situations were the most appropriate for college students. The pre-questionnaires were completed by 60 students. There were two forms of questionnaires: one for the male students; and one for the female students. For the male students, the inviter who invites the invitee in each question is given a male name, while in the female students' questionnaires a female name is given to the inviter in each question. The questionnaires are comprised of four

questions depending on the social relationship. There are three variables in the design: sex (male vs. female), relationship between the inviter and the invitee (same sex vs. opposite sex), relationship between the inviter and the invitee (student vs. professor), making a total of eight combinations ($2 \times 2 \times 2$).

The respondents were asked to write how they would respond when the invitee seems unwilling to accept the inviter's invitation. The situation was decided on the most popular scenes selected from the previous survey conducted on other college students, i. e. asking the invitee to go to the restaurant together on Saturday night.

3.3. Results

Typical invitation patterns were identified from the respondents' answers regardless of the inviter's relationship to the invitee (same sex vs. opposite sex, student vs. professor). Three main patterns analyzed from the results were observed as typical strategies — a persuasion type, a resignation type, and a care type.

The persuasion type indicates patterns to eagerly persuade the invitee to go together, giving some advantageous reasons to the invitee. The resignation type indicates patterns in which the inviter gives up trying to go together immediately, without making any further comments. The care type indicates patterns expressing attentiveness to the invitee's circumstances, attempting to create a situation in which the invitee feels easily able to refuse the inviter's invitation.

Table 1 Typical Themes Identified in Male and Female Students

| Persuasion Patterns | Resignation Patterns | Care Patterns |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| Let's go together. It's really delicious. <u>Combination Styles</u> If you are free, let's go. Let's go together. But if you are busy, go next time (forget it.) <u>Suggestion Style</u> Do you know any other good restaurant that you like? | Oh, really. That's OK. Forget it. | If you are busy (if you don't feel like going), don't worry. If you are busy (if you don't feel like going), let's go next time. Let's go next time again. Let's go when you are free. |

Table 2 Percentage of Invitation Patterns by Male and Female Students

| | Persuasion | | | | Resignation | | | | Care | | | |
|-----------------|------------|----|----|----|-------------|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|
| | 1* | 2* | 3* | 4* | 1* | 2* | 3* | 4* | 1* | 2* | 3* | 4* |
| Male Students | 48 | 40 | 38 | 38 | 15 | 9 | 15 | 19 | 37 | 51 | 48 | 43 |
| Female Students | 32 | 47 | 23 | 29 | 8 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 60 | 52 | 75 | 69 |

Note: Interactions: 1* with a male club member
 2* with a female club member
 3* with a male professor
 4* with a female professor

Table 1 indicates typical themes identified in male and female students' responses. The themes of persuasion analyzed in the experiment are mainly categorized into two patterns. The respondents attempt to persuade the invitee to go to the restaurant by all means such as 'Let's go together' or emphasize advantageous reasons such as 'It's so delicious'. A noticeable feature is that this pattern also includes a combination of the resignation type and the care type (persuasion and resignation, persuasion and care) and leaves some options for the invitee to make a decision.

Therefore some answers lack in aggressive, persuasive tones that they possess in nature. In terms of persuasion patterns, the average percentage of the male students in four social interactions is slightly higher than that of the female students. It indicates the former preferred persuasion strategies more than the latter in general, though the difference between male and female students' responses was not great.

The typical example of the resignation pattern is 'Oh, that's OK'. The resignation type was by far the least popular strategy that the respondents employed especially for female students; there were almost none of this type. It may be because it sounds less polite and kind to the invitee as it lacks the inviter's expression of regret.

The ratio of care strategies is outstandingly high in the relationship between students and their professors. It demonstrates the highest percentage other than that between male students and a male club member. This highest ratio signifies it was the favorite strategy employed by the female students. The ideas analyzed here demonstrated similar expressions used as familiar phrases in Japanese daily life such as "if you don't mind", "if you are not busy", "if it is convenient", which do not convey any significant meanings in themselves except to smooth mutual interpersonal communication. The findings analyzed here produced interesting results.

Table 3 Percentage of Responses to Invitation Refusals from a Male Club Member

| | Persuasion | Resignation | Care | Total |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|--------|---------|
| Male Students | 48(22) | 15(7) | 37(17) | 100(46) |
| Female Students | 32(28) | 8(7) | 60(52) | 100(87) |

Note: The figures in the parenthesis indicate the number of college students.

Chi-square = 6.447, df = 2, p < .05

Table 3 indicates the results of a Chi-square test, demonstrating the significant differences in gender differences concerning interaction between a student and his or her male club member ($\chi^2=6.447$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$). Female students employed care strategies far more than Japanese male students in inviting their male club member. Male students employed persuasion strategies more than female students. For both groups, resignation strategies were employed least.

