

# Cultural and Communicative Perceptions of Politeness: The Japanese Case

by  
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## Abstract

本稿は日本人の犯す語用論上のミス, 「丁寧さ」に関する文化面の影響, 社会的, 心理的相互作用についての調査する以前の「丁寧さ」理論に関するこれまでの研究を紹介したものである。

Leech(1983),及びBrown - Levinson(1987)による枠組はすべての文化を越えて普遍的に適応されうる。特に日本のような高度に脈絡に依存する文化に適応される。

This paper introduces some of the earlier research on politeness theories before examining three areas: the nature of Japanese pragmatic failure, cultural influences upon perceptions of politeness, and the qualities of sociological and psychological interaction. The key question addressed is whether the models or frameworks provided by Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987) can be applied universally across all cultures, especially high-context ones such as Japan.

## Introduction

It is the experience of non-Japanese residents in Japan to hear the opinion expressed that English is not a very polite language. This is not always meant to be derogatory, to look down on English-speaking cultures, particularly the United States. Sometimes it is merely a matter of supposed fact or a complement regarding English as being egalitarian. This is found in such works as Nakane (1973) with her research on *tate* and *yoko shakkai*. Tanaka (1988) comments that because there is not such a clear distinction of style in English as there is between *desu-masu* and non *desu-masu* in Japanese, some Japanese believe that "there is no variation at all in style according to the relationship a speaker has with the other person" (p. 94). From a pedagogic perspective Japanese first-year university students seem to have no conception that there is politeness in English, let alone how to be polite. This is evidence of cross-cultural pragmatic failure. Even when examples are presented, explanations given in English or Japanese, and opportunities for practice afforded, performance is still poor. Perhaps (communicative) competence was never achieved but Ellis (1994) reminds us that competence is not open for inspection.

The present author has organized numerous orientation courses for home-stay and residential courses in the UK, North America and Australia, and has accompanied or led programs on six occasions to Europe and three times to Australia. Having witnessed this whole process firsthand, there also appears to be a kind of psychological block present while the students are still within Japan. Students believe that the English that they have learnt during their secondary education is

sufficient for intercultural communication. Due to the emphasis placed on university entrance exams, little time is devoted to concepts of intercultural communication and the more linguistically orientated cross-cultural pragmatics. Perhaps while still living in Japan, it is difficult to raise awareness, of even if time is specifically devoted to these areas. However, the key point is that the outcome (performance) is not satisfactory. Therefore this paper wishes to examine the questions:

1. What is the nature of pragmatic failure?
2. What are the cultural influences upon perceptions of politeness?
3. What are the qualities of the interaction?

### Politeness Theories

Fraser (1990:219) criticizes researchers for a lack of consistency concerning what politeness is, how it might be accounted for, and in some cases for not defining what they take politeness to be. This is largely because of the newness of the field, in which additional analysis has added to or expanded upon the previous theories.

Fraser discusses Grice's four approaches to politeness, the second of which is his conversational-maxim view (Brown and Levinson 1987:94-94). However, strictly speaking this is not concerned with politeness, but with rational interaction. The four maxims of his general cooperative principle are: be truthful (quality), be brief (quantity), be relevant (relevance), and be clear (manner). The underlying principle is the efficient transmission of information and therefore directly applies to transactional discourse. Grice (1975) states,

there are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character), such as '*Be polite*', that are normally observed by participants in talk exchanges, and these may generate nonconventional implicatures. (p. 47)

Later, his examples of flouting of the super-maxim '*Be perspicuous*' include *ambiguity*, *obscurity*, and *failure to be brief* or *succinct* (54-56). These examples, which in certain situations could be construed as manifesting politeness, are to be found to varying degrees in all societies, although when viewed favorably different terms of description are used.

