

# The Applicability of Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness to Japanese: A Review of the English Literature

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## ABSTRACT

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1978, 1987) is a detailed and large scale work that endeavors to explain and predict polite language behavior in all languages and cultures. It is therefore a theory with great importance not only for pragmatics, but also for other areas of language study such as cross-cultural understanding, communication and language education. It has, inevitably, been the subject of considerable controversy amongst international scholars. A significant part of this debate has been concerned with the theory's capacity to explain politeness in Japanese. Its notions of face, negative politeness and deference have been particularly problematic for several scholars. The "meta-pragmatics" of the academic discourse has even received attention, with regard to socio-historical assumptions about communication and biased terminology. This paper reviews some key examples of the relevant literature that has been published in English, and attempts to identify and summarize the most salient issues, proposed solutions, and alternative frameworks.

## KEY WORDS

face, face-threatening acts, Grice's Maxims, honorifics, Japanese, politeness

## 1. Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1978, 1987) has been very influential in pragmatics and has provoked sustained international debate about universals in politeness and perspectives from a wide range of specific cultures. Some contributors to this debate have supported the theory (e.g., Pizziconi, 2003; Fukada and Asato, 2004) while others have either rejected it (e.g., Matsumoto, 1988, 1989) or accepted parts of it and adapted other parts (e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2000). The theory claims to be applicable to all languages, and therefore much of the debate has been concerned with how universal it can really be, or whether Brown and Levinson failed to take certain kinds of cultures into account. A substantial amount has been written about how well the theory applies to the Japanese language. This paper aims to review some of the relevant literature that has specifically

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concerned this theory and the Japanese language. After outlining the theory, the paper will discuss aspects and implications of it with respect to Japanese, such as the notions of face and intrinsically face-threatening acts, politeness strategies and the Japanese honorific system.

First, let us remind ourselves of the key points in Brown and Levinson's theory. Perhaps the most fundamental component is the abstract notion of a *Model Person* (MP), "a willful speaker of a natural language" (1987:58), who possesses two further fundamental abstract concepts: rationality and *face*, the latter derived from Goffman (1967). Thus all individuals in society are presumably considered to be varied and complexified realizations of the MP. The MP in fact has both positive face and negative face. Positive face concerns the desire by the MP to be associated with, be approved of and be supported by other people when appropriate. Negative face concerns the MP's desire, when appropriate, to be free from impositions, social or material debts or obligations. MPs can seek to achieve these ends through making rational choices, but all MPs have a mutual dependency for satisfying each others' face. Speech acts, such as requests, apologies, complaints, compliments, etc., which occur in conversation between MPs are analyzed in terms of their effects on the MPs' respective face. A key point of the theory is that some of these acts are "face-threatening acts" (FTAs, 1987:60). When an MP finds him/herself in a situation where an FTA is necessary, they use their rationality to assess the situation and then decide whether or not or how they will execute the FTA. This assessment involves the speaker (S) balancing their want for maximum efficiency of execution with S's want to preserve the hearer's (H's) or S's face to any degree. If the latter is greater, then S will want to minimize the face threat of the FTA. This minimalization is sought through choosing from a number of strategies of varying risk of threat to face. MPs will not choose a strategy less risky than necessary. The weightiness of an FTA is calculated as follows:

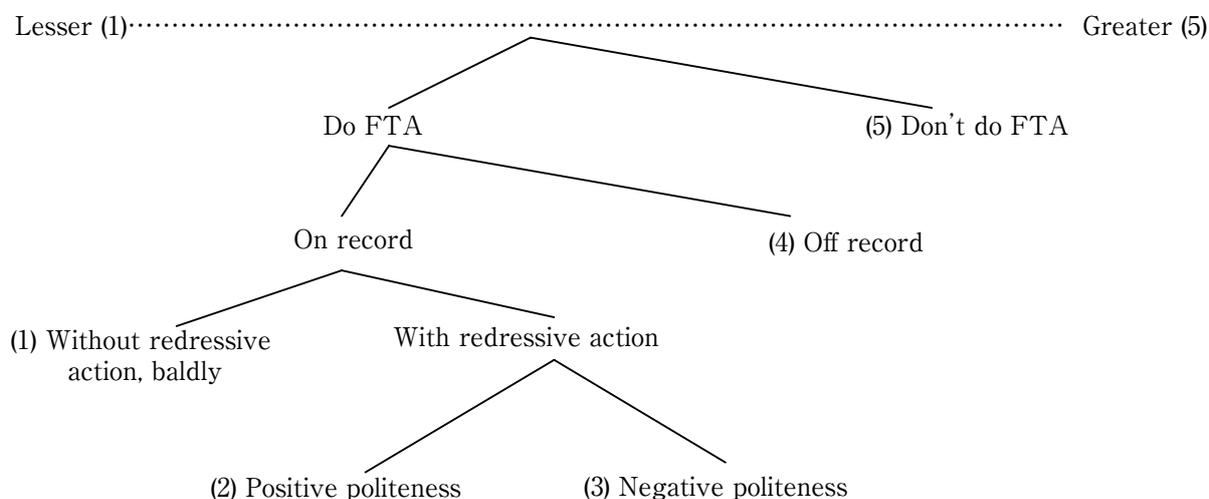
$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x \quad (\text{Brown and Levinson, 1987: 76})$$

where  $W_x$  is the weightiness of the FTA<sub>x</sub>,  $D(S, H)$  is the social distance between S and H,  $P(H, S)$  is the power that H has over S, and  $R_x$  is the degree to which the FTA is rated as an imposition in the given culture in which S and H are situated.

Figure 1 (based on Brown and Levinson, 1987:60) shows the strategies numbered according to the increasing weightiness of the FTA; resulting in the selection of strategies with decreasing perceived threat to face. In the event that a speech act has no or very little weightiness, it can be produced baldly, on record, with no redressive action. This would then follow Grice's Maxims for achieving maximally efficient communication; namely, Quality (Be non-spurious), Quantity (Don't say more or less than is required), Relevance, and Manner (Be perspicuous) (Grice, 1975). A weightier FTA, however, would justify deviating from

**Figure 1: Selection of politeness super-strategies**

Speaker's estimation of the weightiness  $W_x$  of the FTA $_x$ , (1-5):



these Maxims in order to satisfy face-wants. Positive politeness is redressive action designed to save positive face, and negative politeness similarly concerns negative face. An even weightier FTA would justify doing the FTA off-record, through conversational implicatures such as hints. Each super-strategy, as shown in Figure 1, consists of a number of more specific strategies. This is the basic model, upon which Brown and Levinson expand and elaborate into a number of realizations using their own data from the Tamil of South India, the Tzeltal spoken by Mayan Indians in Chiapas, Mexico, and the English of the USA and England, supplemented by examples from other cultures.

## 2. Universality and Cross-cultural Variation

Since the theory aims for universality, much literature related to it has scrutinized its cross-cultural applicability to languages such as Japanese. Brown and Levinson (1987) acknowledged these concerns, but nevertheless defended the theory, while positing five dimensions of cross-cultural variation that would be consistent with their model:

- (i) The general level of  $W_x$  in a culture, as determined by the sum of P, D, R values.
- (ii) The extent to which all acts are FTAs, and the particular kinds of acts that are FTAs in a culture.
- (iii) The cultural composition of  $W_x$ : the varying values (and thus importance) attached to P, D, and  $R_x$ , and the different sources for their assessment.
- (iv) Different modes of assignment of members to the sets of persons whom an actor wants to pay him positive face, and the extent to which those sets are extended: are the relevant persons a highly limited and restricted class, or are they (or some of them) an extensive set?
- (v) The nature and distribution of strategies over the most prominent dyadic relations in

a particular society: are they distributed symmetrically? asymmetrically? in particular configurations?

