Cross Cultural Variation in the Notion of 'Face':

A Comparison of Japanese and American English

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The current paper will examine how the psycholinguistic term 'face' is realized differently in Japanese and American English.　Moreover, it will be argued that simply characterizing Japanese as relying heavily on negative politeness strategies is not a complete portrayal of this complex phenomenon.　Furthermore, previous studies have utilized primarily sentential level analyses without regard to new methodologies developed within the field of sociolinguistics.

Therefore, it will be argued that past studies did not provide a comprehensive portrayal of this multiplex phenomenon, and thus argue for a discourse level approach to examine this notion.

Keywords: face; social-norm view of politeness; politeness strategy; multiple identities

Introduction

Politeness is a phenomenon that has generated much discussion in both the linguistic and non-linguistic communities. It is important to realize that when linguists utilize the term 'politeness' they are not referring to such common sense notions as 'manners' or 'etiquette.' Specifically, this scientific conceptualization of 'politeness' has been termed 'politeness 2' in the linguistic literature. For the purpose of the current paper, 'politeness' will be defined as attention to one's 'face.'

Purpose

Face refers to the way in which other people view you, essentially one's public self-image. The purpose of this paper is to review the literature that exists regarding the comparison of the manifestation of 'face' in both Japanese and English. Moreover, it will demonstrate that the notion of 'face' is not solely a linguistic matter but also needs to include cultural and temporal dimensions, as well as issues of identity.

Review of the Literature

Fraser (1990) asserts that the social-norm view of politeness refers to society having explicit norms that

decide whether or not a person has spoken politely. This corresponds with the type of politeness termed *wakimae* (discernment) in Japanese (Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki, & Ogino, 1986). If one chooses to violate those standards, social repercussions occur. This view of politeness will play a crucial role in the discussion that follows. However, let it be stated that in both the United States and Japan there are norms that govern societal perceptions of politeness. Therefore, this is not a dichotomous distinction as portrayed by Hill et al. (1986).

Perhaps the most influential theory of politeness to date is that put forth by Brown and Levinson (1987). The authors utilized this term that was used by American sociologist Erving Goffman (1967). It was first introduced by the Chinese anthropologist Hu in 1944.

Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that the Model Person (a competent adult speaker) has two special properties: rationality and face. Rationality refers to modes of reasoning from ends to the way the person will achieve those ends. Face, as previously stated, is one's public self-image. People have both positive and negative face. Positive face refers to the desire to be approved of by others, while negative face is the desire to be unimpeded by others. Contrary to prevailing stereotypes about negative

face being of prime importance only in Asian cultures; it is very important in Western culture where individuality and personal space are very important values.

In order to accomplish a potentially face-threatening act (FTA), one has the choice of utilizing either positive or negative politeness strategies. These are ways of accomplishing the act with redressive action. If one chooses not to use redressive action, the authors term that "bald on record." An example of that would be a command, "Give me that pen." "Off record" refers to doing the FTA indirectly. An example would be, "I sure could use a pen" or even, "I can't take notes." Positive politeness strategies address one's positive face wants, and thus emphasize solidarity. Negative politeness strategies, on the other hand, address one's negative face wants, and thus emphasize deference. An example of a negative politeness strategy would be, "I am sorry to bother you, but could I borrow a pen?" The implication is that the speaker is inconveniencing the hearer. "Hey buddy, got a pen?" is an example of a positive politeness strategy. The implication here is that the speaker and hearer are on the same level.

An immediate issue regarding Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory is their claim of universality based on only three languages. Additionally, they utilized a sentential level approach and did not look at extended pieces of discourse. In summary, they do not put forth enough empirical data to claim a universal theory of politeness.

Discussion

It has been stated that Asian languages (Eelen 2001: 3) largely utilize negative politeness strategies because they are said to emphasize deference. Basically, they are operating under the distance category of Lakoff 's (1973) distinction. Lakoff (1973) gives three rules of politeness: (1) don't impose (distance), (2) give options (deference), and (3) be friendly (camaraderie). Moreover, Japanese people are said to operate under the "polite fiction" of "you are my superior" (Sakamoto and Naotsuka, 1982). Therefore, in order to emphasize status differences, negative politeness strategies are utilized. Brown and Levinson (1987) cite Japanese as a language that relies heavily on negative politeness strategies. They even go so far as to call it a negative politeness culture (p. 245). However, they do not cite any empirical evidence to