Table 4 Percentage of Responses to Invitation Refusals from a Female Club Member

| | Persuasion | Resignation | Care | Total |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|--------|---------|
| Male Students | 40(19) | 9(4) | 51(24) | 100(47) |
| Female Students | 47(41) | 1(1) | 52(46) | 100(88) |

Note: The figures in the parentheses indicate the number of college students.
Chi-square = 4.779, $df = 2$, $p < .10$

Table 4 indicates that the analysis of a Chi-square test did not show significant differences in gender differences concerning the interaction between a student and his or her female club member ($\chi^2 = 4.779$, $df = 2$, $p < .10$). Both groups analyzed here employed almost the same invitation patterns — i. e. half of the correspondents in each group employed care strategies, and less than half of them; persuasion strategies respectively. Very few respondents in each group employed resignation strategies.

Table 5 Percentage of Responses to Invitation Refusals from a Male Professor

| | Persuasion | Resignation | Care | Total |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|--------|---------|
| Male Students | 37(18) | 15(7) | 48(23) | 100(48) |
| Female Students | 23(20) | 2(2) | 75(66) | 100(88) |

Note: The figures of parenthesis indicate the number of college students.
Chi-square = 13.020, $df = 2$, $p < .01$

Table 5 indicates the results of Chi-square test demonstrating significant differences in gender differences regarding interaction between a student and his or her male professor ($x^2 = 13.020$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). An outstanding number of the female students employed care strategies, while less than half of the male students employed them. Though the ratio of care strategies is slightly higher than that of persuasion strategies, male students employed persuasion strategies more often than female students. Recognition strategies demonstrated the lowest ratio of all the three patterns.

Table 6 Percentage of Responses to Invitation Refusals from a Female Professor

| | Persuasion | Resignation | Care | Total |
|-----------------|------------|-------------|--------|---------|
| Male Students | 38(18) | 19(9) | 43(20) | 100(47) |
| Female Students | 29(25) | 2(2) | 69(60) | 100(87) |

Note: The figures in the parenthesis indicate the number of college students.

Chi-square = 16.910, $df = 2$, $p < .01$

Table 6 indicates the analysis of a Chi-square test, demonstrating the significant differences in gender differences concerning the interaction between a student and his or her female professor ($x^2 = 16.910$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). Most female students employed care strategies to a female professor, while less than half of the male students employed them. Here, again, male students employed persuasion strategies more than female students. The ratio of resignation pattern in male students is the highest of all the interactions, though it is still very low percentage.

4. Discussion

The findings provided by this experiment support the theory claimed by

Brown and Levinson and elaborate sociological interaction research about Japanese people's invitation strategies conducted by Szatrowski (1994). Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest that Japanese culture is mainly classified into the category of negative politeness which means to avoid face threatening acts, while Matsumoto (1988) opposes to this opinion, giving examples of positive politeness such as asking a favor of people when greeting. Three patterns were identified in the experiment — persuasion type, resignation type, and care type. The analysis that care strategies were more frequently employed than persuasion strategies in general indicates some aspects of negative politeness in Japanese culture. This tendency is found more obvious in female students than in male students.

The generalization of social structures is provided by culture-specific dimensions of social relationship assessed as D (distance) and P (power). In societies where status differences are emphasized, P is likely to be highly valued, while in the society where egalitarianism prevails, P is likely to be accorded low importance. The female students employed care strategies much more frequently while inviting professors than their club members. The strong reaction to high P analyzed in the results of female students confirms that Japanese society is a hierarchical society where status and position are emphasized. It is also speculated that women are likely to be keenly aware of this, respecting negative face. On the other hand, however, male college students, demonstrating little difference in P and considerably high ratio of persuasion strategies suggest that negative politeness strategies were not applied by male college students in the experiment.

In terms of the gender difference of the inviter, male students employed care strategies more to a female club member than to a male club member, while they demonstrated little difference between male and female profes-

sors. It can be induced that female college students are only likely be aware of both gender differences and power, while male college students are likely be aware of gender differences in symmetric relations.

5. Conclusion

The results analyzed in the Japanese college students identified three typical types of invitation strategies — persuasion, resignation, and care. The general distinctive feature of Japanese college students found in both persuasion and care patterns is a care style which is attentive to the invitee's negative response, attempting to respect the invitee's negative face. The fact that extremely low ratio in resignation pattern in both male and female respondents supports the finding here. It is especially obvious in female respondents who indicated high P in the care pattern. As Brown and Levinson suggest, it may implicate that Japanese society is a negative politeness culture in which negative face is avoided or minimized so far as responses to invitation refusals are concerned. The results of male respondents, however, did not indicate significant differences in P. It is premature for this to attribute the reason for this to the social matrix that Japanese women are more powerless than men in social asymmetry, power and authority.

More extensive multi-dimensional research should be conducted on other age-group to elaborate the findings. I would like to recruit respondents from an English-speaking country to compare two sociolinguistic interaction in the future perspective. This would enable true cross-cultural comparisons to be made, based on empirical data rather than assumptions about other cultures.

