# What Does It Mean to Speak?:
# A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Meta-Linguistic
# Schemata in Japanese and English*

Sachiko Ide
*Japan Women's University*

## 1. Introduction

My gratitude goes to Dr. Hyon-Sook Shin, president of the Discourse and Cognitive Linguistic Society of Korea, Professor Jeong-Woon Park, and all the organizing committee members who so cordially made the arrangements that made it possible for me to come to this First Seoul International Conference on Discourse and Cognitive Linguistics: Perspectives for the 21st Century. I am very much impressed by the theme of this conference, especially the part "Perspective for the 21st Century." It is my conviction that a theme of the 21st century for any discipline should be the inquiry into the new principles for peoples of this globe to co-exist. Co-existence presupposes the respect for varieties of indigenous cultural traditions from everywhere on this globe. Therefore, it is time for us especially those who have indigenous cultures outside of the West to bring up perspectives which have been neglected in the frameworks of the academic tradition, i.e. those originated in the West.

In order for us to avoid the misunderstanding, it is important for me to state the following at the outset. I am going to propose a cross-cultural difference in meta-linguistic schemata in Japanese and English as a way of highlighting the differences of degree of what it means to speak. Bringing the perspective which has been neglected in the Western academic tradition does not mean to counter-argue for the perspective known as universal. Rather, I am pointing out the perspective

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dominant in Japanese language and language use in the hope to give attention to those phenomena which must be found in any other languages, in other words, universally, but might have been neglected as minor phenomena. The role of a scholar whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds are those of non-Western should contribute to the knowledge of the world by adding what the Western biased perspectives could not see.

It is in this sense this presentation of mine be taken as an example of innovative mode of contribution for the perspective for the 21$^{st}$ century.

As a way of paying respect to Korean people, I would like to focus on the use of linguistics forms characteristic of East Asian languages. As far as I know, Korean has a rich system of lexical varieties to show respect and humility. There are also complex varieties of person reference terms, which vary depending on the speaker's relationship to the hearer or the other people in the context of speaking. These features, when compared with English, remind me much more of the Japanese language. I am not in a position to talk about Korean, but taking advantage of being a native speaker of an East Asian language, I would like to talk about some things which have not been well dealt with in the frameworks of the linguistic and pragmatic traditions of Western oriented scholarship.

An incident which might illustrate the huge gap between the Western mind and the Eastern one occurred about three and a half years ago when an economic crisis started in Thailand, and spread to all the East Asian countries including Korea. Japan was no exception. People all over the world watched how the Asians would cope with this economic crisis, as there was a possibility that it might trigger a worldwide economic collapse. One day, a journalist from the *Financial Times*, who had a Ph.D. in sociology from Cambridge University, came to my office for an interview. She felt that, if the honorific system were abolished from the Japanese language, this messy economical confusion could be resolved. She believed that language supports the infrastructure of a society. She presumed that the point of the system of honorifics was to ensure distance between interactants and it is also a system geared toward making information ambiguous and complicating its transmission. Therefore, if the system of honorifics were to be abolished from the society, it would make it easier for the Japanese to transmit information. This in turn would solve the complicated societal problems.

When I mentioned what this journalist had said to my Japanese colleagues and students, they all laughed. We do not know how to explain what it was that she had not understood, but we all know that we cannot get along without honorifics. I am sure, Koreans who have had experience of suffering the reformation according to the IMF guideline would feel sympathetic to this problem of Japanese honorifics. Language is not a tool like a pen, a typewriter, or a computer. The very way we think and express ourselves and relate to others is tied to a system of language in which honorifics play an indispensable role. Therefore, we cannot think of abolishing honorifics from our system of language.

Honorifics was brought up by this journalist as the key hindrance for democratization and efficient economic functioning. Behind this logic lies equating modernization and globalization with westernization. To the extent we become westernized, we can have a better system, a better society and a better world.

In the face of such a proposition, we have to stop and think whether language is really such a system that can or must be changed so that we can operate our own society in the Western way.

