Politeness and Face Theory: Implications for the Backchannel Style of Japanese L1/L2 Speakers

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This article revisits the long-standing debate regarding the universality of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. The negative face of conversational participants is addressed from the perspective of L1/L2 Japanese speakers. Accordingly, the pragmalinguistic dimension of language examined in this paper (i.e. backchannelling) offers novel insights into an aspect of face theory that has not been addressed in previous investigations. It is argued that, while L1/L2 Japanese speakers appear to be aware and sensitive of their interlocutors' negative face when using backchannels, this awareness is greatly superseded by the need to behave according to the parameters determined by one's position in the social hierarchy.

1. Introduction

Over the years, a great many aspects of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987: henceforth B&L) politeness theory have been examined, applied, challenged, or modified (Eelen 2001; Mills 2003). Despite its claimed universality, several researchers (Gu 1990; Ide et al. 1992; Mao 1992, 1994) have criticised this theory as being centred on the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the model person. Particularly relevant is the work of Matsumoto (1988, 1989, 1993), who contends that politeness, and particularly the concept of face, is conceptualised differently in Japanese. While Pizziconi (2003) and Matsumoto (2003) have subsequently developed the finer points of Matsumoto's (1988) original article, this paper seeks to incorporate into the debate a new dimension of language: the discourse markers known as backchannels. From the perspective of L1/L2 Japanese speakers, I will consider how backchannels are used and perceived in conversation, and how this might inform the debate on face theory within B&L's politeness model.

1.1. Politeness theory and the concept of face

Following the work of Grice (1967, 1975) and Goffman (1967), B&L's theory of linguistic politeness has dominated research in pragmatics for several decades. This consists of two parts: a fundamental theory concerning the nature of politeness and how it functions in interaction, and a list of politeness strategies, drawing on examples from mainly three languages (i.e., English, Tzeltal, and Tamil). The basic premise is that politeness in any culture can be explained in terms of a limited number of universal phenomena, namely the construct of *face* and certain social variables – i.e., differences in power (P), social distance (D) and the relative imposition of particular acts (R).

B&L (1978: 66) define face as "the public self-image that every member wants for himself" and divide it into two types: negative and positive. Negative face refers to the desire of every competent adult member of a culture that his/her actions be unimpeded by others, whereas positive face involves the desire of every member of a culture that his/her wants be desirable to at least some others. In other words, positive face can be thought of as "the positive and consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for approval", while negative face, on the other hand, is "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves,

and rights to non-distraction" (*ibid*.: 61). Another important element in understanding how face and politeness are connected involves what B&L call a *face-threatening act* (FTA). This occurs in social interactions which intrinsically threaten the face of the speaker (S) or hearer (H), such as when one makes a request, disagrees, gives advice, etc. The potential severity of a FTA is determined by various factors, which include the following: the social distance (D) of the S and the H; the relative power (P) of S and H; and the absolute ranking (R) of imposition in a particular culture. Consequently, strategies to save face are chosen according to the gravity of the FTA.

Politeness thus arises through mitigation of an action that can threaten either negative face (e.g., a request) or positive face (e.g., a refusal). The satisfying of positive face is called positive politeness and is expressed by indicating similarities amongst interactants and by expressing appreciation of the interlocutor's self-image, whereas negative politeness can be expressed by satisfying negative face in terms of indicating respect for the addressee's right not to be imposed on.

1.2. The supposed universality of politeness

Matsumoto's (1988, 1989, 1993) work on linguistic politeness in Japanese seems to have become the standard reference for authors questioning the pan-cultural applicability of the notion of face. Matsumoto argues that the concept of face, particularly that of negative face, is "alien" to Japanese culture, and that B&L's concept of face, based on Anglo-Saxon tradition and individualism, is not appropriate to account for polite linguistic behaviour in Japanese. Drawing on the work of Clancy (1986) and Lebra (1976) among others, Matsumoto (1988: 405) explains her position as follows:

> What is of paramount concern to a Japanese is not his/her own territory, but the position in relation to others in the group and his/her acceptance of others. Loss of face is associated with the perception by others that one has not comprehended and acknowledged the structure and hierarchy of the group.

