

# How and why honorifics can signify dignity and elegance

## The indexicality and reflexivity of linguistic rituals

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Honorifics are known as politeness markers in the languages that have them. However, the descriptions in the Western literature on the functions of honorifics were not felt by speakers of languages that employ honorifics to be satisfactory, either for academic or for general understanding. The goal of this paper is to try to make sense of the use and function of honorifics as fully as possible so as to explain how and why they can signify not only politeness but also the speaker's dignity and/or elegance. It is claimed that the indexing and reflexive functions of honorifics according to *wakimae* use have to be understood in a high context culture where the speaker's viewpoint and the organization of speaking is different from what has been generally assumed in the discipline to date.

Keywords: Honorifics; indexicality; *wakimae*; speaker's viewpoint

### 1. Can honorifics be abolished?

This article focuses on the use of linguistic forms characteristic of East Asian languages. It seems that the Thai language 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. In contrast to English, these features show great similarity with the Japanese language. Thus, it appears to make sense to talk of East Asian languages, and to point to 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 in 1997 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 to see 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 and economic crisis.

Japanese colleagues and students all laughed when told of this suggestion. While none knew how to explain what it was that this journalist had not understood, all knew that honorifics are essential. Language is not a tool like a pen, a typewriter, or a computer. The very way East Asians think and express and relate to others is tied to a system of language in which honorifics play an indispensable role. Therefore, East Asians cannot think of abolishing honorifics from their systems of language.

Honorifics were brought up by this journalist as the key hindrance for democratization of the society and efficient economic functioning. Behind this logic lies equating modernization and globalization with Westernization. To the extent East Asians become Westernized, they could have a better system, a better society and a better world. In the face of such a proposition, it is necessary to stop and think whether language is really such a system that can or must be changed so that East Asian societies can operate 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 or pragmatic features around the world that cannot be accounted for if only Western theories of linguistics and pragmatics are followed.

It seems indisputable that the Western way of looking at language is basically somewhat different from the East Asian way. It seems that the Western way of looking at language is as something linear, 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 as an oversimplification it can be described such that each alphabet letter contributes to a whole, which could be said to have a space before and a space after each word. Chinese, in contrast, features characters, which work as a whole lexical unit, though they may relate to others in a variety of ways. It is easy to understand the alphabetic brain-frame as a mindset that lends itself to simple conceptualization, but some aspects of language cannot be explained within the framework of this kind of linear understanding of language. Some languages seem to require a sociolinguistic system of complex conceptualization.

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

This problem has been central for about a decade, ever since my article, "Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of linguistic politeness" appeared in *Multilingua* in 1989. The conclusion reached after all this time is that there are at least two essential aspects that must be incorporated if a fair account of the universals of linguistic politeness is to be given. 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.

This first difference, that of what it means to speak in the West and in East Asia, is fundamental. This diversity is illustrated by a pioneering work by Linda Young called *CrossTalk and Culture in Sino-American Communication* (1994). Young realized 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 crosstalk 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 argued that such discourse phenomena could only be understood from the viewpoint of the Chinese cultural ideology of interpersonal interaction and the workings of the society.

This difference in the role of discourse in the East and the West can be highlighted by the popular saying in the West: "A man is as good as his word" and a Chinese philosopher's words that the "'*Dao*' (that is 'the ethical way') that can be spoken is not constant *Dao*," i.e. the ethical way cannot be expressed by speaking. This simple but contrasting cultural understanding of speaking gives

a glimpse of the depth of the differences between what it means to speak in the West and the East.

However, it has been the trend up to now to base scholarship on the established assumptions of 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 cultural activity everywhere on the planet. The distinction of concern 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 Asian cultures (Hall & Ames 1995).

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 recorded history, spreading across neighboring countries, including Korea, Japan, Thailand, and others. 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 world view, 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, Western political philosophy assumes that people were created by God. While in Buddhism, the world continues to exist, Christianity thinks of the world with limits.

This contrastive worldview of the East and the West, mediated by religion, 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." Such "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 humility and caution in all things. An academic with the tree-in-the-forest perspective will hardly develop a theory of broad scope, but will rather focus on the precise technical discussion of the matter under investigation. The Western viewpoint can be characterized 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 the Western way of thinking, there is nothing to obscure your perspective. In contrast, 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.