Is it better for the world to westernize, and does that mean sacrificing all of the varieties? There are quite a number of linguistic features or pragmatic features which we CANNOT account for if we follow only Western theories of linguistics and pragmatics.

I cannot help thinking that the Western way of looking at language is basically somewhat different from ours i.e. the East Asians. It seems to me that their way of looking at language is as something linear, something which can be processed one piece after another in an alphabetic item-and-process approach. The way Western languages and Chinese are written highlights this difference, since Western languages are all written from left to right, and each alphabet letter contributes to a whole, which is defined by a space before and a space after a word. This is basically processed by the left-brain. Chinese, in contrast, features characters, which are in themselves a whole, though they may relate to others in a variety of ways. It is easy to understand the alphabetic brainframe as a mindset that lends itself to one dimensional conceptualization, but some aspects of our language can not be explained within the framework of this kind of linear understanding of language. Some languages seem to require a sociolinguistic system of two or sometimes three

dimensions.

## 2. Difference in speaking: the East and the West

This problem has occupied me for about a decade, ever since my article, "Formal Forms and Discernment: Two Neglected Aspects of linguistic politeness" appeared in *Multilingua* in 1989. I have come to the conclusion that there are at least two essential aspects which we must incorporate if we are to give a fair account of the universals of linguistic politeness. The first is the difference in what it means to speak in the West and in the East. The second is that the organization of speaking must be considered in terms of hierarchical structures. In this presentation I focus on the first difference.

This first difference, that of what it means to speak in the West and in East Asia, is fundamental. This diversity is illustrated in a pioneering work by Linda Young called *Cross Talk and Culture in Sino-American Communication* (1994). Young realizes that there are important differences in the way Americans speak English and the way Chinese speak English. What appears inscrutable to Westerners are Chinese discourse patterns that Chinese speakers use in English in cross talk settings of business negotiations. For example, a summary statement of the main argument is delayed until the end, which is the reverse of an English discourse convention. She maintains that this is simply a consequence of the Chinese principle of pragmatics. She argues that such discourse phenomena could only be understood from the viewpoint of the Chinese cultural ideology of interpersonal interaction.

Another difference in discourse convention I would like to illustrate is on turn takings. Ide and Uchida (Forthcoming) found the contrastive differences in the way turn takings occur in Japanese and English. Tables 1-1, 1-2, and Table 2-1, 2-2 show the reverse discourse phenomena. When the turn occurs after the utterance is completed, Japanese speakers tend to correct but English speakers tend to agree. On the contrary, when the turn occurs in the middle of the utterance, Japanese speakers tend to agree but English speakers tend to correct. Where does this striking differences in discourse conventions in Japanese and English come from?

Table 1-1: What is said when the turn is taken after the speaker finishes the utterance (Ide & Uchida Forthcoming)

(): the actual numbers ƒ

| What is said when the turn is taken | English |
|---|---|
| Agreement | 40.4 %( 65) |
| Confirmation | 19.3 %( 31) |
| Question | 12.4 %( 20) |
| Answer | 9.3 %( 15) |
| Objection | 6.8 %( 11) |
| Correction | 6.2 %( 10) |
| Topic Change | 5.6 %(9) |
| TOTAL | 100 %( 161) |

Table 1-2: What is said when the turn is taken after the speaker finishes the utterance (Ide & Uchida Forthcoming)

(): the actual numbers ƒ

| What is said when the turn is taken | Japanese |
|---|---|
| Correction | 22.7 %( 71) |
| Topic Change | 16.0 %( 50) |
| Answer | 15.0 %( 47) |
| Objection | 13.8 %( 43) |
| Confirmation | 11.5 %( 36) |
| Question | 10.9 %( 34) |
| Agreement | 10.1 %( 32) |
| TOTAL | 100 %( 313) |

Table 2-1: What is said when the turn is taken in the middle of the current speaker's utterance (Ide & Uchida Forthcoming)

(): the actual numbers j

| What is said when the turn is taken | English |
|---|---|
| Correction | 31.6 %(37) |
| Topic Change | 18.8 %(22) |
| Objection | 12.8 %(15) |
| Question | 12.0 %(14) |
| Answer | 10.3 %(12) |
| Confirmation | 7.7 %( 9) |
| Agreement | 6.8 %( 8) |
| TOTAL | 100 %(117) |