Lakoff (1973) adds to Grice's principles the three rules of being polite: don't impose, give options, and make A (the hearer) feel good. She recognizes the possible conflict between clarity and politeness. Leech (1983:57) redefines these in his *Interpersonal Rhetoric*, again adopting Grice's principles but adding the *Politeness Principle*, the sub-maxims of which are *tact*, *generosity*, *approbation*, *modesty*, *agreement*, and *sympathy*. Leech adds scales for each of the maxims. For Tact there are cost-benefit, optionality, indirectness, authority, and social distance scales (123-126). Maintaining his 'formal-functional' paradigm (1983:4) he suggests four main illocutionary functions: *competitive*, *convivial*, *collaborative*, and *conflictive* (104). The word cooperative cannot be used because he has already used it for equating his Cooperative Principle maxims with those of Grice's. However, if the letter *c* has been selected to impress, it is surprising that he did not mention this; nor did Matsumoto (1988), Ide (1989), Gu (1990), or Mao (1994) suggest the addition of 'consensus' as (289)

suggested by Liversidge (1993:3). Such a term cannot be equated with 'collaborative' because collaborative is "indifferent to the social goal" (104). Wierzbicka, in *Japanese key words and core cultural values* (1991:355) considering the role of the word *wa*, also proposes the word 'consensus'. The word 'conformism' she feels to be not very helpful, because it is a "culture-laden concept" (355). In the cross-cultural adjustment processes of accommodation and assimilation, there is a danger of cultural relativism. For example, in English-speaking cultures conforming usually holds a negative connotation, whereas adapting does not. However, in the case of other cultures, it is incorrect to assume this connotation is the case or that it should be.

The two difficulties with the work of Lakoff and to a greater extent with that of Leech are:

1. "We have no way of knowing which maxims are to be applied, what scales are available, how they are formulated, what their dimensions are, when and to what degree they are relevant, and so forth" (Fraser 227). While their ideas and intelligent insights provide stimulus to armchair research, empirical work in the field needs more concrete guidelines.
2. By expanding the theory, it begins to encompass areas of socio-pragmatics as well as pragmalinguistics, and is therefore more complex. While this in itself is not necessarily incorrect, the risk of error of measurement, due to a higher number of variables, is increased.

When cross-cultural considerations are added to 1 and 2 in trying to construct a universal theory of politeness, let alone quantify it, the task becomes even more difficult. Leech (1983) avoids this problem by distinguishing between '*absolute politeness*' and *relative politeness*, the latter meaning "relative to some norm of behavior which, for a particular setting, they [a certain group] regard as typical. The norm may be that of a particular culture or language community" (84). Leech's analysis of the strategies for producing and interpreting polite illocution confines itself to absolute politeness. Therefore his work on general pragmatics excludes both pragmalinguistic studies (language-specific) and socio-pragmatic studies (culture-specific) and is therefore "the study of language in total abstraction from the situation." (p. 11)

Therefore, Leech's framework seems unsuitable for cross cultural studies of politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) criticize his framework stating,

If we are permitted to invent a maxim for every regularity in language use, not only will we have an infinite number of maxims, but pragmatic theory will be too unconstrained to permit the recognition of any counter-examples. (p. 4)

Before seeking a more suitable model for addressing Japanese perceptions of politeness, brief mention should be made of research of both Japanese performance and possible cultural influences upon performance. The reasons for reviewing this research are two. First, performance is one of the main ways that we can infer perceptions. Second, an analysis of cultural traits will give an indication of the suitability of any proposed model.