### 3. Features of some East Asian languages: How can the complexity of person reference terms be explained?

When compared with English, Thai and Japanese share a number of characteristics with other East Asian languages. According to the *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (Bright 1992), Thai is said to lack inflectional endings for number, person, and tense in the verb stems, but has extensive derivational compounding, the use of numerical classifiers, sentence final particles,

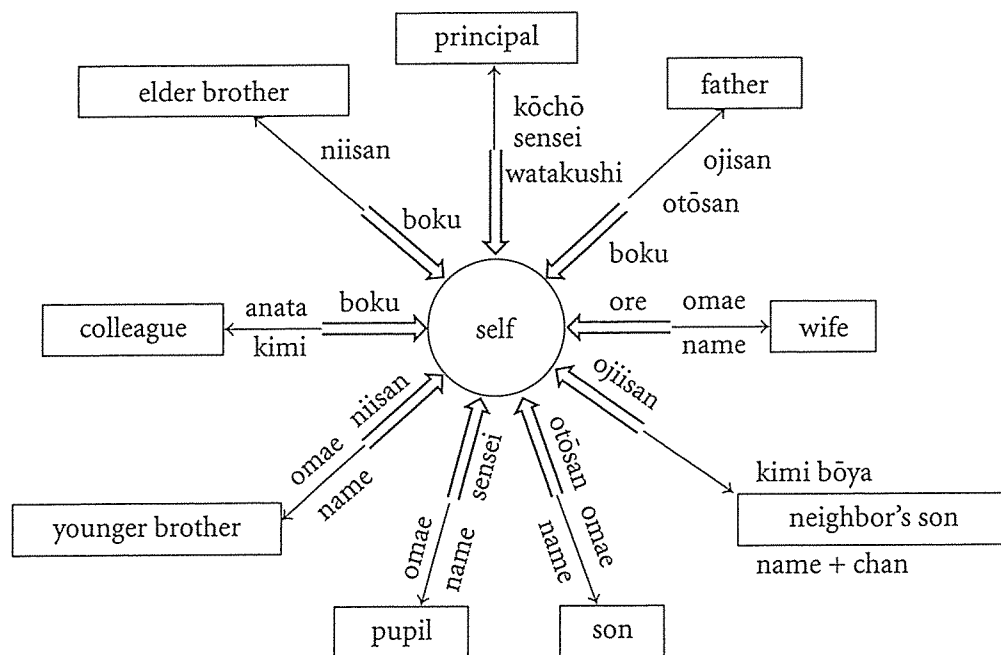


Figure 1. Rules for self and addressee reference terms (Suzuki 1987:43)

wide spread zero anaphora, and in addition, sociolinguistic factors are explicitly marked. Person reference terms are highly complex. That is, multi self-reference and addressee-reference terms are marked for the sex of the speaker, and the relationship of the speaker and the hearer.

Stylistic registers are lexically differentiated. Thus, there are various forms for the verb. Several variant forms, which are sociolinguistically chosen, are features of Thai, and the same can be said of Japanese. Figure 1 illustrates the Japanese case of self-reference and addressee-reference terms.

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 Thai, the person reference terms are changed in many varieties of ways depending on the context. Varieties of lexical forms constitute sociolinguistic structures: the speaker's sex, age, role or social ranking is one dimension, the formality of the context the other dimension. The latter is determined depending on the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, as well as the formality of the situation.

Table 1 shows the sociolinguistic structure of self and addressee reference terms.

Honorifics are another example of this kind of linguistic and pragmatic phenomena. How can these linguistic and pragmatic phenomena be explained?

Where can a framework to explain this difference be found? Why is it that East Asian languages have so many varieties of address terms? The richness in honorific forms is not unrelated to varieties of address terms. The discussion of

Table 1. Sociolinguistic structure of self and addressee reference terms (Ide & Yoshida 1999:471)

Person	Speaker Style	Adult		Young child	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
First person pronoun	Formal	<i>watakusi,</i> <i>watasi</i>	<i>watakusi,</i> <i>watasi</i>	None	<i>watasi</i>
	Normal	<i>boku</i>	<i>watasi, atasi</i>	<i>boku</i>	FN**+ <i>tyan</i>
	Deprecatory	<i>ore</i>	None	<i>ore</i>	None
Second person pronoun	Formal	<i>anata*</i>	<i>anata*</i>	( <i>kimi</i> )***	( <i>anata</i> )
	Normal	<i>kimi</i>	<i>anata</i>	FN + <i>kun</i>	FN + <i>kun</i>
				FN + <i>tyan</i>	FN + <i>tyan</i>
	Deprecatory	<i>omae</i>	None	<i>omae</i>	None

\* not applicable in addressing superiors

\*\* FN represents first name

\*\*\* ( ) begins to appear around the age of five

these topics has as its goal the challenging of the Western perspective, which so clearly fails to give a fair account of the linguistic and pragmatic phenomenon prevalent in East Asian societies.