Table 2-2: What is said when the turn is taken in the middle of the current speaker's utterance (Ide & Uchida Forthcoming)

(): the actual numbers j

| What is said when the turn is taken | Japanese |
|---|---|
| Agreement | 33.7 %(65) |
| Confirmation | 16.1 %(31) |
| Answer | 15.5 %(30) |
| Question | 13.5 %(26) |
| Correction | 8.8 %(17) |
| Topic Change | 7.2 %(14) |
| Objection | 5.2 %(10) |
| TOTAL | 100 %(193) |

This difference in discourse conventions in the East and the West is highlighted by a quotation from the Bible at the beginning of the book: In the West, it is believed that "In the beginning was the word." In contrast, consider the Chinese view that the "Dao" (that is "the ethical way") which can be spoken is not constant Dao. This simple but contrasting cultural understanding of speaking gives us a glimpse of the

depth of the differences between what it means to speak in the West and the East. However, we realize with regret that it has been the trend up to now to base a scholarship on the established assumptions of the Western science, where the conviction that science is based on rationality emerged at the beginning of the 16th century, and sets a universal norm for accessing the value of culture activity everywhere on the planet (Hall and Ames 1995). The distinction we are concerned with today is the outcome of the philosophical development in the civilizations in question, which can be traced back to their respective origins. The essential concepts in Western intellectual tradition, concepts such as 'absoluteness', 'transcendence' or 'subjectivity', played no part whatsoever in the development of East Asian cultures. While in the West there is an absolute being which is supposed to have created individual beings, Asians do not assume such an entity or such an origin. The East Asian worldview goes back as far as the 10th century BC. The value system of yin and yang, which encompasses all objects and abstract concepts in the universe, has consistently endured despite changes in religion and philosophies over the 3,000 years of Chinese history, spreading across neighboring countries, that is Korea, Japan, Thailand. According to this value system, every thing exists in relation to the other things. This differs greatly from the Western value of the individual as the central unit of society. In the Eastern worldview, things exist in relation to others, for example, man and woman, parent and child, black and white, and so on. Herein lies a fundamental difference in the concept of 'being', that is to exist, from the West, though it is assumed to be one of the foundations of cultural ideology both in the West and in the East.

As a medium of thinking, we have Buddhism and Christianity. While Buddhism views human beings as small, as nothing, Christianity assumes that all men are created equal by God. While in Buddhism, the world continues to exits, Christianity thinks of the world with limits.

This contrastive worldview of the East and the West, mediated by religion among others, gave rise to contrastive thinking prototypes by such people as the geologist Hideo Suzuki (1978), who characterized the Eastern prototype as "thinking in the forest". "Thinking in the forest" means that the human viewpoint is that of a tree, surrounded by other trees, with no view to a horizon or vast expanses, but focused on the trees in the immediate vicinity. Such a perspective leads understandably to

humilityandcautioninallthings.Anacademicwiththetree-in-the-forestperspective will hardly develop a theory of broad scope, but will rather focus on the precise technical discussion of the matter under investigation. I see the Western viewpoint as that of the eagle soaring in the sky, alone, unfettered by its surroundings, with a perspective that spans all that is beneath it. The ultimate individual, the Western scholar can pronounce sweeping and decisive judgments on problems surveyed from such heights. In other words, the Western perspective of speech event is to objective.Theanalogyincontrastto"thinkingintheforest"is"thinkinginthedesert". IntheWesternwayofthinking,thereisnothingtoobscureyourperspective.Incontrast, the way you conceive of the world in the East is as if your vision were hemmed in, as it is in the deep forest. The only things you can see are the things right in front of you. Therefore, in the East, you are very concerned with your relationship with whatever is around you. It is the tree-in-the-forest grasp of speech events. In this perspective, the individual is conceived of oneself as a part of the whole without having overall objective grasp of the speech event. Thus, the speaker's perception of the speech event tends to be subjective.