## Japanese Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure is present at all levels; elementary, intermediate, and advanced. Although at lower levels allowances are made for errors, White (1993) shows how something as 'simple' as 'Saying please,' with which some teachers would not anticipate problems, frequently leads to misunderstanding. He presents six situations in which omission or unnecessary insertion of 'please' invoked in the mind of the native hearer inappropriate interpretations of the non-native English speaker's utterances. Thus, at intermediate or advanced levels, failure seems to be evident in bimodal form. Sometimes learners used negative politeness strategies where native speakers would not and sometimes the reverse (Tanaka, 1988). Also positive politeness strategies are not employed enough, learners tending to opt for the more formal expressions. Tanaka and Kawade found similarly that non-native speakers do not necessarily use politeness strategies in a manner similar to native speakers (1982:30). All this reflects Takahashi and Beebe's argument that "the high point for pragmatic transfer will occur later than the high point for phonological or morpho-syntactic transfer." (1987:137). Learners had problems shifting the level of formality or style according to the interlocutor status (Tanaka, 1988: 92). Takahashi and Beebe included comparisons of EFL and ESL students. Although Takahashi and Beebe found more pragmatic transfer among EFL students, significant failure among Tanaka's learners, who were all ESL students, clearly upholds the argument of Kasper who maintains that "extended residence in the target community does not in and of itself make 'negative' pragmatic transfer go away." (1992:220). Kasper also reminds us that divergent ('negative') transfer does not always lead to miscommunication. Sometimes it can have beneficial outcomes (221). Therefore there is a need to examine more closely the perceptions and misconceptions present. However neither Tanaka nor Takahashi and Beebe conducted post-interviews to determine how much their learners were aware of sociopragmatic problems and to what extent failure was due to lack of pragmalinguistic ability.

## Cultural Influences on Japanese Perceptions of Politeness

Japanese society places a high value on status of a hierarchical nature. It is almost impossible for two strangers to conduct a conversation unless they have either been introduced by a third party or have managed to glean some personal details, usually by the exchanging of *meishi* - name cards. Whether these are vestiges of a feudal society or not, even where one has entered a group through achievement, once in that new group, status is ascribed by age, time in the organization etc. Even within a group of people who entered the organization together there are differences. It is only that because the vertical separations are so vast that a sense of equality or comradry is fostered. The strength of respect or deference afforded within this vertical structure produces a very ritualized procedure of interaction. Moeran in discussing *keigo* as honorific language does not even talk of vertical relations in terms of politeness: vertical ones are status differences and deference but horizontal ones are politeness and intimacy (1988:432). His is an anthropological approach. In cross cultural pragmatics a wider usage is necessary. In cross-cultural pragmatics, language occurs both

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in the horizontal and the vertical dimensions. Therefore, both dimensions must be incorporated into any theory of politeness.

Japanese society also places high value upon the feeling of being in or out of the group. At its deepest level this is displayed by the feeling of 'being Japanese' : a sense of 'Japaneseness' (Moeran, 1988:437). Mizutani says this distinction is used to heighten group-consciousness both at the micro and macro level (1981:61). Sometimes to strengthen the group solidarity, behavior displays attacks on outsiders through criticism and belittling. In a cross-cultural context, this may occur in presence of foreigners, when Japanese assume that their remarks cannot be understood (p. 62). In Japan the commitment to the group should ideally be one hundred percent, and as theoretically there is no withdrawal from the group, relations must as far as possible be smooth and avoid conflict. However, this group consciousness has been partly imposed from above. In the Meiji Era, 1868-1911, the ruling elite determined that employees changing companies, in particular engineers, was detrimental to the economy and made a kind of 'gentlemen's agreement' to forbid this.

The avoidance of conflict is closely connected to the third area: that of the high value Japanese society places on harmony. The Japanese language has the saying, 'the post that sticks up is hammered down' often misquoted as, 'the nail that sticks out is hammered down' . Whiting (1989) captures this attitude well in his book on Japan's baseball world *You've Got to Have Wa*. He also answers the question of the best way to destroy *wa* in a Japanese baseball team: put an American in the team. The revisionist Van Wolferen (1989) states, "Japanese are obsessed with the idea of harmony precisely because of a subliminal awareness that it is always a very difficult thing to achieve" (p. 412). The possibility that *wa* might be lacking would be profoundly embarrassing. He continues, "To keep it out of view entails major effort, for Japanese society has no less conflict than other societies". As such one is not allowed as much psychological distance or space. Morishima (1976) describes how in British society, which might be considered by some to be traditional, each person's personal space is not only recognized but also respected. However, in Japan the idea of *omoiyari* not only has connotations of empathy, but also of 'conformity'. Consequently, Wierzbicka (1991:355) does not like Honna and Hoffer's use of the word 'conformism', preferring 'consensus'. Within this tight web of relationships there is a reluctance to expand links further than is required, because in doing so, by definition one incurs further duties and obligations of a reciprocal, debt-like nature.