In order to give an appropriate account of the sociolinguistic variables seen in the person referent terms in Thai and in Japanese, it is important to stop and think where the scholarship, or the science on which so much scholarship is based, actually came from. A great debt is owed to the scholarship that originated in the West. The academic disciplines created there naturally look at the phenomenon in question within their visible context. In the case of the study of language and language use, the frameworks to deal with such phenomena were established based on the worldview of Western people. Therefore, when an appropriate account of that which is unfamiliar in the Western context is to be given, there is simply no framework that encompasses such linguistic and pragmatic phenomena. When the journalist from *The Financial Times* suggested abolishing honorific use, it is obvious that this suggestion came from the perspective of Western society and Western languages. This paper attempts to show that what has been missing in the Western frameworks can be provided by independent thinking based on philosophical and historical developments in East Asia. This, it seems, may be 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 positions.

When speaking in English, the speaker talks about the speech event, as it were, from a seat in the audience. As a consequence, speakers must observe themselves in the speech event as objective actors on the stage, distancing "me" on the stage and the speaking self as shown in Figure 2. Therefore, a speaker has to describe the speech event objectively and say, "Mary gave me this book" in a full sentence. In contrast, in the speech event in Japanese, the speaker is on the stage with the audience, who are sitting on the same level as and under the stage light with the speaker, as shown 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 kure ta no yo* (*kono* 'this' *hon* 'book' *kure* 'be given' *ta* 'PAST' *no* 'nominalizer particle' *yo* 'FINAL

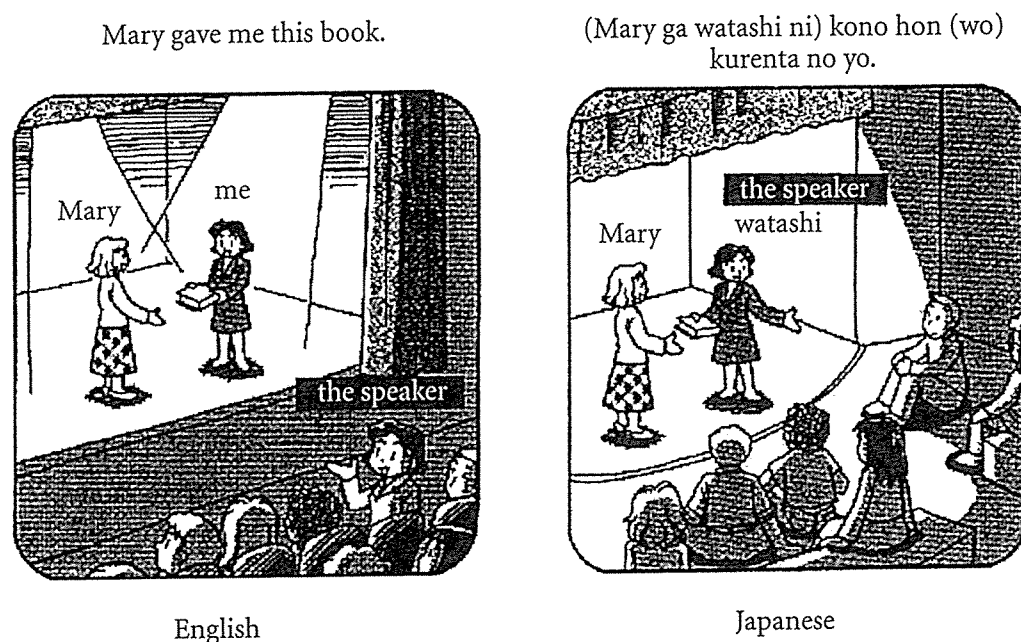


Figure 2. The speaker's position in speech event

PARTICLE')” where there is no indication of the subject “Mary *ga*” (*ga* ‘SUBJECT MARKER’) nor an indirect object “*watashi ni*” (*watashi* ‘I’ *ni* ‘DATIVE MARKER’), 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 the utterance. One is “*no*,” a particle to nominalize. This particle indexes the speaker’s identity as a sweet female. Another sentence final particle “*yo*” at the end of the utterance asserts the speaker’s attitude toward the information. If the equivalent utterance to English “*Mary ga kono hon wo watashi ni kure ta* (*wo* ‘OBJECT MARKER’)” were uttered, this would be considered pragmatically incorrect.