## 3. Features of some East Asian languages

Having introduced the type of thinking in the East different from the West, I may allow myself to present my lecture here in the way which is more familiar to the thinking in the East. According to discourse conventions in a macro level, I would like to introduce some more features of East Asian languages which cannot be well accounted for in the academic framework so far established. Person reference terms tendtohaverichsystemsinEastAsianlanguages.Howcanweexplainthecomplexity of person reference terms in East-Asian languages? To illustrate the complexity of person reference terms in Japanese case, Figure 1 is shown from the well-known Takao Suzuki's work.

Figure 1. Rules for self-specifiers (Suzuki 1987:43)

The personal pronoun for the first person reference is "I" in the Western languages, whoever you are, and whomever you are talking to. But in Japanese and in Korean, we change the person reference terms in so many varieties of ways depending on the context. Varieties of lexical forms constitute sociolinguistic structures: the speaker's sex, age, or social ranking is one dimension, the formality of the context is the other dimension. The latter is determined depending on the relationship of the speaker and the hearer. Please observe Table 3 in which sociolinguistic structure of personal pronouns are found.

Table 3. Sociolinguistic structure of personal pronouns (Ide & Yoshida 1999:471)

Honorifics is another example of linguistic and pragmatic phenomena which cannot be accounted for within the Western pragmatics. How can we explain this linguistic and pragmatic phenomena? And we must explain it, for it is so important in our languages.

In order to give an appropriate account of the sociolinguistic variables we see in person referent terms and honorifics in Korea and in Japanese among many other languages, we have to stop and think where the scholarship, or the science on which so much of our own work is based, actually come from. We are all indebted to the scholarship which originated in the West. The academic disciplines created in the West naturally look at the phenomenon in question within their visible context. In

the case of the study of language and pragmatics, the frameworks to deal with such phenomena were established based on the worldview of Western people that is the eagle's view soaring in the sky. Therefore, when we are to give a fair account of that which is unfamiliar in the Western context, we are at a loss to find a framework that encompasses such linguistic and pragmatic phenomena. When the journalist from the *Financial Times* suggested abolishing honorific use, we realize that this suggestion came from the perspective of Western society and Western languages where they regard the language is the means to transmit information and/or the speaker's intention. My goal today is to attempt to show that what has been missing in the Western frameworks can be provided by our own independent thinking based on philosophical and historical developments in East Asia. This, I believe, is a step towards a true understanding of the nature of human language and human interaction.

## 4. Two types of agreement

By returning to the differences in perspective between the East and the West, the deep forest view versus the bird's eye perspective, it is possible to gain a further understanding of the differences in what constitutes speaking in the East and the West. Figure 2 illustrates the differences in the speaker's meta-linguistic schemata. By the meta-linguistic schema, I mean the perspective of how the speaker grasps the speech event.

Figure 2. The meta-linguistic schemata

(1)  Mary gave me this book.
(2)  *(Marygawatashini)konohon(wo)kuretanoyo.*
MarySmeIOthisbookOreceive-PASTSFPSFP

When speaking in English, the speaker talks about the speech event as it were from a seat in the audience. As a consequence, the speaker has to observe herself in the speech event as an objective actor on the stage, so the speaker has to say, "Mary gave me this book." In contrast, in the speech event in Japanese, the speaker herself is on the stage and the audience who are sitting on the same level as and under the stage light as you can see in Figure 2. Therefore, the speaker shares the information with the hearer on the stage, and thus, does not have to state what is obvious in the context. Thus, "Kono hon kureta no yo" where there is no indication of the subject 'Mary ga' nor indirect object 'watashi ni' since both these items of information are obvious to the hearer, who is in the context of speaking. On the other hand, in Japanese there are two particles at the end of utterance. That is, 'no' as the nominalizing particle. This particle indexes the speaker's identity as sweet female. Another sentence final particle 'yo' at the end of the utterance asserts the speaker's attitude toward the information and the addressee.