Of the 18 examples used to demonstrate this point, Matsumoto (1988: 409) begins with the simple introduction *Doozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu* (=I ask you to please treat me well/take care of me). Comparable to the English expression *Nice to meet you*, this expression, or some variation of it, is used when S is introduced to a new person, and expresses the desire that the relationship be a good one. The person with whom S desires H to enjoy a good relationship may also be a third party, as illustrated by the utterances *Musume o doozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu* (=I ask that you please take care of my daughter well) and *Shujin o doozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu* (=I ask you to please take care of my husband well) (Matsumoto 1988: 410).

According to face theory, these speech acts would be categorised as direct requests and, thus, impositions on the S's negative face (i.e., FTAs). B&L (1978, 1987) categorise Japan as a negative politeness culture, which implies that the Japanese should go to great lengths to avoid imposing on others. Yet it is plain to see from the everyday utterances provided above that this is not always the case. Matsumoto (1988) also points out that it would be a disservice to simply relegate these types of formulaic expressions to the category of hackneyed expressions that do not really mean anything; clearly, in Japanese, these utterances are used far more frequently and are especially important in maintaining hierarchical positions. According to Haugh (2004), the Japanese concept of politeness can be attributed to sociocultural dynamics in their value system. The acknowledgement of interdependence, known as *amaeru* in Japanese, is greatly encouraged in Japanese society (Doi 1981). Subordinates (*kohai*) tend to show respect to their seniors (*senpai*) by acknowledging their dependence, and seniors, in return, accept the responsibility of taking care of their subordinates.

In the examples above, S humbles him/herself to H by placing him/herself in a lower position and acknowledging the need to be taken care of by H. Since this behaviour is the

norm in Japanese society, the addressees of such requests consider it an honour to be asked to take care of someone, as it signifies that one is regarded as holding a higher position in society. Thus, deferent impositions are thought to enhance the positive self-image of H and, contrary to B&L's characterisation of negative politeness cultures, deferent impositions in the Japanese context could be viewed as a positive politeness strategy. Further, by using a variant of one of the examples above, S demonstrates societal competence and acceptability, and manages to preserve his/her own face. Conversely, failure to recognise the hierarchical ranking would reflect unfavourably on S, creating an impression of ignorance or lack of self-control.

Supporting Matsumoto's (1988) view of Japanese politeness, Hill et al. (1986) conducted a large scale quantitative analysis of Japanese vis-à-vis American linguistic politeness, and found that the notion of *wakimae* is fundamental to politeness in Japan. While no single English word translates this concept adequately, the term *discernment* seems to reflect its basic sense of strict adherence to expected norms. In other words, discernment refers to the "almost automatic observation of socially agreed upon rules and applies to both verbal and non-verbal behaviour" (*ibid*.: 348). As a counterpart to *wakimae*, Hill et al. use the term *volition*, defined as an aspect of politeness that "allows the speaker a considerably more active choice, according to the speaker's intention, from a relatively wider range of possibilities" (*ibid*.: 347).

Hill et al. (1986) presented participants with alternative expressions related to borrowing a pen and asked them to complete a questionnaire measuring the degree of politeness of each expression, the appropriate politeness level for the various addresses (distinguished by power and status) and which linguistic form they would use. The results show that the responses of both American and Japanese participants were influenced by discernment (i.e., a recognition of certain fundamental characteristics of addressee and situation); however, each group seemed to differ in the weight assigned to the various factors contributing to discernment and volition: the Japanese group adopted the discernment principle to a much greater extent (as shown by a high agreement on the appropriate form/s for making a certain request) while the American group opted more often for volition (as demonstrated by a weaker correlation between addressee/situational features and the appropriate form of a request).

2. Backchannel behaviour

The term backchannel is difficult to define univocally. As evidenced by Fujimoto's (2007) list of 24 terms, there exists a great deal of variation in the literature, depending on the particular perspective researchers adopt in their analysis (McCarthy & O'Keeffe 2004). Relative to the purposes of this paper, backchannels can be understood in general terms as the brief verbal and nonverbal responses and/or reactions that a listener gives to the primary speaker when the primary speaker is speaking (see Cutrone 2005 for an in-depth discussion of some of the issues involved).