It might be useful to look at this in more detail. In speaking Japanese, the speaker is an element of the context on the stage, as illustrated in Figure 2. Therefore, the speaker shares the contextual information and the other factors relevant to 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 their 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” on the other contextual factors. For speak-



ers of Japanese to express or to index such positions in the context is essential. This agreement is shown by appropriate modal expressions. 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. This is not to say that they disregard the context completely, as such features as the T/V distinction show, but speakers do not show the multifaceted agreement with the context that speakers of Japanese so consistently do.

This illustrates a fundamental difference in linguistic and pragmatic phenomena in the East and the West. Although this and many other features are similar among languages in the East, and the points where they contrast are similar among many languages in the West, further illustrations will be drawn from Japanese and English as examples of the respective types of languages in the East and the West.

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 of situation, 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 relation to others, and takes place at the pragmatic level. 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. Such pragmatic level agreement as does exist in English is more a matter of lexical choice than of the language system, as incompatible choices are regarded as situationally inappropriate rather than as linguistically incorrect.

## 5. The organization of speaking

What has been discussed up to now about the differences between Eastern and Western speaking brings to mind the idea of Edward Hall (1966) on high context and low context cultures. Since Japanese undoubtedly reflects the concept of a high context culture, speakers of Japanese have to be more sensitive to context than people who speak in English. Therefore, the organization of speaking can be thought of as shown in Figure 3. When you speak in a high contextual culture, you must take the context into account as part of the in-

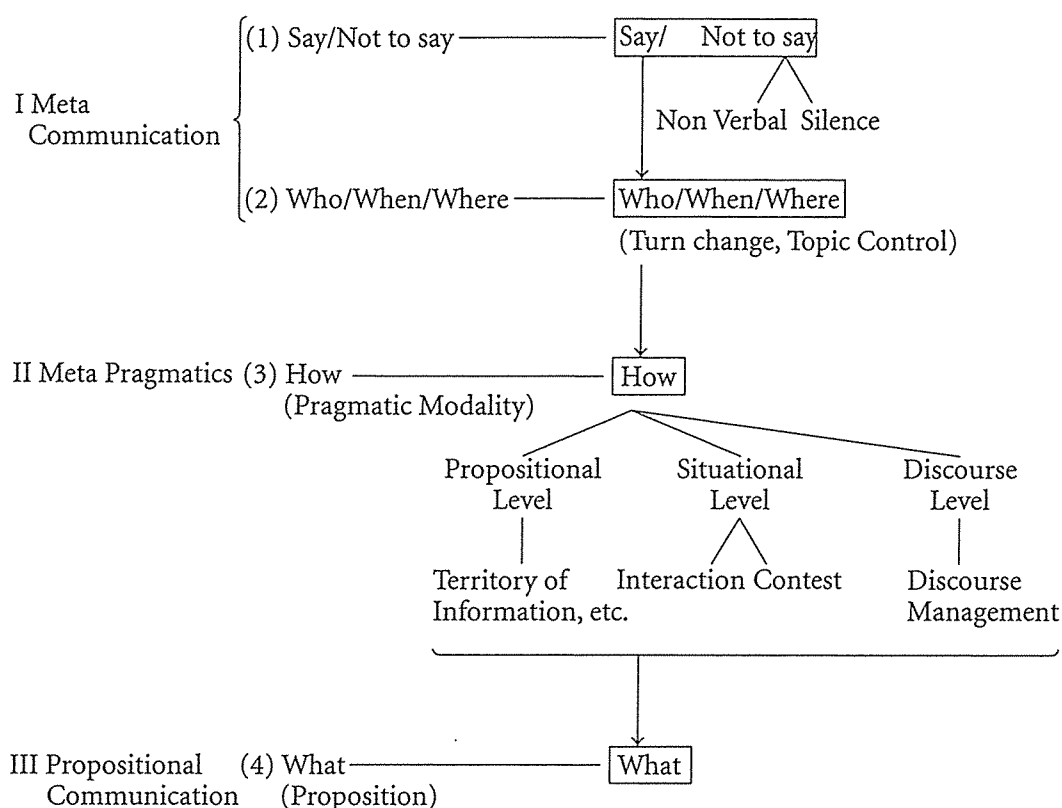


Figure 3. The organization of speaking

formation of an utterance. Most of the analytic frameworks Western minds produced reflect a low context culture. As soon as this basic difference is clear, it is obvious that speakers from high context cultures will feel that “something is missing.” It follows that a framework is needed that can take into account features essential when speaking in a high context culture. In Figure 3, “The organization of speaking,” there are three levels of communication. The first one is meta-communication, the second level is meta-pragmatics and the third level is communication of propositions.