It might be useful to look at this in more detail. In speaking Japanese, we recognize that the speaker is an element of the context in the Figure 2 that is on the stage. Therefore, the speaker shares the contextual information and the other factors relevant to in the context with the hearer. Speakers carry on a complex analysis of a variety of factors while speaking: while thinking about the content of what to say, they also must recognize what kind of position or role they have, and index their identity. Next, they must recognize the relationship with the addressee, and index it by the choice of linguistic forms. Then, speakers must evaluate the extent to which the hearer shares the contextual information, because shared information does not need to be mentioned, as it is contained in the context. It is important for speakers to agree their comprehension with the other contextual factors. For speakers of Japanese to express or to index such positions in the context is essential. This agreement is shown by appropriate modal expressions which include person reference terms and honorifics. In the West, on the other hand, there is a tendency for speakers to situate their viewpoint in the audience and speak about what is going on on the stage from a seemingly objective perspective. Therefore, there is no need for speakers to worry about agreement with the context, as speakers of Japanese has to do so consistently. After gaining some insight into the importance of the difference in the speaker's position relevant to speaking itself, it seems probable that the difference in 'agreement'

may also have to do with the different levels at which the 'agreement' takes place. In Japanese, it is the context, meaning the speaker and the addressee as well as the formality of the setting, which determines the predicate forms, and this can be termed pragmatic modality. Agreement takes place in terms of Wakimae, in terms of showing one's sense of self, and is agreement at the pragmatic level, that is, the agreement of modal expression with the context. In English, on the other hand, agreement occurs at the grammatical level, inasmuch as the subject determines the form of the predicate by establishing number, person and gender.

## 5. Explanation

It is time to round up my talk by giving accounts of linguistic and pragmatic phenomena prominent in East Asian languages. With the contrastive difference of meta-linguistic schemata dominant in East Asian languages and English in mind, let me try to explain the differences of discourse conventions, person reference terms and honorifics.

## 5.1. Discourse conventions

First, let us consider discourse conventions introduced earlier. We learned from the work of Young (1994) that English discourse by Chinese tends to trace the Chinese ideology. That is, the summary statement of the main argument is delayed until the end, which is the reverse of English discourse conventions. Why is there this difference in discourse conventions?
I argue that Chinese people with the meta-linguistic schema of a tree-in-the forest, i.e. the one in a high context culture, are sensitive to the addressee and other contextual features. Therefore, it is emphasized to get the addressee involved in the process of the thinking rather than presenting the proposition clearly. English discourse conventions tend to state the theme of the proposition at the outset and illustrate it as the conversations go on. I think this difference in Chinese and English comes from the difference of the meta-linguistic schemata. In English, the speaker grasps speech event objectively. Thus, it is preferred to clarify the point of argument, as the schema of the speaker's discourse is that of the birds' eye view.
Similar explanation can be made for the difference of turn takings in Japanese and

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English as we saw in Table 1 and 2. Japanese take turns at the end of the speaker's utterance when the turn taker wants to correct what the speaker says, and at the middle of the utterance when the turn taker wants to agree. On the contrary, in English, turn taking occurs at the end of the utterance when the turn taker wants to agree, and at the middle of utterance when the turn taker wants to correct. This reverse phenomenon in discourse conventions can be explained by the difference of the meta-linguistic schemata in Japanese and in English. In a high context culture where the speaker is expected to recognize him/herself as a part of the context and have the meta-linguistic schema of a tee in the forest, the focus of discourse is to create 'harmony' by showing resonance in agreeing. But the correction is reserved until the end of the utterance, and it is only after some hedge statements, such as "I wonder of it is correct", "Well, let me see", and "I understand what you said, but…". What is emphasized here is harmony of the feeling of the conversationalists rather than the clarity of the propositional content of the conversation.

On the other hand, in a low context culture, where the speaker has the objective meta-linguistic schema tends to give precedence to the clarity of the propositional content. Therefore, we find in Table 1 and 2 that English turn takings are made in the middle of the utterance when the turn taker corrects the speaker's utterance. And turn taking of agreeing tends to be made after the end of the utterance. English discourse conventions are practiced in orienting the propositional content of the conversation as clear as possible.