2.1. Variation across cultures

A number of studies have compared (L1 and L2) Japanese speakers' backchannel behaviour with that of native speakers of English. A common trend that seems to have emerged in the research is that Japanese people, whether they are speaking English or Japanese, tend to backchannel more frequently than L1 English speakers. A great portion of these backchannels occur during the primary speaker's speech, thus creating simultaneous speech (Hayashi 1988; Maynard 1986, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1997; White 1989). Various researchers (cf. Lebra 1976; Mizutani 1982; White 1989) have considered the potential negative effects of these frequent interjections on intercultural communication, hypothesising that they may be perceived as a sign of H's impatience and desire for a quick completion of the statement.

This hypothesis is also supported by the British participants' interview data in Cutrone's (2005) intercultural analysis of Japanese-British dyadic conversations in English. The same study showed that the more frequently the Japanese participants sent backchannels, the more the British participants felt they were being interrupted, and the more they perceived their Japanese interlocutor to be impatient. Paradoxically, in their interview responses the Japanese participants explained that they sent frequent backchannels to signal support/empathy towards the speaker, as is customary in Japanese culture.

2.2. Backchannels and politeness

The findings of the studies cited above seem to support Matsumoto's (1988) contention that among the Japanese, negative face does not play such a major role as originally assumed by B&L. The Japanese participants in Cutrone's (2005) study did not seem to consider their frequent interjections to be an imposition to their interlocutors. Rather, according to the reasons given by many Japanese participants, the primary function of their frequent backchannels was instead to facilitate a harmonious atmosphere in the conversations. In this way, the Japanese participants did not seem to see their backchannel behaviour, consisting of frequent speech overlapping backchannels, as affecting the negative face of their interlocutors; rather, they believed such behaviour to be accentuating the positive face of their interlocutors. This is consistent with the generalisation (cf. Locastro 1987, 1999; White 1989; Maynard 1997) that the Japanese use backchannelling behaviour to maintain harmony in conversations. While this may be a universal purpose of backchannels, the fact that their overuse can be perceived negatively in certain languages seems to suggest a fundamental difference from how Japanese conceptualise them.

In a contrastive study of Japanese and US English backchannels, Tajima (2001) found evidence supporting both sides of the debate. While Japanese backchannel use was largely governed by hierarchical factors such as the age, gender, status of interlocutors and the formality of the conversational settings, there were also instances in which Japanese listeners attempted to mitigate FTAs by shifting the style of their backchannel forms (i.e., creating greater psychological distance in conversations). As shown in Table 1 below, Tajima compares some of the basic patterns of usage in Japanese backchannel forms (known as *aizuchi*) with three common backchannel forms in English (i.e., *yeah*, *right*, and *uh-huh*). Although Tajima's presentation of common backchannel forms in Table 1 is somewhat limited in scope, as she does not describe in great depth some of the hierarchical elements mentioned above, it is interesting that the backchannel forms in her categories suggest a clear relationship between gender and formality. That is, backchannel forms that are considered informal in Japanese are thought to be gender neutral, whereas feminine forms generally equate to more formal backchannels. Women who know each other well might be expected to adopt a gender neutral/informal form. Masculine forms, on the other hand, generally fall in line with the less formal backchannels. However, if a younger man were speaking to an older man, the younger man would be expected to adopt a more formal form.

ENGLISH	JAPANESE				
	Formal	Informal	Masculine	Feminine	Gender Neutral
yeah	*hai* *ee*	*un* *aa*	*aa* *ou*	*ee*	*un*
right	*sou* + sentence final particles (SFP)				
	sou desune	*sou* *sou dane* *sou dayo*	*sou dana*	*sou ne* *sou yo*	*sou* *sou dane* *sou dayo*
uh-huh	*ee ee*	*un un* *aa aa*	*aa aa*	*ee ee*	*un un*

Table 1. Examples of English and Japanese backchannels (from Tajima 2001: 57).

Using Silverstein's (1976) notion of indexicality, Tajima (2001) provides various examples of "indexical presupposition" and "indexical creativity" from the six dyadic Japanese conversations in her study. In line with the conceptualisation of Japanese politeness reflected in the *wakimae* principle, indexical presupposition refers to the societal expectations that Japanese speakers choose certain backchannel forms based on age, gender, status of interlocutors, and the formality of the conversational settings. The following example (Tajima 2001: 57) demonstrates how certain contextual factors from the conversation can be inferred from the backchannel form the listener chooses to employ:

(1) X: Samui desu ne [It's cold here]
    Y: ee [Yeah]

As shown in Table 1, the backchannel form *ee* suggests that speaker Y is female, speaker X has a higher status than speaker Y, and speaker X is likely to be an unfamiliar person to speaker Y. Tajima explains that by uttering the more informal form *un* (instead of *ee*) in this situation, speaker Y would be seen as showing too much familiarity between interlocutors, thus creating an impression of ignorance or lack of self-control.