Moeran (434) adds to the in-out group dimension the public / private one. This is the fourth area of importance, known in Japanese as *omote* and *ura*. Although the main emphasis is on one organization vis-a-vis another, the same principle occurs within any one organization, each group presenting a united front, when doggedly fighting for territory and power in the continual internecine struggles of *habatsu* (cliques, factions). To support this argument, Moeran makes use of the domains of interaction provided by Lebra (1976:434): the intimate, the ritual, and the anomic as diagrammed by the author in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Domains of Interaction

	UCHI - IN GROUP	SOTO - OUT GROUP
OMOTE (PUBLIC)		RITUAL
URA (PRIVATE)	INTIMATE	ANOMIC

### Qualities of Interaction

It is important to examine how these sociological and psychological constructs are realized.

First, whether in a ritual, intimate, or anomic context there is a high level of systematicity in the initial stages, a use of formulaic language or strategies. Such formulaic expressions are strategically indispensable, since they reinforce the impression of behavior in accordance with the social expectation in the situation in question, and demonstrate the speaker's understanding of the sociocultural system (Matsumoto 1988:413). In some ways this systematicity could be thought of as in terms of a comparison of game of shogi with that of chess. Although both games originate from the same game in India, the Japanese variation has weaker pieces which means that the earlier stages are predictable and take longer. In later stages it is the reverse: chess becomes the more predictable.

Second, sometimes the interaction does not have a transactional goal but rather serves to reinforce the structure and hierarchy of the group. For example, the function of some meetings is not to decide anything, but to appear to give credence that everybody is involved in the decision-making process. Its function is one of appeasement, a kind of ritual.

Third, directness, whether in the form of an opinion or a suggested action, is avoided as this may lead to debate and cause imposition and loss of face. "Non-imposition is the essence of polite behavior" (Ide, 1989:277). Mizutani (1981) talks of Mr. J as having a "strong antipathy toward using words to convince others of some matter. He feels disgruntled and uncomfortable." (69). If there is a possibility that Mr. J will be put at a disadvantage or will hurt the other, "the edge of the debate will inevitably be blunted"(71). Van Wolferen (1989) states,

Since all conflict is defined as bad, arguing and debating are not usually recognized as healthy ways to settle disputes. There is practically no scholarly debate, and most Japanese scholars would not know how to carry on such a debate. (p. 436)

This is a harsh criticism, for in fact in informal settings opinions are stated. Van Wolferen is referring to the more public domain of meetings or conferences. He also indirectly is stating that there are no overt guidelines such as those of parliamentary debate, Robert's Rules, which are the basis for debate whether it be in the House of Commons, companies or an academic conference. Very rarely does one encounter someone such as Tawara Soichiro who has the skill to preside over high level debating on TV. Forums or panel discussions usually consist of each speaker expressing his or her own opinion or outlining their findings with little ensuing discussion. Therefore, in dealing with each other, Japanese often consider silence safer than providing or seeking an explanation or

requesting an action. Reasons are not usually expected and seniors, as a general rule, do not have to give them. However seniors must demonstrate that they have the best in mind for juniors (Van Wolferen, 433). Doi (1981) explains that Japanese link this closely to *amaeru*, “to lean on a person’s good will”(p. 72) or “to depend on another’s affection”(p. 167). Morsbach and Tyler (1986) describe *amae* as having “a variety of meanings centering around passive dependency needs in hierarchical relationships”(p. 300).

Fourth, speech is viewed as a non-reciprocal process, as described by Robinson (1991) and shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Dimension of Reciprocal and Non-Reciprocal Speech

	TIME	SPEECH INITIATION	INTERACTIVE STYLE	CONTENT
RECIPROCAL	Each	Partners are equal in asking questions and initiating speech	Zigzag: speech is back and forth in short chunks	Responsive: partner’s 2’s speech refers to what partner 1 has said
NON RECIPROCAL	Unequal	One partner is dominant in initiating speech & asking questions; the other partner generally responds	Each partner speaks in long chunks without interruption	Unresponsive: each partner’s speech is independent of previous speaker’s content, as in monologues

Nozaki (1992) talks about her culture shock on arriving in the US and borrows from Sakamoto (1982) the description of interaction between teachers and students in the US as being a game of volleyball, as opposed to the Japanese game of bowling. Bowling presumably refers to tenpin bowling in which everyone has their own turn and there is no interaction, as opposed to lawn bowls or cricket both of which have direct interaction.