Brown and Levinson (1987:244)

These variables are primarily concerned with how the mechanics of the model respond to cultural variants such as D, P, and R values, relative prevalence of positive face and weightings of preference for particular strategies. However, Brown and Levinson (1987) still insist on the universality of the following: the two types of face and their specific properties; Grice's Maxims as fundamentals (super-strategy 1), the violation of which constitutes the derivative super-strategies (2) to (4); and the consistent rank ordering of super-strategies with regard to risk of threatening face. They also maintain that honorific systems in languages such as Japanese are basically manifestations of negative politeness, categorizing honorific markers as a deference strategy within this super-strategy. The rest of this paper will review some of the discussions regarding these points.

### 3. The Notions of Face and the MP

Brown and Levinson's notion of face has come under close scrutiny with regard to its conceptual origins and its application to politeness. Although they claim that their notion of face is derived from Goffman (1967), they also state that it is based on the English folk term, which has emotional investment and which interactants have mutual knowledge of. Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) argued that Brown and Levinson's concept of face is not faithful to Goffman's, which was actually inspired by the Chinese notion. The mention of the English folk term seems to have raised suspicions of culturally-bound assumptions being used as a basis for a supposedly universal theory, especially given that the theory has been proposed by British scholars. Brown and Levinson's interpretation's emphasis on the individual's selfish desires has been widely criticized (e.g., Mey, 2001; Pizziconi, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2000; Ide, 1989; and Matsumoto, 1988, 1989). Indeed, one could be forgiven for thinking that the MP posited in this model is essentially a thoroughly selfish and manipulative Machiavellian. Werkhofer (1992) argued that this model seems to presuppose that an antagonism between S and H is necessary for politeness to take place. In contrast, Goffman stated that face consists of "Not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another" (1967: 2).

While criticisms of over-emphasis may be justified, it is also possible that some of these critics have focused excessively on certain points taken out of context from Brown and Levinson's model, while neglecting other important parts of their supporting argument. Brown and Levinson (1987) actually argued for a shift in sociolinguistics from speaker-identity to dyadic patterns of verbal interaction in the expression of social relationships. Nevertheless, their repeated insistence on the universality of positive and negative face perhaps demonstrate Euro-centric (or Anglo-centric) assumptions underlying the theory. Ide

(1989) and Matsumoto (1988, 1989) asserted that the very notions of individual territory and freedom from imposition, as constituents of negative face, are alien to Japanese culture, where an individual's main concern is the position in relation to the others in the group, and that loss of face is associated with the perception by others that one has not comprehended and acknowledged the structure and hierarchy of the group. This could include failure to acknowledge his/her dependence on the others.

Thus the Western notions of individual freedom and autonomy may not be so emphasized in Japanese culture. Tanaka, Spencer-Oatey and Cray (2000) also questioned the notion of rationality of the individual. Their study measured English and Japanese responses to situations that might call for an apology, and based on their findings, argued that feelings of responsibility, emotional reactions to unexpected behavior, stereotypes and cultural differences are likely to influence an individual's apology just as much as rational thinking.

#### 4. Face-threatening Acts

Brown and Levinson's notion of face is not only controversial as a description of fundamental aspects of society, but also in that it has crucial implications for what kinds of speech act can be considered to be face-threatening acts. A face-threatening act is defined by its potential threat to the constituent properties of either positive or negative face. Therefore, a speech act such as a request is considered to be intrinsically face-threatening because it imposes on H's freedom from imposition. On the other hand, an utterance which simply stated a mundane fact of no illocutionary or perlocutionary force would not threaten either positive or negative face, and thus would require no violation of Grice's Maxims in the form of politeness. However, Matsumoto (1988, 1989) demonstrated examples from Japanese that would not fit into this framework. For example, 'today is Saturday' could be uttered in that form between almost any two interactants in English. In Japanese, however, the speaker is forced to make a choice from polite and honorific forms, none of which is safe for all purposes, simply in order to form a sentence; for instance: "Kyoo wa doyoobi da", "Kyoo wa doyoobi desu", or "Kyoo wa doyoobi degozai masu" (Matsumoto, 1988: 415). Failure to use the appropriate form could thus threaten face, even in an utterance such as this one. Therefore, according to Matsumoto, this theory would fail to predict polite behavior in certain Japanese utterances. However, Fukada and Asato (2004) turned this very argument in favor of Brown and Levinson. The fact that socially appropriate forms of politeness that express the social positions of the interactants are expected in any situation can be incorporated into the P and D values when assessing the potential weightiness of the FTA (any utterance can be an FTA given the possibility of using an inappropriate form; the potential weightiness refers to the weightiness that would occur in the event of an inappropriate status-marking form).

