

# Strategies and Sources of Negative Politeness

Face-saving devices used to facilitate acceptance  
of offers in Japanese

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## Abstract

This is an analysis of three interactions in Japanese between native Japanese speakers and an adult native English speaker. Each situation consists of an offer made by the Japanese addresser to the foreign addressee.

The addresser attempts to cancel the anticipated debt that is inherent in accepting an offer through the use of negative politeness strategies. These interactions are first analysed in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of politeness, and then in terms of alternative frameworks of politeness proposed by Matsumoto (1988, 1989) and Ide (1989).

## Introduction

The focus of this study is a style of discourse that is common in the Japanese language but possibly uncommon or unlikely in the English language. The politeness strategies that characterize this style of discourse conform to those argued to be universal by Brown and Levinson (1987), but the motivation underlying the use of these strategies may not necessarily do so. The three situations which will be described took place in Japan and consisted of interactions in Japanese between

elderly / middle-aged Japanese people and an adult native English speaker. All interactions concern offers, which have the potential to threaten the face of both addresser and addressee (Brown and Levinson: 1987: 76). First there is a description of three situations in which an offer is made which would typically be refused in Japanese culture. The addresser, being aware of the difficulty of acceptance of the offer but aware of its attractiveness, attempts to render the offer difficult to refuse by cancelling the debt associated with such an offer. The addresser, recognising this difficulty, urges the addressee to accept, implying that a refusal would be inappropriate or unnecessary.

The interactions are first analysed in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. It could be suggested that the behaviour of the addresser in Situations One to Three below is designed to help the addressee maintain "face". Face is defined by Brown and Levinson as "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (1987: 61). Brown and Levinson propose a "Model Person" (MP), a "wilful fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties- rationality and face" (1987: 58). This MP is characterised as having two distinct needs: freedom from imposition and the need for approval. The MP is rational in that he / she chooses the strategy to satisfy his / her wants. Certain speech acts essentially threaten face, that is, conflict with the need to satisfy the face wants of one or both interlocutors. These are known as Face Threatening Acts (FTA's).

The motivation for these politeness strategies is then analysed in terms of explanations provided by both Matsumoto (1988, 1989) and Ide (1989) of the importance of knowing one's place in the social hierarchy in Japan. Matsumoto stresses Japanese politeness strategies are based on an "acknowledgement of interdependence" (1988: 410) rather than preserving face. Similarly Ide (1989)

describes the “paternal conventions in Japanese society where the role of the superior is to care for the inferior, not vice-versa” (1989: 246). Importantly, Ide argues that in Japanese society one’s position in the hierarchy rather than face governs the interaction. Accordingly, both Matsumoto (1988, 1989) and Ide (1989) attribute deference in Japanese society to an acknowledgment of the social context.

### The Three Situations

#### *Situation One*

A group of six women are sitting on a train delivering newspapers to various stations to be collected by arrangement. One worker has prepared a special drink for her co-workers and a supply of disposable cups. A foreigner comes and sits in their midst, the train being almost full. After five minutes have elapsed one of the women pours a drink for each of her co-workers. After checking that the others have received a drink the co-workers accept with some hesitation and profuse thanks. The provider of the drinks then offers the foreigner a drink as well. The foreigner declines, unwilling to accept a favour from a stranger, and in accordance with Japanese culture, unwilling to accept a favour which she could not repay. The provider of the drinks then urges her to accept it, asking,

*kirai desu ka*

(lit) ‘Do you dislike it?’

The foreigner feels too uncomfortable to refuse and thus obliged to accept.

#### *Situation Two*

In Japan a cash gift is sometimes given to people about to embark on an overseas holiday. It is customary to buy a souvenir for the giver of the cash gift of

about one third of the value of the cash gift.