Fifth, in Japan, as with most other Asian cultures, the thought and rhetorical patterns are in a high context. Sometimes the term high- and low-context cultures is used to explain this. Damen (1987) summarizes the work of Okabe (1983) as shown in Table 1.

Very little information is encoded in the verbal message. The person or speaker is expected to perceive rather than be an agent of change. This can be especially frustrating for foreigners taking up positions in Japanese organizations. One is not informed or told anything. If you ask too often what you should do or if you make frequent requests to do something, you will be regarded as aggressive or pushy. However, it is to be remembered that the same kind of process occurs for Japanese when joining an organization. This process could be described as learning by osmosis.

Table 1. Cultural Assumptions of East and West: Japan and the United States

	Thought and Rhetorical Patterns	
	United States	Japan
1. Thought Patterns	Analytical	Synthetic (is-ness of things)
	Absolutism	Relativism
	Facts, precision, specificity, linear	Point/dot/space
2. Rhetoric	Confront, persuade, linear form of argument	Harmony, consensus, circular form of argument
Organization	Balance between general and supporting details How or why	General or specific What
Proof	Logical proof, facts	Ambiguity, paraphrase
Style	Explicit words (finally)	Ambiguous words (perhaps, I think so)
Tone	Low context (verbalize), speaker as agent of change <i>Erabe</i> (selective) choosing best answer	High context (silence, nonverbal) speaker as perceiver <i>Awase</i> (adjustive) logic of gathering alternatives
Mode	Dialogue - resolving differences Digital - learned	Haragei - art of the belly Analogue - nonverbal important

### Negative Politeness and Face Threatening Acts

Having outlined pragmatic failure, cultural influences and the nature of interaction, it is necessary to examine the suitability of Brown and Levinson's concept of negative politeness and face-threatening acts for Japan's culture-specific situation, and for other high-context cultures. The question really is whether Brown and Levinson's concept can be applied universally across all cultures. Central to the argument is "to what extent politeness is seen as fulfilling a normative goal as opposed to an instrumental goal" (Gu 1990:246). The former Leech calls "relative politeness" (1983:83-84): "politeness relative to a context or situation" (p. 102). "Being variable in many dimensions is not relevant in the study of general pragmatics" (84). As stated earlier, this position does not help analysis of the Japanese context. Ide (1989) seeks to incorporate the 'discernment' aspect of linguistic politeness,

oriented mainly toward the wants to acknowledge the ascribed positions or roles of the

participants as well as to accommodate the prescribed norms of the formality of particular settings. (p. 231)

Mao (1994) supported this Japanese concept of face and pointed to the interesting resemblance to the Chinese context in which

the public, communal aspects are stressed; foregrounding the other's perception or even their indulgence in whether a given [Japanese] relationship has been acknowledged or a given (sanction) has been secured (p. 27)

Gu (1990) talks of the concept of *iimao* which has two cardinal principles, sincerity and balance; and four underlying notions, respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement (p. 239). Ide (1989) embraces a framework based on Miyahara's work, which incorporates volition and discernment in terms of Weber's typology of social actions and its reformulation by Habermas (1984) as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Framework Incorporating Volition and Discernment in terms of Weber's Typology of Action and its Reformulation by Habermas

MODE OF ACTION DEGREE OF RATIONALITY	STRATEGIC (orientated to success)	COMMUNICATIVE (orientated to understanding)
RATIONAL	VOLITION (1) Instrumental-rational (interest)	(2) value-rational (value)
NON-RATIONAL	(3) affective (drive/feeling)	DISCERNMENT (4) traditional (convention)