Nonetheless, there is also the question of whether utterances can be categorized as intrinsically face-threatening acts by the nature of their illocutionary force. There has been widespread concern that Brown and Levinson's theory gives too much emphasis to the notion of intrinsic FTAs. While acknowledging that requests can be FTAs, Sifanou (1992) contended that requests in certain contexts can imply closeness and intimacy, questioning the validity of the assumption that requests always threaten the addressee's negative face, thus also challenging the importance of negative politeness. She proposed that requests only threaten face when negative face is more important and valued more than positive face.

## 5. Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson's model posits politeness strategies as the means for carrying out a necessary communicative task. But does this rationale accurately reflect the range of possible motives and goals in human conversation? This framework seems to imply that the main premise of all conversation is the execution of some desired practical task or the conveyance of factual information. Some theorists, however, have postulated that the management of interpersonal relationships through particular styles and manners can in some contexts serve as a more important goal than the propositional content itself. Spencer-Oatey (2000) addressed this by proposing an analytical framework based partly on Brown and Levinson but also on the notion of rapport management. Brown and Levinson's task-dominated approach is partly shaped by the key role given to Grice's Maxims. The cross-cultural relevance of these maxims has been disputed by scholars such as Koyama (2003, 2004), who has contended that these constitute Anglo-centric socio-historical assumptions about communication, which evolved from the styles of discourse such as that fostered in the Royal Society in 18th century England. Brown and Levinson acknowledge that face is not an unequivocal right, rather it can be and is routinely ignored, but this qualification is not incorporated into the mechanics of their model in a way that would explain why face-wants might be ignored and how this variable would be related to other variables in the model. The assumption seems to be that the greater the threat to an individual's territory or acceptance, the more indirectness will be considered necessary, but as Thomas (1995) argues, many counter examples are readily available. The only modulators of the impact of face-wants appear to be the P, D and R<sub>r</sub> values. These are combined in the assessment of W<sub>r</sub>, as shown earlier, in a way that implies that they are orthogonal. But can R<sub>r</sub> have an independent fixed value in any given culture, regardless of situation, which is then combined with separate values for P and D? With regard to this formula, Fukushima (1996) studied request strategies in British English and Japanese. Two request situations used in her study were assessed as being similar in terms of the ranked degree of imposition between British and Japanese cultures, and other factors, such as social distance and relative power between the speaker and hearer were set as equal. However, her findings were that the Japanese subjects' production tended to be more direct than that of the British subjects. "Therefore,

the differences between the British subjects and the Japanese subjects in request strategies can be considered as being uninfluenced by different perceptions of the situations in terms of the degree of imposition" (Fukushima, 1996: 686). This seems to imply that any differences found in linguistic behavior could be attributed to social norms rather than the illocutionary force. She argues that this may confirm that among in-group members in Japanese culture, solidarity is highly valued and positive politeness and going bald-on-record are employed as politeness strategies. Mutual and shared acknowledgement of interdependence is generally agreed to be valued in Japanese culture as part of solidarity, and making a small request that can be easily satisfied strengthens social bonds. However, in-group / out-group membership was an important issue in relation to request strategies in this study, and Fukushima acknowledged that this concept could have been better defined in the research design. Nevertheless, this empirical evidence highlights the potential pitfalls of constructing models on the basis of decontextualized speech acts.