First, when you want to say something, you have to decide whether you should even say it or not. Every culture has rules about speaking and not speaking. In certain contexts, you evaluate your position and that of the person you are considering saying something to and decide that it would be better if you did not say it after all. For example, in Japanese, at a seminar in graduate school, students sit and listen to the professor or the fellow student’s presentations, and they do not speak, even if they feel they have something they want to say. That is because it does not agree with the contextual norm, that is, with *wakimae*, as it applies in the seminar. So, not saying anything is a way of showing that the

speaker's (or rather the non-speaker's) politeness conforms to the norm. One can, of course, show one's intention by a number of non-verbal behaviors, such as nodding to show that one agrees, or tilting one's head to show one's doubt.

At the next level of speaking are the considerations of who is to speak, when to speak, and where to speak. Contextual information regarding the age, status, role, who has most knowledge, and many others are the factors that determine who speaks to whom, when, and where.

Another consideration involves the question of sequencing. How turn-taking is arranged means a lot. One can, of course, take one's turn, but it should be done within the shared knowledge of sense of place i.e. *wakimae* of the sequencing rules. If one breaks these rules, it gives a marked meaning, so it is always important to know when the appropriate time for one to speak has come. There are also rules regarding when and where one can interrupt or give back-channels, and who is to lead in topic selection. These and many other elements of a conversation are calculated with regard to the various contextual factors, factors that are shared among participants of the conversation in the speech event where the speaker and the hearer share the same context. In a high context culture, the questions of speaking or not speaking, of who may say what to whom and when and where are all a part of the information exchanged as a meta-communication. One can give a meta-communicative message because there is shared knowledge of the context. When one follows this rule, it means that one has the appropriate reading of the contextual information and that is also the information one is expressing. And if one does not follow these rules, this intended deviation gives a special message beyond what is verbally communicated. This kind of communication reflecting the context of speaking plays a major role in communication and is absolutely essential in high context cultures.

The next stage of speaking is the meta-pragmatic level. It is not the proposition alone that determines what to say, for there are a variety of ways to say the same thing, and therefore, how to say what one has to say is a question that is crucial in speaking in a high context culture.

It turns out that there are three sub-levels of pragmatic modality: the propositional sub-level, the situational sub-level, and the discourse sub-level. First look at the propositional sub-level. In saying the same thing, in a high context culture, one has to distinguish whether the information one is talking about is closer to oneself or the closer to the addressee (Kamio 1997). Depending on one's judgment of this distinction, one can express the difference by means of modal expressions of evidentials. This is pragmatically obligatory.

The next level is the situational sub-level. Depending on the relationship of the speaker and the hearer and the formality of the situation, appropriate modal expressions must be selected. Essential modal expressions used for this sub-level are honorifics, person referent terms and sentence final particles. This agreement to fit the context is just as obligatory as saying things grammatically correctly. If one fails to choose such modal expressions as honorifics appropriately, one may be criticized for the way one speaks. Matsumoto (1989: 208–209) claims that there is no neutral predicate form in Japanese for the proposition sentence “Today is Saturday.” One has to make obligatory choices for the predicate forms among plain, polite or super-polite honorific forms according to context of speaking. In a high context culture, where the speaker is supposed to exercise the tree-in-the-forest perspective by paying attention to the immediate contextual matters, and to express the appropriate positions according to the expected norms of the society, i.e. *wakimae*, a person who fails to do so will be an awkward speaker, just as those who ignores grammatical rules in English do.

The next sub-level is the discourse. Appropriate devices such as constant back-channeling while listening make the conversation go smoothly. It is almost obligatory, as the lack of it would be regarded as the sign of disinterest or anger at the speaker. There are varieties of mitigating expressions or formula to make the discourse pragmatically appropriate.

Finally, on the fourth level, having made decisions regarding all the other questions, one says what one wants to say, and that is the propositional content.