An elderly woman wants to advance a cash gift to a foreign couple about to embark on a European holiday. The wife is the tutor of the elderly woman's grandchild. The wife initially refuses the gift, feeling uncomfortable receiving a large sum of money and being clearly unfamiliar with this practice in Western culture. The elderly woman, recognising the indebtedness she could be seen to be imposing, presses the couple to accept the gift, saying,

*shitsurei desu ga nihon dewa ko shimasu.*

(lit) 'It is rude but we do this in Japan.'

'I know it is very rude to offer a cash gift in your country, but in Japan it is customary to give money in this situation'

thus trying to relieve the couple of the obligation to refuse.

### *Situation Three*

A pregnant woman is trying to carry a young child, a stroller and luggage up a flight of stairs on a railway station, escalators and lifts being non-existent. An elderly Japanese man helps the woman carry her effects up the stairs, and disappears immediately afterwards, allowing no time to acknowledge the woman's gratitude.

## **Japan : A Debt-Sensitive Culture**

Japan is sometimes classified as a typically debt-sensitive culture, particularly in contrast to English speaking cultures (Brown and Levinson: 1987: 247). Coulmas refers to this as "an ethics of indebtedness" (1981: 89), and asserts that even small favours incur debts (1981: 88). In her discussion of gift giving in Japanese society, Benedict argues,

"The fact that the recipient will be greatly indebted to him acts, not to make

any man anxious to avail himself of this advantage to himself but to make him very chary of helping" (1946 : 104-105).

The situations described above could be considered to typically occur in Japan and not English-speaking cultures for two reasons. Firstly, in English speaking cultures one does not generally make offers which indebt others to the degree described in Situations One and Two ; one does not typically offer a drink to a stranger in a train (nor does it generally occur between Japanese natives ; it may have occurred because the addressee was a foreigner), nor does one offer a large sum of spending money to friends departing on an overseas trip. Secondly the recipient of a favour or gift in an English speaking culture does not necessarily feel a comparable sense of indebtedness, thus obviating the addresser of the need to relieve them of it. Thus in an English speaking culture, in Situation Three, the addresser would typically acknowledge the gratitude without necessarily feeling such a strong need to relieve the addressee of a sense of indebtedness. In Japan, however, Doi (1985 : 91) argues that an act of kindness received from a stranger can be experienced as a burden ; this would account for the elderly man's hasty departure.

Brown and Levinson (1987) argue, "to accept an offer is an FTA best minimised by allowing oneself to be cajoled into it" (1987 : 233). Thus in Situations One and Two acceptance of the offer could be considered intrinsically face-threatening, not just because the encounter took place in a debt sensitive culture such as Japan. However in Japanese culture there is perhaps a heavier emphasis on the effort provided by the addressee than in English-speaking cultures. Coulmas observes,

"The Japanese conception of gifts and favors focuses on the trouble they have caused the benefactor rather than the aspects which are pleasing to the recipient" (1981 : 83).

Accordingly, and in accordance with Benedict's (1946) observations, what is perhaps distinctive about the above examples is that an offer is being treated by the addresser as a potential imposition. This is a reflection of the nature of providing favours in Japanese culture, that is, the commonly perceived necessity of reciprocity and the focus on what form this should take.

Coulmas identifies two formulae used in Japanese to respond to apologies and thanks, "recognising the object of gratitude or regret and relieving the interlocutor of its burden, or, alternatively, denying the existence of such an object or playing it down" (1981: 77). The use of such formulae is not necessarily restricted to responding to apologies and thanks. Here it is used to anticipate the gratitude and particularly the apology associated with accepting offers in Japanese. These formulae are also evidenced by the addresser in the above offers. The addresser, anticipating the gratitude of the addressee, attempts to relieve the addressee of the burden of gratitude. In Situations One and Two the addresser relieves the addressee of this burden through verbal strategies; in Situation Three the addresser effectively denies the necessity of expressing gratitude by immediately disappearing.