## 6. Honorifics

The Japanese honorific system has had a major role in discussions about universal politeness, as already mentioned earlier with regard to FTAs. Almost all scholars have at least acknowledged that Japanese has a much richer and more formalized system than English of marking the relative social status of the speaker, addressee, referent and bystanders. Not only does Japanese have plain (e.g., "-da" ) and polite (e.g., "-desu" , "-masu" ) verb forms, but also any verb can be in a humble, neutral (equal, not all-purpose) or honorific form. For example, according to Matsumoto (1989), the predicate "- eat" can be expressed as "itadaku", "itadakimasu", "taberu", "tabemasu", "meshiagaru" or "meshiagarimasu"; ascending from humble to honorific, in plain and polite forms respectively. There are also the vulgar forms "kuu" and "kuimasu", which might be used by a male speaker in casual conversation to a hearer who is slightly lower in status. Thus, it is more elaborate and multi-dimensional than the "Tu/Vous"-type distinctions in some European languages. In addition, certain nouns can be prefixed with "o-" or "go-" in order to honor the addressee or referent; and in some cases, one of several entirely different words can be chosen. Furthermore, Japanese has ranges of phrases with varying degrees of polite elaboration, as found in many other languages, into which the above noun and verb elements can be inserted.

Can such a system be accounted for within Brown and Levinson's model? Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) have addressed the issue of honorifics in three principal ways: (1) by classifying honorifics as deference, which in turn is posited as one of several negative politeness strategies; (2) by discussing honorifics as a manifestation of impersonalization; and (3) by arguing that honorific systems provide evidence that in complex societies members of higher social strata tend towards negative politeness while the lower social strata tend towards in-group positive politeness. In justifying these approaches, they argued that

honorifics are 'frozen conversational implicatures', which have evolved from face-preserving politeness strategies. They also cite (1987:37) research by Mackie (1983), which claims that Japanese children can control indirectness strategies such as hedging (i.e., learned informally and innately) long before they master the honorific system, which needs to be taught explicitly.

What seems to have been particularly problematic for scholars such as Matsumoto (1988, 1999, 2003) and Ide (1989) is the omnipresence of markers of social status, even in utterances that have no face-threatening illocutionary force (e.g., "Today is Saturday"), along with the multi-dimensionality. Matsumoto contended that "a theory of politeness must account for the use by Japanese speakers of honorifics in the absence of FTAs, or must count all utterances as intrinsically face-threatening" (1989: 217), and concluded that "Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness fails in Japanese not because the strategies for achieving politeness are different but because the postulated motivation underlying politeness phenomena seems unsuited to Japanese culture and language" (1989: 219). Pizziconi (2003) reviewed some of the literature regarding politeness in Japanese and defended Brown and Levinson's theory against the criticisms of Matsumoto and Ide in particular, arguing that the "Japanese scholars" (2003: 1471) had polarized the debate by over-emphasizing the dichotomy of Western individualist behavior versus Japanese fixed social norms. She challenged Matsumoto's assertion that Japanese deference cannot be considered as being derived from the negative politeness strategy of minimizing the imposition on the addressee's action; rather focusing on the ranking difference between the conversational participants. Pizziconi argued that the only conclusions that can be made from the Japanese scholars' studies is that the wide range of social identity-marking devices makes the roles of the conversants more explicit. She credited the Japanese scholars for highlighting the usage of politeness-related interactional markers that operate independently from the presence of an FTA, but nevertheless concluded that "Politeness (as 'appropriateness') is better observed, even in Japanese, in the polite stances constituted by strategic use of polite devices rather than in unmediated polite meanings conveyed by the plethora of dedicated honorifics" (2003: 1471).

