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The Universality of Face in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory: A Japanese Perspective

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In 1978, Brown and Levinson published their politeness theory, claiming it to be universal. Since that time, much research has been conducted to determine the limitations of this theory. This paper examines research which has been done on politeness strategies in Japanese to see how relevant the theory is now.

When people are involved in conversations, they individually consider certain variables, whether consciously or sub-consciously, that help them determine the form that their speech will take. In 1955, Goffman called these variables “face,” and defined it as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman 1955: 213). In 1978, Brown and Levinson, using Goffman’s definition of “face” as a starting point, proposed a comprehensive and, according to Brown and Levinson, universal theory of politeness. Since that time, researchers have been working to refine the definition of face and adapt this politeness theory, in order to decide whether or not the definition - and therefore, the theory - is universal. This paper discusses research that has been conducted since the theory was first published, looking especially at research that has compared face in Japanese politeness strategies and English politeness strategies, in an attempt to determine the present status of the theory.
A Japanese Perspective

WORKING PAPERS IN EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE
borrow B's car is unambiguous; however, if she said, "I need to pick up my friend at the airport tomorrow, but I don't have a car," she would be going off record because there is no explicit request.

Doing an act baldly, without redressive action (strategy 1) "involves doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 74). To do the FTA baldly in the above example, person A might say, "Lend me your car, tomorrow!" Doing an act with redressive action (strategies 2 and 3) means "giving face" to the addressee" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 74). This can mean doing the act using 'positive politeness' (strategy 2), "oriented toward the positive face of H, the positive image that he claims for himself," or using 'negative politeness'! (strategy 3), "oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) H's negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination" (Brown & Levinson 1978: 75). To do the FTA given above using positive politeness, person A might say, "Hey, that's a great suit you have on! Is it new? ( . . . ) By the way, may I borrow your car, tomorrow?" (adapted from Brown & Levinson 1978: 108).

By asking about person B's suit, person A would be showing that she is interested in something that person B presumably finds desirable, for example, the suit. On the other hand, to do it using negative politeness, person A might say, "You couldn't by any chance loan me your car, tomorrow, could you?" (adapted from Brown & Levinson 1978: 141). In this case, person A is trying to partially satisfy person B's desire to not be imposed upon by implying that she does not think he can loan her the car.

1Tracy (1990) states that only negative politeness is "similar to what people in everyday life mean by 'being polite,'" while positive politeness is a "communicative way of building solidarity, showing the other is liked and seen as desirable" (pp. 211-212).

It is not justifiable, however, to always choose the most polite strategy, because "that will imply that the act is more face-threatening than it actually is" (Fasold 1990: 162); therefore, S must decide which strategy to use. This decision is based on three factors (Brown & Levinson 1978: 79):

1) the 'social distance' (D) of S [the speaker] and H [the hearer] (a symmetric relation) [For example, with a friend there is not a great social distance; however, there is with a stranger.]

2) the relative 'power' (P) of S and H (an asymmetric relation) [For example, a friend does not hold the same position of power as does the President.]

3) the absolute ranking (R) of impositions in the particular culture [For example, asking someone to borrow a quarter would not be as great an imposition as asking that person to borrow one hundred dollars.]

Whenever S intends to do an FTA, she must first take into account these three factors in order to decide which strategy to employ. It is the third factor that Brown and Levinson use to allow for different cultures to fall into their universal theory.

In discussing how people from different cultures would implement their politeness strategy, they introduce the term "ethos", defined as "the affective quality of interaction characteristic of members of a society." (Brown & Levinson 1978: 248). Since different cultures embody differences in ethos, certain cultures will have a tendency towards one or another of the five main politeness strategies. For example, they claim that the U.S. is a positive-politeness culture because the level of weightiness of any given FTA remains relatively low, while Japan is a negative-politeness culture because the people tend to be more "standoffish" (1978: 250). Characterizing a culture as a positive-politeness or negative-politeness culture does not mean that that strategy is the only strategy used, but only

2On page 249, Brown and Levinson do allow that their hypothesis "may of course be wrong."
Research since the publication of the Politeness Theory...

The differences in the studies section have may arise across cultures,
that there is more prevalent within that culture. Thus, while claiming...
In Japanese, the agreement on the proper request for each addressee is very high, while in American English the agreement is low. Hill et al. attribute this difference to the difference between the roles of discernment and volition within the politeness strategy selection process of each language.

While both discernment and volition need to be used in any given situation, the weight given to each will vary among cultures; therefore, in Japanese, discernment is the primary consideration when choosing a politeness strategy, and volition is secondary. On the other hand, in American English, volition is the primary consideration, and discernment is secondary (1986: 362). It is this distinction that creates the disparity in agreement, and “lend[s] empirical support to the hypothesis of Brown and Levinson that D(istance) and P(ower) are two major elements operating” in the selection of an appropriate politeness strategy when performing an FTA (1986: 363).

More fundamental than Tracy’s criticism of Brown and Levinson’s theory is that raised by both Matsumoto (1988) and Mao (1994). They claim that Brown and Levinson’s initial assumption that all members of society have both negative and positive face is not necessarily universal (Matsumoto 1988: 405 and Mao 1994). This criticism, although culturally based, can be seen as being related to Tracy’s (1990) criticism mentioned above. Within Japanese society, people who hold certain positions are expected to meet certain obligations in relation to people who hold lower positions, and, therefore, when asked to meet these obligations by a person in a lower position, the person in a higher position would not deem this as an imposition (Matsumoto 1988: 410).

In stating her position, Matsumoto gives examples of “Formulaic expressions as ‘relation-acknowledging devices’” (1988: 409). She explains that these formulaic expressions are the basis for Japanese politeness strategy (1988: 413) - a position echoed in the findings by Hill et al. that Japanese speakers opt for “specific linguistic forms, at a conventional level of politeness” after assessing “the factors of addressee status and general situation relative to speaker’s own” (1986: 362). What she asserts is that Japanese people do not try to avoid imposing on others, but make statements that might be perceived, by a non-Japanese, as an imposition, in order to acknowledge the addressee’s higher rank (1988: 410). The reason for this convention is that, in Japanese society, it is understood that a person of lower rank is dependent on a person of higher rank; thus, by expressing one’s dependence on another, one raises, or reaffirms, the other’s relative position (1988: 410). One example of this is that she gives is the expression “Suzin o doozo yorosiku onegaisimashu. ([lit.] ‘I ask you to please treat/take care of my husband well.’)” which would be said by a woman when speaking to her husband’s boss (1988: 410). Matsumoto admits that such expressions might be considered examples of positive politeness because they “enhance the addressee’s face”, but claims that this is not the case because “it is not done straightforwardly,” and there is no “manifestation of intimacy” (Matsumoto 1986: 410). Therefore, in Japanese culture, negative face, as defined by Brown and Levinson (not wanting others to disturb you), is hard to validate.

Mao (1994) uses both Matsumoto’s claims and Brown and Levinson’s claims to present a new definition of face, “the relative face orientation” (1994: 471). The relative face orientation may be defined as:

an underlying direction of face that emulates, though never completely attaining, one of two interactional ideals that may be salient in a given speech community: the ideal social identity, or the ideal indi-
References


What is said in Japan is said in China, but not in the same face. In China, the expression of face is closely linked to the concept of 'face.' A Japanese perspective.