support this claim. Without empirical evidence this statement has little value. Americans, on the other hand, are said to operate under the "polite fiction" of "you and I are equals" (Sakamoto and Naotsuka, 1982). Thus, it has been said that American English relies heavily on positive politeness strategies. The most obvious example of this is the use of *keigo* (honorifics) in the Japanese language and lack of it in American English. The discussion which follows will show that this notion is far more complex than that, and thus argue against a universal theory of politeness. Due to the importance of individuality in American culture, negative politeness strategies are frequently used. For example in order to ask someone for help, depending on the closeness of their relationship, "I know that you are very busy, but do you think that you could help me?" To an American, this kind of request respects his/her individuality to the utmost. In contrast, a positive politeness strategy would be, "If you have a moment, how about helping me." Most likely what would govern which strategy is used is the degree of imposition of the request, and the closeness of the relationship between the interlocutors.

In Japanese what is of utmost importance is position in relation with others in the group (Matsumoto 1988: 405). According to Matsumoto (1988), Brown and Levinson's theory is built on the foundation that individuals defend their own territory through the use of negative and positive politeness strategies. In Japanese, loss of face is associated with not acknowledging the structure and hierarchy of the group (p. 405). This is manifested in the fact that people see themselves as working as part of a group. In Western culture, one usually would say, "I am an engineer." In Japanese culture, one says that he/she works for company X (p. 406). The notion of wanting to defend individual territory (negative face-want) is alien to many Japanese people (p. 408). However, much of Japanese politeness is based on the notion of non-imposition of another. While one's positive face-want is important due to membership in the group, Japanese tend to use a lot of negative politeness strategies as well, especially to accomplish potentially face-threatening speech acts. Therefore, I feel that Japanese people use both positive and negative politeness strategies. The issue at hand is that the speakers do not have an active choice between positive and negative strategies as Brown and Levinson claim. Much of Japanese politeness is

obligatory. This will become clearer later on with Hill et al.'s (1986) discussion of the prominence of *wakimae*.

Matsumoto (1988) goes on to analyze linguistic elements in relation to Brown and Levinson's model. Matsumoto terms deferent expressions 'relation acknowledging devices.' An example is when a parent is dropping a child off at school, he/she says to the teacher the equivalent of ,"*musume wo dozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu*"(please take care of my daughter) (p. 409). The core speech act is a request; therefore, the imposition is on the teacher. The parent needs the help of the teacher, so he/she humbles him/herself. The crucial element of an utterance such as this one, I feel, is that the person who says it is indicating the interpersonal relationships that exist: the person who is humbling him/herself is not choosing to use a negative politeness strategy, but uttering what is socially required to appropriately make a request. *Keigo* is the required inflectional and morphological encodings which acknowledge the hierarchical nature of Japanese society. Once again there is not a choice not to include the polite morphological ending *masu* when speaking to someone of higher status. Matsumoto's classification of Japanese is that of a social-norm view.

Matsumoto does not mention the importance of the in-group/out-group distinction in Japanese which further exemplifies the interdependent nature of Japanese society. In Japanese there are certain verb forms and inflections that indicate membership to a particular group. For example, there are forms that indicate membership within a family. American English does not have this type of formal in-group/out-group lexical distinction. However, as with any society or organization there are both in and out groups. For example, in a company there is going to be information that is made available only to members of that company. The main difference here is that English is more flexible in a purely linguistic sense of this in-group/out-group distinction. However, let it be noted that in both societies there is a certain degree of politeness that is expected. Furthermore, failure to utter what is appropriate could result in people viewing that individual as not polite, respectful, et cetera. In this sense, the two societies are very similar.

Whereas Matsumoto (1988) questions the notion of face in Japanese, Hill et al. (1986) actually introduce the notion of *wakimae* and the discernment/volition distinction. The authors define *wakimae* as the almost automatic observation of socially agreed upon rules which include both verbal and non-verbal behavior (p. 348). The speakers submit passively to the requirements of the system. Volition, on the other hand, refers to the speaker having a more active choice in what strategies to use. The authors state that all of positive politeness and much of negative politeness fall under the category of volition. Both volition and discernment operate in American English and Japanese, however, discernment is much more prominent in Japanese and volition in American English.