## 7. Alternative Frameworks

Inevitably, several alternative frameworks and models of universal politeness have been proposed, some of which have at least partly evolved from this particular debate. Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki and Ogino (1986) proposed a framework based on the notion of volition versus discernment. Ide described the notion as "linguistic behavior... oriented towards roles and situations, rather than face wants" (1989: 231). Their empirical study found that Japanese used more discernment than Americans. Along with Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983), Spencer-Oatey (2000) believes face to be a universal phenomenon, concerned with people's sense of worth, dignity, identity, respect, honor, status, reputation and competence,

but argues that face seems to focus too much on the self. She proposed the term rapport management, which implies more balance between the self and others. This is based on the widely acknowledged fact that different cultures determine the relative sensitivity of different aspects of face, as well as which strategies are most appropriate for managing face. Haugh and Hinze (2003) proposed an analytical framework intended to be free from controversial technical terminology, and which thus aspired to be culturally 'neutral'. A different approach to the same problem was proposed by Koyama (2004), who formulated a Kantian-Piercian theory of language, using the semiotic constructs of sign, index and symbol to explain cross-cultural and historical linguistic variations in speech acts and their premises and interpretations. This, he argued, would be a more appropriate framework for analyzing and explaining Japanese honorifics. Spencer-Oatey and Jiang (2003) argued that too much literature had inadequately addressed the cross-cultural issues by merely describing cultural differences without making any attempt to explain them. They therefore postulated a framework of sociopragmatic interactional principles (SIPs), scalar in nature, including a strictly limited number of universal SIPs, and a number of secondary SIPs, that explain underlying sociocultural principles and "Guide or influence people's productive and interpretive use of language" (2003: 1635).

## 8. Epistemological and Methodological Challenges

This debate has been, and is likely to continue to be, an extremely comprehensive and complex one covering many interdisciplinary areas. A particularly central and crucial aspect of it has been the particular epistemology and methodology on which contributions to it are or should be based. Some of the contributors' generalizations about politeness, cultures, individuals and society have been the subjects of some lively exchanges (e.g., Koyama, 2003; Pizziconi, 2003; and Matsumoto, 2003). Nevertheless, while disputing the particulars of certain cross-cultural generalizations (such as Grice's Maxims and positive and negative face), scholars such as Matsumoto (2003) have made it clear that they do not object in principal to the quest for a universal theory of politeness. On the other hand, the vital process of scrutinizing universal models for their cross-cultural validity seems to have involved making generalizations on the level of national linguistic communities regarding the homogeneity of their sociolinguistic norms (e.g., Matsumoto, 1988, 1989; Ide, 1989; Gu, 1990, etc.). As Matsumoto (2003) argues, one of the greatest challenges of participating in this field of enquiry is taking account of the fractal complexity and diversity of language in its social context, even at the intra-cultural level, while searching for common underlying principals, at any given level, whether in order to formulate a universal theory, or to protect the cultural identity rights of a minority group from being dissolved under what one considers to be an unsound universal theory proposed by members of a dominant group. Given such sensitivities at stake, the "meta-pragmatics" of this discourse can be as precarious as the pragmatic phenomena it attempts to explain, involving potential faux-pas

and misinterpretations of motives, leading to such acrimonious exchanges as those referred to above.

## 9. Conclusion

As Pizziconi acknowledges, "The need for an unbiased terminology for cross-cultural comparison is more urgent than ever, and the task of creating one as problematic as ever. Terms like 'deference', 'tact', 'superior', even 'politeness' itself, clearly carry multiple connotations in different cultures" (2003: 1502). Another essential part of the challenge is one which has lacked sufficient attention (or at least detailed reporting of) in a substantial portion of the literature: suitable theoretical constructs (as alluded to above), as well as models, need to be tested by and formulated through the appropriate use of qualitative, quantitative, observational and experimental methods. This is essential in order to collect a range of empirical data from which to draw conclusions of maximum possible validity and reliability. Progress in these areas should facilitate a debate that can work towards a consensus on universal principals and cross-cultural variation.

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