Ide (1989) states, "Of these four types of social action, Brown and Levinson's model concerns the type of (1) instrumental rational action." (p. 243). Matsumoto (1988) prefers Lakoff's model of strategies in which "the constituents of face are culturally determined and in which both culturally preferred and personally preferred strategies are provided for." (424). Thus, Ide and Matsumoto in examining politeness and face, and in particular Brown and Levinson's theory of negative face, end up with very different conclusions concerning its validity for Japanese society. Ide accepts the theory provided it is expanded. "Any interaction is potentially a face-threatening act." (p. 33). Matsumoto rejects it, "their theory can only with great difficulty, if at all, be seen as satisfactorily embracing the politeness system in Japan." (p. 425).

These contrary positions are not as incompatible as they first appear. Matsumoto is concerned with macro considerations of power of a vertical nature. However, she admitted that "the western type of Deference consisting of giving options is also observable in Japan, but usually only among people similar in ranking." (p. 424). Ide is more concerned with micro considerations, "the strategy of negative politeness is associated with values of sociability and civility and interactions

characteristic of such private domains as neighbourhood, friendship, hobbies, etc.”(p. 34).

However, it does seem that both Ide and Matsumoto have fallen into the common error found among some Japanese researchers in using the all-embracing term ‘western culture’. They emphasize differences and extremes, particularly focusing on the USA. Ide (1989) in adopting the work of Miyahara (1986), glosses over the distinction made by Habermas (1984) between social and nonsocial action as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Model of Action Orientation

	Orientated to Success	Orientated to Reaching Understanding
Nonsocial	Instrumental action	
Social	Strategic action	Communicative action

Ide also appears to ignore that the same action could be analyzed both strategically and communicatively.

### Conclusion

This analysis of the cross-cultural and communicative perceptions of politeness has looked at the Japanese context. However, it has not wished to assume that generalizations such as ‘Japan and the West’ or ‘Japan and the US’ are the norm. It has also sought to avoid adopting prescriptive positions, the inherent dangers of doing so have been clearly pointed out by the respected seminal work of Said (1978) on *orientalism*, or more specifically to Japan by the linguist Miller (1982) concerning *nihonjinron*. It was a Japanese American, Hayakawa, who criticized such generalizations. He proposed or recognized that for the purposes of forming critical analysis, it was necessary to accept the existence of two poles. He described this as the two-valued orientation (1949; 1989, 128-142), but argued that in general it was much better to have a wider perspective, referring to the ability to see things from more than two standpoints as a multi-valued orientation.

Clearly the framework of Leech (1983) for politeness has its limitations. Although the model provided by Brown and Levinson (1987) is better, its concept of negative politeness and face threatening acts encounters problems when dealing with instrumental and normative goals. One of the main conclusions concerning Japan that one would draw from the work of Ide and Matsumoto is that instrumental orientation is not important. However, it is likely that there is more variation within Japanese society than some of the research would have us believe. Some of the subjects used in research have been from an older generation and are not thus necessarily representative of the current population. The work of Ide looked at men and women from a fairly elite group who were aged between forty to seventy years old. While such studies are important in that they examine one microcosm of Japanese society and language, there is a need for others which look at different microcosms in order to clarify to what extent arguments about negative and positive politeness are valid.

Such studies should examine the three sections as presented in this paper: pragmatic failure,

cultural influences on perceptions of politeness, and qualities of interaction. Studies need to incorporate qualitative methods including in-depth interviews along with quantitative approaches with statistically reliable questionnaires and surveys. One particular microcosm which might provide fruitful data is that of sports clubs, particularly university clubs. These are areas where traditional values, especially those of the *sempai* - *kohai* system are strong, although the translation in English, the senior - junior system, does not do justice to the connotations of it in Japanese. It is in this kind of environment that the differences between the theory of Brown and Levinson and the arguments of Ide and Matsumoto are likely to be most evident. Only then will we have a more robust understanding of cultural and communicative perceptions of politeness, especially of, but not only, the Japanese case. Until that occurs, it is inaccurate to claim the existence of a true universal, and it is dangerous to put all one's eggs into a universalist basket.

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