### **Analysis According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Framework**

Brown and Levinson (1987) identify two means of minimising threats to face, positive and negative politeness. The former is designed to emphasise the common ground between addresser and addressee and thus is alternatively labelled by Scollon and Scollon (1983) as "solidarity politeness"; the latter is designed to respect the addressee's individuality and autonomy and Scollon and Scollon label this "deference politeness". The above examples could be considered to be examples of negative or deference politeness. The use of a means of escape or providing an "out" on the part of the addressee take the form of pessimism in Situation One,

apology and generalisation in Situation Two and a sudden absence or self-effacement in Situation Three. The addresser is endeavouring to relieve the sense of indebtedness felt by the addressee, in a situation in which the addressee would normally and reasonably be expected to feel indebted.

The offers in Situations One to Three conform to Brown and Levinson's (1987) criteria for deference politeness in some ways but not in others. Ways in which they do conform are: a) minimising the threat to the addressee in all three situations, b) apologising in Situation Two, c) pessimism in Situation One, and stating the FTA as a general rule in Situation Two. Ways in which they diverge from Brown and Levinson's criteria for deference politeness are as follows: a) in none of the situations is a minimal assumption about the addressee's wants being made; in each of the situations it is assumed that the addressee would benefit from the favour, and b) the addressee is not necessarily or genuinely given the option not to act; the pessimism and / or apology expressed in the offer may have the contrary effect of compelling the addressee to accept it. Alternatively this could be interpreted in Brown and Levinson's terms as a "conventional out", an attempt to "pretend to offer an escape route without really doing so, thereby indicating that he has the other person's face wants in mind" (1987: 72).

A sense of indebtedness, which could not be repaid, could be considered a loss of face in Japanese society and thus the effort of the addresser to relieve the burden of the addressee's indebtedness could be considered an attempt to maintain the addressee's face. The elimination of the threat to the addressee's face could be considered in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms to be "redressive action" and takes the form of negative politeness. In Situation One the addressee is offered an "out"; a means of refusing the offer in suggesting that the addressee will probably not like what is being offered, but which conversely compels the addressee to accept the offer. The native English-speaking addressee was initially unaware that this

could have the illocutionary force of an offer. However this utterance *kirai desu ka* ('Do you dislike it?') has parallels in textbook examples of sentences used for making offers, such as the one quoted by Matsumoto :

*Okuti ni awanai kamosiremasen ga ohitotu dozo.*

(lit) 'This may not suit your palate, but please accept just one'

(1988 : 412).

The expression in Situation Two does not have the indirectness and formality of this textbook expression. The textbook expression contains the honorific *o* before *kuti* (mouth), and *hitotsu* (one), the indirect expression *kamosiremasen* (may), and the polite expression used for offering, *dozo*. The common feature, however, is that both expressions suggest the addressee might not like what is being offered, and thus provide an "out".

In Situation Two the offer is generalised by being represented as normal practice in Japanese culture, which serves to "distance S and H from the act" (Brown and Levinson : 1987 : 70). In Situation Three the sudden deliberate withdrawal of the addressee could be considered as a form of self-effacement, by allowing the addressee "to maintain claims of territory and self-determination" (ibid).

The speech act of an offer is potentially threatening to both addresser and addressee (Brown and Levinson : 1987 : 76). In Situations One and Two the addresser is providing the addressee with the opportunity to redress the former's face wants. The addressee is being pressed to save the face of the addresser by accepting the offer, thus denying that what is being offered is unacceptable.

Brown and Levinson define the sociological variables affecting the FTA as "social distance" (D), "relative power" (P) and "absolute ranking of impositions" (R) (1987 : 74). In each of the above situations D features significantly in the interaction : the inequality of the addresser and addressee in all three situations is



indicative of an asymmetrical relationship which means that deferential rather than solidarity politeness is used. The distance rather than the common ground between the addresser and the addressee is emphasised in all situations because of the significant age difference between the addresser and addressee, and differing nationalities of the addresser and addressee in a culture in which foreigners constitute less than 1 % of the population. Another important factor affecting D is that the addresser and addressee are strangers to each other in Situations One and Three.