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Appendix

アンケート

男 学部 () 年齢 ()

例1) 山口君は、土曜日の午後、サークル仲間の木村君をおいしいと評判のお店と一緒に食べに行くように誘いました。しかし山口君は、あまり気乗りしない様子です。

質問

山口君は、気の乗らない木村君に対してどういう言葉を続けると思われますか。自分が山口君になった気持ちで具体的に書いてください。

例2) 町田君は、土曜日の午後、サークル仲間の山田みゆきさんを、おいしいと評判のお店と一緒に食べに行くように誘いました。しかしみゆきさんは、あまり気乗りしない様子です。

質問

町田君は、気の乗らないみゆきさんに対して、どういう言葉を続けると思われますか。自分が町田君になった気持ちで具体的に書いてください。

例3) 佐々木君は、ゼミの山形健太郎教授を、おいしいと評判のお店と一緒に食べに行きませんかと誘いました。しかし山形教授はあまり気乗りしない様子です。

質問

佐々木君は、気の乗らない山形教授に対して、どういう言葉を続けると思われますか。自分が佐々木君になった気持ちで具体的に書いてください。

例4) 中田くんは、ゼミの光田裕子教授を、おいしいと評判のお店と一緒に食べに行きませんかと誘いました。しかし光田教授は、あまり気乗りしない様子です。

質問

中田君は、気の乗らない光田教授に対してどういう言葉を続けると思われますか。自分が中田君になった気持ちで具体的に書いてください。

アンケート

女 学部 () 年齢 ()

例1) 佐伯えりさんは、土曜日の午後、サークル仲間の安田しのおさんを、おいしいと評判のお店と一緒に食べに行くように誘いました。しかし安田さんは、あまり気乗りしない様子です。

質問

佐伯さんは、あまり気乗りのしない安田さんに対してどういう言葉を続けると思えますか。自分が佐伯さんになった気持ちで具体的に書いてください。

例2) 西村和子さんは、土曜日の午後、サークル仲間の富田順一君を、おいしいと評判のお店と一緒に食べに行くように誘いました。しかし富田君は、あまり気乗りしない様子です。

質問

西村さんは、あまり気乗りしない富田君に対してどういう言葉を続けると思えますか。具体的に書いてください。

例3) 木村あやこさんは、土曜日の午後、ゼミの先生中川太郎教授を、おいしいと評判のお店と一緒に食べに行きませんかと誘いました。しかし中川教授はあまり気乗りしない様子です。

質問

木村さんは、あまり気乗りのしない中川教授に対してどういう言葉を続けると思えますか。具体的に書いてください。

例4) 中村あゆみさんは、土曜日の午後、ゼミの先生渡部慶子教授を、おいしいと評判のお店と一緒に食べに行きませんかと誘いました。しかし渡部教授は、あまり気乗りしない様子です。

質問

中村さんは、あまり気の乗らない渡部教授に対してどういう言葉を続けると思えますか。自分が中村さんになったつもりで具体的に書いて下さい。

Questionnaires

(English Version)

For Male Department () Age ()

1. On Saturday afternoon, Richard asked his club member, Tom, to go to the restaurant that is famous for its delicious food. Tom, however, seems unwilling to go out.

Question :

Tom seems unwilling to or can not accept Richard's invitation. How would you respond to this situation, if you were Richard? Write your response.

2. On Saturday afternoon, Jon asked his club member, Mary, to go to the restaurant that is famous for its delicious food. Mary, however, seems unwilling to go out.

Question :

Mary seems unwilling to or can not accept Jon's invitation. How would you respond to this situation, if you were Jon? Write your response, as if you were Jon.

3. On Saturday afternoon, Jim asked his academic adviser, Prof. Ronald Davis, to go to the restaurant that is famous for its delicious food. Prof. Davis, however, seems unwilling to go out.

Question :

Prof. Davis seems unwilling to or can not accept Jim's invitation. How would you respond to this situation, if you were Jim? Write your response.

4. On Saturday afternoon, Simon asked his academic advisor, Prof. Susan Brown, to go to the restaurant that is famous for its delicious food. Prof. Brown, however, seems unwilling to go out.

Question :

Prof. Brown seems unwilling to, or cannot accept Simon's invitation. How would you respond to this situation, if you were Simon? Write your response.

Questionnaires

For Female Department () Age ()

1. On Saturday afternoon Ann asked her club member, Elizabeth, to go to the restaurant that is famous for its delicious food. Elizabeth, however, seems unwilling to go out.

Question :

Elizabeth seems unwilling to or can not accept Ann's invitation. How would you respond to this situation, if you were Ann? Write your response.

2. On Saturday night Julia asked her club member, Sheldon, to go to the restaurant that is famous for its delicious food. Sheldon, however, seems unwilling to go out.

Question :

Sheldon seems unwilling to or can not accept Julia's invitation. How would you respond to this situation, if you were Julia? Write your response.

3. On Saturday afternoon, Linda asked her academic advisor Prof. Martin Garner to go to the restaurant that is famous for serving delicious food. Prof. Garner, however, seems unwilling to go out.

Question :

Prof. Garner seems unwilling to or can not accept Linda's invitation. How do you respond, if you were Linda? Write your response.

4. On Saturday afternoon Rebecca asked her academic advisor, Prof. Sara Anderson, to go to the restaurant that is famous for its delicious food. Prof. Anderson, however, seems unwilling to go out.

Question :

Prof. Anderson seems unwilling to or can not accept Rebecca's invitation. How would you respond to this situation, if you were Rebecca? Write your response.