## 5.2. Complex person reference terms

It is well known that the concept of personal pronouns in Western languages does not apply in the East Asia languages. The Western linguists who know of this multi-pronoun phenomenon often wonder why there are so many variety of pronouns or quasi-pronouns, but no explanation has been attempted as far as I know. The different meta-linguistic schemata introduced in this paper should be the key to lead this question from mystery to reasonably explained phenomena.

Figure 1 illustrates how a male speaker shifts self reference terms according to the category of interactants. For example, he chooses 'boku', an informal variant, in speaking to his collogues, elder brother, father, and chooses 'ore', a deprecatory

variant, in speaking to his wife but choose 'watakushi', a formal variant, in speaking to the principal of the high school he is employed. The speaker further chooses such kinship terms as 'niisan (elder brother)', 'otoosan (father)', and 'ojiisan (grandfather)' or the role reference term 'sensei (teacher)'. Figure 1 presents seven different terms for self-reference where in English 'I' can be used for all these variants. Table 3 illustrates that the person reference terms are varied further according to the sex of the speaker and the generation difference. How can we explain this multi-varied person reference terms? Is there a reason for this phenomenon? If there is no reason for East Asia languages to have these varieties of personal pronouns, the variation should have been eliminated. Silverstein (1985) claims that the structural categories of language are determined by the interactional consciousness. To quote his very difficult sentences, "...structure, though a theoretical abstraction 'is determined by' entailing use-value to the extent that structural categories are precipitated by constancies of consciously informed entailments in the social action of language use" (1985: 256). When considered in the light of meta-linguistic schemata discussed above, we may argue the following as an explanation for the complexity of Japanese personal pronouns.

In figure 2, we have seen that the speaker is an element of the content. Therefore, the person reference term does not have to be verbalized as long as it is obvious to the addressee. However, when the speaker has to verbalize her identity, she has to make a choice among varieties of self reference terms. This choice is made according to the agreement with the context. That is, if the context is formal and the relationship of the speaker to the addressee is not so familiar, the speaker chooses 'watakushi' but in other context she would choose 'atashi' among others.

Since in a high context culture, the speaker's meta-linguistic schema to grasp the speech event is such one as a tree in the forest, what is obligatory in pragmatics is the agreement of the choice of person reference terms with the contextual factors. In contrast, in English the speaker uses invariant 'I' whatever the context the speaker might be placed, this is because the speech is made by grasping speech event objectively. What matters in English is the agreement of the subject and predicate forms, i.e. grammatical agreement.

## 5.3. Honorifics

Let us recall that I mentioned about Japanese honorifics to be abolished by the English journalist from *Financial Times*. Why is it that we, native speakers of an honorific language, cannot think of abolishing honorifics from our language system? Honorifics is the morphological linguistic system to index the contextual element of the speech event. The contextual elements in question are the relation of the speaker toward the addressee AND toward the speaker him/herself in the speech situation. In a high context culture, the speaker, having meta-linguistic schema in the forest, what is obligatory in speech is the contextual agreement. That is, the speaker has to index the relation to the addressee and the setting, as well as how he/she represents him/herself. For example, how much dignity and elegance he/she wants to express as her personal identity is indexed by the choice of honorific forms. The presentation of the speaker's self identity is realized by such morphological forms as honorifics used according to the context. Language is not only the medium of transmission of information, but also the mediation to express the speaker's position in context. Language plays multiple roles, among which 'reflexive function' that is realized only in use in context (Lucy 1993) is vital in understanding language and pragmatic phenomena in a high context culture.

I conclude this talk by Dell Hymes' following passage (1986):

> Although linguists liberally inspired, may wish to ignore differences in evaluation, and appropriateness (of speech), social reality does not. The very choice of a variety conveys meaning and affects the meaning that can be conveyed.

A close look at this aspect of language is crucial for the global communication with peoples of variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The awareness on the meta-linguistic schema of a high context culture would surely serve as a motive for promoting a research direction needed in the 21st century, I believe. I am aware that the organizational style of this lecture is something in accord with a tree in the forest view even though it is presented in English.

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(Email: side@lares.dti.ne.jp)