The difference of P in Situations One and Three is attributable to the differing ages and nationalities of the addresser and addresser but limited in that the interactants are strangers to one another. However P is probably of considerable importance in Situation Two because of the relationship between the addresser and addressee ; the assessment of P is complex because addresser and addressee possess P of a different order. Reasons for which the addresser possess P are as follows : the addressee is the tutor of the addresser's granddaughter and the addresser is a pivotal member of the addressee's social network, and thus the addresser possesses both "material" and "metaphysical" control over the addressee (Brown and Levinson : 1987 : 77). The addresser is of advanced age in a society in which this confers status, and is a native of the country. The addressee possesses P due to her position as a tutor of the addresser's grandchild in a culture in which teachers are accorded great respect, and belonging to a respected ethnic minority.

The ranking of the imposition of the debt incurred in Situations One and Three is negligible. Situation Three incurs the least amount of debt ; helping someone in need could possibly be interpreted as an obligation rather than a favour. This could be classified in Brown and Levinson's terms as "free goods, those things and services (like a match, or telling the time, or giving directions) which all members of the public may reasonably demand from one another" (1987 : 80). The ranking of the imposition of debt imposed in Situation Two is considerable and thus requires

the addressee to repay the debt in the culturally appropriate form despite the efforts of the addresser to minimise the imposition.

Brown and Levinson (1987) describe the correlation between the politeness strategy chosen by the addresser and the weight of the imposition; a high weighting of D, P and R require minimisation of the FTA. Accordingly in the above situations there are varying attempts to minimise the FTA according to the perceived weight of the imposition. In Situation Three, in which the addresser offers help to an addressee who is in clear need, the FTA is minimised by the disappearance of the addresser, a minimal act that reflects the minimal nature of the FTA. In Situation One in which a drink is offered to a stranger, the addresser's attempts to minimise the FTA, more than perhaps would be perceived as necessary in Western society, are affected through the use of pessimism. In Situation Two, in which a substantial amount of money is offered to a friend, a greater attempt is made to minimise the FTA with the use of two strategies: the apology and the generalisation.

### **Analysis According to Matsumoto's (1988, 1989) and Ide's (1989) Frameworks**

Alternative interpretations of politeness phenomena to Brown and Levinson (1987) are offered by Ide (1989) and Matsumoto (1988, 1989). Ide and Matsumoto suggest that Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness fails to adequately account for politeness phenomena in Japanese. Rather, recognition of the status differences by the interlocutors results in the use of socio-pragmatically correct forms. According to Ide and Matsumoto, sensitivity to the context rather than the desire not to impose is the key factor in interactions in Japanese.

Ide (1989) argues that Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of politeness is tainted with Western ethnocentrism: "Linguistic politeness seen through a non-Western eye is the phenomenon associated with proper behaviour in a social

organization by complying with the social conventions" (Ide : 1989 : 243). Ide (1989 : 241) argues that the notion of face is a Western concept, and reflects the prominence of the individual in Western society. In Japanese society group membership, rather than the Western notion of face, is the foundation of interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Ide contests Brown and Levinson's treatment of honorifics in Japanese as negative politeness strategies. Ide insists that rather than expressing deference, the use of honorifics is obligatory, and expresses recognition of the status differences between the interlocutors. Ide identifies two categories of the polite use of language, discernment and volition. Discernment consists of the use of obligatory formal forms, such as honorifics, pronouns, address terms, speech levels and speech formulae (Ide : 1989 : 232). Volition consists of verbal strategies, such as the negative politeness strategies outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987). Ide argues that Brown and Levinson base their argument on volition and neglect discernment.

Matsumoto (1988) argues that social ranking, knowing one's place in the hierarchy, is more important than preserving individual territory. In fact Matsumoto asserts that the desire to be free from imposition implied by Brown and Levinson's Model Person is "alien to Japanese culture" (1988 : 405).

