

Cultural and linguistic issues in the construction of the discourse on Japanese politeness

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Keynote Speech Abstract

Japanese Politeness is often referred to, in lay discourse, as the quintessence of politeness. The language is rich in honorifics, and native speakers' behaviour is characterized as relatively mannerly and deferential, indirect and diplomatically vague. The discourse on Politeness in scholarly research has by and large attempted to avoid essentialist statements, but it too has emphasized the linguistic affordances of Japanese – its rich repertoire of honorifics – on one hand, and individuals' sensitivity to social hierarchies (Ide's 1989 *wakimae*), social cohesiveness and order (Hofstede 1980, Markus, H.R. and Kitayama, S. 1991) on the other.

As a specialist of a language taken to represent a paradigmatic case of the 'eastern' type of politeness, I will address the theme of the conference by asking the question of whether the empirical evidence available to us after decades of scientific research indeed supports the archetypical characterizations described above, and to what extent a supposed East/West divide in Politeness phenomena can be recognised.

One of the most conspicuous pragmalinguistic features of Japanese is its wealth of honorific devices. If we consider language structure (a language's morpho-syntactic features) a kind of social artefact shaped by and reflecting its users' social concerns, the wealth of honorifics we find in Japanese would suggest the extreme salience of the interactional aspects of language use. Compared to 'western' languages such as English or Italian, Japanese can be said to consistently 'force' its speakers to attend, in discourse, to sociocognitive dimensions (such as, for example, Power and Distance) in relatively more elaborate, more explicit and more pervasive ways.

The 'peculiarity' of Japanese Politeness can be largely attributed to its pragmalinguistic affordances, but no study has to date provided evidence that linguistic, pragmatic and cognitive principles regulating the use of Japanese language are qualitatively and non-trivially different from universal ones. Its distinctiveness can instead be located at the level of (discursive) sociopragmatic norms regulating conduct in communities of practice. I will argue that Japanese has a significant preference for the explicit marking of the utterance's 'situatedness', which includes components such as setting (time, place, circumstances), identity (social and personal attributes, role-relationships of speech event participants), and last but not least affective attitudes. These are universally constrained by normative codifications, and variation can be expected in the nature of underlying ideologies.

I will address the issue of culturally specific ideologies of politic behaviour (and in particular the question of their existential loci, whether they are external or internal to speakers), provide a brief illustration of the how these are mediated through language, and consider whether the resulting characterization can be reconciled with the received portrayals of Japanese politeness.

References

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