Indexical creativity refers instead to the way listeners shift the styles of their backchannel forms to mitigate FTAs. One example in Tajima's study involves an exchange between two female speakers engaged in a casual conversation. As they were friends and the same age, most of the backchannel cues in the conversation predictably consisted of plain and informal forms such as *un*, *aa* and *sou*. However, when H appeared to disagree with S, her backchannel cues switched from informal to extremely feminine forms such as *ee* and *sou yo*. By shifting to a slightly more formal and less familiar backchannel style, H signals some level of disagreement, without having to state it overtly (which would mitigate their interlocutor's loss of face). Thus H seems to be manipulating the creative meaning of her backchannels to maintain harmony in the conversation. Within six dyadic conversations involving US participants, Tajima (2001) found no evidence of style-shifts in listeners' backchannels toward the speaker. However, this does not mean that English has no style-shifts to signal listeners' psychological distance, for Tajima did not include prosodic cues in her measurement techniques. It might be that L1 English speakers have other ways to mitigate their psychological distance through listening behaviour (e.g., changing their intonation, stress, pitch, etc.).

Further differences in how the Japanese view politeness are highlighted in Haugh's (2004) comparison of the term *politeness* in English dictionaries with its Japanese equivalent(s) *teinei* and *reigi tadashii* in Japanese dictionaries. Modern definitions of politeness in English generally fall into four categories: as behaviour avoiding conflict and promoting smooth communication (Lakoff 1989); as socially appropriate behaviour (Fraser & Nolen 1981); as consideration for the feelings of others (Brown 1980); and as H's evaluation of S's behaviour as polite (Eelen 1999; Mills 2003). Many of these dimensions of politeness were also mentioned in Japanese dictionaries; however, the way they are lexicalised in Japanese appears to be quite different and more complex than in English (see Haugh 2004 for the etymology of the word *politeness* as developed in Japanese *kanji* characters). One difference is that in Japanese the term is generally associated with good manners or etiquette (*sahoo*), which express vertical respect (*keii*), propriety (*rei*) and an ability to adhere to social norms (Shinmura 1991; Kamada & Komeyama 1992).

3. Discussion

From a general standpoint, I subscribe to Matsumoto's (1988) argument that understanding one's position in the social hierarchy and speaking and behaving accordingly is, without exception, the defining feature of Japanese politeness. However, Matsumoto's contention that

negative face is 'alien' to Japanese culture (1988: 405) seems to be somewhat overstated. If this were true, Japanese people behaving within the parameters of their hierarchical groups would be able to perform FTAs without any fear of imposing on their interlocutor. Although intra-group dynamics may often create a certain level of comfort, it is unlikely that a Japanese speaker would tell a friend that he is going to borrow his car, or that a subordinate would tell his boss that he requests a pay rise. Instead (by turning these imperatives into requests), it is likely for S to engage in some strategy involving indirect language and hedging to mitigate the FTA. Cutrone (2005) found that several Japanese participants admitted they often resorted to avoidance and/or feigning understanding as a means of mitigating such potential FTAs as disagreeing and not understanding. Moreover, shifting the style of backchannel forms (to create distance) may be another strategy used by the Japanese to mitigate FTAs (see Tajima 2001).

The debate will inevitably continue as it rests on differing interpretations of how B&L outline their revised model of politeness. On the one hand, this assumes that its underlying principles are universal, while on the other hand it acknowledges that "cultural specific usages will vary" (B&L 1987: 57). Thus, as Gilks (2010) points out, the core of the debate centres on how far these "cultural specific usages" can extend without moving beyond the boundaries of B&L's framework. As far as backchannels are concerned, research in this area, particularly as it relates to politeness and face theory, is still in its infancy. Besides shedding light on aspects of the theoretical debate, further research could help inform language pedagogy and intercultural communication tasks involving L1/L2 Japanese speakers. More specifically, we need to look closely at how the backchannel behaviour of Japanese people changes according to the social profile of their interlocutors.

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