Moreover Matsumoto argues that in Japanese an imposition can sometimes be a means of expressing deference. To illustrate this Matsumoto presents a standard speech formula, which explicitly expresses the desire for dependence and thus imposition :

*'doozo yorosiku onegaisimasu*

(lit.) 'I ask you to please treat me well / take care of me'

(Matsumoto : 1988 : 409).

Matsumoto argues that in Japan the use of politeness strategies is an expression of interdependence, that is, the unequal relationship of the dependence of juniors

upon seniors.

Next I will discuss how the three situations above conform to Ide and Matsumoto's framework of politeness in Japanese, and contrast this with ways in which they conform to Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of negative politeness. In Ide's (1989) terms the three situations above may be identified as belonging to the category of volition rather than discernment. Thus volition, or the verbal strategies of negative politeness outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987) is evidenced in all three situations. None of the three situations involves the use of honorifics, speech levels or speech formulae; they all consist of spontaneous exchanges rather than obligatory modes of behaviour demanded by the social context. However, the ways in which the debts have been cancelled in these three situations is in fact a means of saving the addressee's face, of giving the addressee freedom from obligation, and preserving the addressee's autonomy.

The acknowledgement of dependence and the waiving of the need to repay the favour in all three situations are indicative of an unequal relationship. The appropriate response of the addressee is thus to acknowledge the difference in position and accept the dependent position and the favourable treatment. Matsumoto states "freedom from imposition is far less potent as a dynamic of politeness than is preservation of the social ranking" (1988: 413). In each of the situations there is evidence of difference in P: the addressers are considerably older than the addressee, and the addressers are natives of Japan and the addressee a foreigner. Thus in Japanese culture in two important ways the addresser would be considered to be senior in rank to the address and thus possess more P than the addressee.

The desire not to impose on others is apparent in these three interactions, and in this sense the interactions do indeed conform to Brown and Levinson's framework of negative politeness. This suggests that individual territory and self-determination

are in fact sometimes important in the Japanese politeness framework. Thus Brown and Levinson's theory at least partially accounts for negative politeness phenomena in Japanese.

Matsumoto's (1988) position is somewhat ambivalent. Although Matsumoto initially asserts that the desire to be free from imposition is alien to Japanese culture (1988: 405), she later assumes a more moderate stance, arguing that sensitivity to the maintenance of the social ranking is more important than freedom from imposition (1988: 413, 421). Matsumoto's latter position does not deny that freedom from imposition is a factor in Japanese politeness strategies, but emphasises that maintenance of the social ranking is much more important. The interactions in the three situations above support the latter of Matsumoto's assertions. Contrary to Matsumoto's former assertion, the three situations above do not suggest that freedom from imposition is alien to the Japanese conception of politeness. However it may certainly be the case as Matsumoto later asserts that the dynamic of the maintenance of the social hierarchy is more significant than freedom from imposition. The insights provided by Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) thus help clarify the motivations underlying the use of negative politeness strategies in these three situations.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As Brown and Levinson (1987: 247) acknowledge, the weight of impositions varies cross-culturally. Incurring a debt in Japanese arguably has a different significance from incurring a debt in other languages. The redress used to disclaim the addressee's indebtedness when making an offer, outlined by Brown and Levinson, is clearly evidenced in the three situations above. However the motivation behind these negative politeness strategies is not simply that of preserving

the addressee's face. These strategies serve the additional function of preserving the status quo by reaffirming the positions of the addresser and addressee. In each of these situations a debt is incurred but the need to repay the debt is relieved. Instead of repaying the debt, the expected response is an acknowledgement of the social context, of the seniority of the addressee, and one's dependence upon one's seniors.

Some aspects of the above situations could be considered universal because the negative politeness strategies such as pessimism, apology, generalisation and self-effacement conform to those identified in other cultures. What may be particular to Japanese culture are the bases for these strategies; rather than simply being a need to minimise the imposition these strategies could also be an indication of the distribution of P in the society. It is clearly possible to identify the existence of universal strategies but more difficult to identify universal underlying sources.

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