Matsumoto (1988) and Hill et al. (1986) parallel each other in the sense that Japanese people do not have the same free choice of strategies to use as speakers of American English. Matsumoto (1988) goes so far as to say that Japanese speakers cannot even conceptualize the notion of free choice of politeness strategies because they are very group oriented. However, she does not give adequate attention to the study by Hill et al. (1986), which showed that Japanese speakers do sometimes utilize volition. Matsumoto's (1988) study consisted mainly of an anthropological and sentential analysis. Hill et al. (1986) utilized a questionnaire where participants had to rate the appropriateness of different pieces of discourse. While both of these studies have laid important groundwork in this field, more studies need to be conducted that address people from different cultures' conceptualization of face from a discourse level approach.

Basically, both Japanese and American English operate within a social-norm view of politeness. If a speaker chooses to violate the societal expectations, there will be social sanctions towards that person. Group identity and harmony prevail in Japanese, so it is not usually the case that someone chooses to ignore expected polite behavior. This is true too in American English; if one is not polite there will most likely be social sanctions placed on that individual. The main difference between the two languages is that Japanese tends to be more rigid in the sense that politeness is embedded in the syntactic structure of the language. The speaker of American English has a wider range of choices to show the degree of politeness that he or she intends to.

Both Hill et al. (1986) and Matsumoto (1988) fail to consider the notion of multiple identities. In her ethnographic account of life in a neighborhood and as a factory worker in Tokyo, Kondo (1990), argues against considering 'self' as a global entity. She asserts that an individual has multiple identities depending on the context that he or she is in at the moment. For example, she discusses how regardless of her personal desire for independence; she was expected to be an active member of the community that she lived in. Her neighbors were extremely involved from her perspective; however, they were simply showing concern for her. This has been called "sweet interdependence" (Yamada, 1997). This parallels the discussion of discernment and volition, but also asserts that one person belongs to many in-groups. The distinction is not a simple, rigid dichotomy as both Hill et al. (1986) and Matsumoto (1988) assert.

In American society, previously, hierarchical relationships played a greater role than in the present. Scollon and Scollon (2001) contrast the striking difference in the importance of authority between those born during the Great Depression (1929-1945) and the Baby Boom Generation (1946-1964). Of course, the most striking difference between the United States and Japan is that the United States was created on the premise of individual freedom, and thus, this has dominated much of the culture. This contrasts with the Confucian ideals that Japan was built upon including: respect for both age and status, and self-discipline. This sharply contrasts with the United States where its creation was due to a lack of respect for the government at that time. Nevertheless, 'the Great Depression and before, hierarchy and age were very important in the United States: adults were to be respected at all costs. The authors assert that this so called "breakdown" of authority was due to the insecurity of status felt by those born during the Great Depression. The Baby Boom Generation, in turn, was born into a world of abundance. The authors do not attach a reason to this breakdown in authority; however, it is clear that this generation chose the Vietnam War as the target for asserting their individualism. Never again were the same distinctions and hierarchical relationships to occur in the United States. For example, in corporations there are instances where workers call their superiors by their first names. This would not have occurred for those born in previous eras.

Directions for Further Research

Further research needs to utilize a discourse level approach, and move beyond speech act realization. Blum-Kulka (1990) and Both Kasper (1996) have called for this. In order to have enough evidence to make claims about face, for example, support needs to be shown from across turns, and not simply with individual speech acts. Context is extremely important. Moreover, the studies by Hill et al. and Matsumoto are slightly dated. Perhaps a new study could look at the importance of the in-group and out-group distinction that exists in Japanese, or at the speech of young people where the usage of keigo is diminishing.

Relevant approaches could include: ethnography, interactional sociolinguistics, and conversation analysis. Ethnography refers to going to the culture where you want to study the phenomenon, and utilizing participant observation as a method to accomplish that. This is done through interviews and observations (see Bernard, 2002). Like ethnography, interactional sociolinguistics has roots in anthropology. It builds on the work of both Gumprez, Goffman, and Hymes. The main point of this approach is that meaning is created interactionally, and interpretation is based on shared expectations by interlocutors (see Schiffrin, 2000). In short, conversation analysis is the study of recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction. The goal is to describe the shared methods that interactants use to produce and interpret talk. The scholar most closely associated with this approach is Harvey Sacks. He built this approach on the work of Garfinekel, Goffman, and Chomsky (see Schiffrin, 1998 for an overview of the field). Since the studies done by Hill et al and Matsumoto, the field of sociolinguistics has gone past looking at single speech acts.

Conclusion

The current paper has shown that Japanese and American English use both positive and negative politeness strategies. While Japanese tends to be constrained by rules such as the usage of keigo, both societies have expectations regarding what is and is not polite. Additionally, issues of

culture, identity, and time are important to realize when looking at issues of face related to these two languages.

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