The organization of speaking as represented in Figure 3 shows the way to capture speaking in a high context culture. But scholarship up to now has focused primarily on level (4), the level of propositional content. Language use is bound to the context in a variety of ways from (1) to (3) levels. The rules for language use that have been discussed in terms of the speaker’s intention are those we are familiar with such as the Gricean Maxims, Speech Act Theory, and Linguistic Politeness Theories. However, little has been discussed regarding rules for linguistic form agreement with the context.

It is essential and very often obligatory in a high context culture such as the Japanese culture to make appropriate choices of linguistic forms as are required by the context. It is often said among Japanese “what that person says is right but the way the person says it is not acceptable.” This saying reflects the importance of meta-pragmatic level of speaking.

## 6. Politeness and pragmatic agreement

Honorifics have been mentioned as one of the linguistic forms that contribute to pragmatic modality in the organization of speaking. The use of honorifics makes the speech polite because of the linguistic role it plays.

It seems that only some of the aspects of honorifics have ever been discussed in academic works. For example, the brilliant work "Ideologies of honorific language" by Judith Irvine (1998:62), for all its insight, still seems to fail to explain the essence of honorific use. She seems to claim, "grammatical honorifics accompany linguistic ideologies that specify that flattened affect, conventionality, and avoidance of engagement with the concrete or the sensory as appropriate ways to express respect for *others*." Her interpretation of the use of honorifics does not explain how they work as "dignity or elegance" markers for the speakers of languages that employ them. No Japanese could imagine that our language could get along without honorifics. Even a simple propositional sentence requires the choice between honorific or non-honorific predicate forms.

Honorifics work as linguistic politeness only when they are used in keeping with the context. In other words, the use of high honorific forms itself could be interpreted differently depending on the context of speaking. Thus, if a high honorific form is chosen inappropriately, that is in a context where a less polite honorific form is expected, it could imply "irony," "alienation," or any number of other meanings. If honorifics are not used in a context where it is expected, it means that the speaker has ignored or neglected politeness and appropriate behavior. Thus, just as grammatical agreement in Western languages requires the agreement of the subject and the predicate form, it is the context of speaking that defines what constitutes agreement of the modal forms, and people in high context cultures have a highly complex communicative competence regarding the structure of varieties of linguistic forms. It is this agreement that is at the heart of the concept called *wakimae*, an aspect of linguistic politeness that is totally unrelated to those with which analytical frameworks of linguistic politeness are already familiar. This concept differs rather strikingly from the linguistic politeness frameworks of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) or Leech (1983), which posit that speakers find their strategies in order to produce utterances in such a way as to save face of the interactants.

Perhaps explaining this from a different angle will aid in its clarification. Prevalent Western terms such as "common knowledge," "frames," "schema" or "script" all point to shared expectations in communication. *Wakimae* is the conceptual frame the members of the speech community share, and it is very

often culturally defined. This kind of speaking is just like greetings or speech formulas in everyday language life that are used as rituals.

It is the ritual aspect that makes certain types of speech behavior polite. On first seeing somebody in the morning, one says a greeting like "Good morning." It is a ritualistic phrase intended to be uttered in the context of a first meeting early in the day. It is the situated practice to say "Good morning" in English speaking cultures, and "*Ohayoo*" in Japanese culture. It is a conventional practice. Everybody does it. Everybody knows that "Good morning" or "*Ohayoo*" are just a way of observing a ritualistic verbal exchange and indicating that the channels of communication are open. One could also say "Good morning" to one's daughter when she wakes up at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. In that case, it could ironically mean "you are a sleepy head," or "how in the world can you still be in bed when the sun is setting?" In this case, "Good morning" has a different meaning from "Good morning" uttered in the morning. It is not the exception, but the rule that linguistic forms and contexts have a matching relationship. In other words, linguistic forms do not stand by themselves. The forms and the situational context are in the relationship of co-occurrence. Speakers of a language where all belong to the same culture share the knowledge of the rules that match the linguistic forms and contextual situations in order to get along in the society. The system of "matching" between forms and context is not a one-to-one correlation made by calculations, rather it is a system whereby one form out of a number of options is matched in a complex way. It operates according to the dynamic super-system as the matching of the form and context are made dynamically so that new meaning is created from one moment to the next.

It might be useful to look at the way in which Japanese people acquire the appropriate use of honorifics. Up until they graduate from high school or college, they briefly learn how to use honorifics in the family, at school, or in the peer group. However, all they acquire is a rather superficial understanding of the forms and their uses. Once they become employed in a corporation, one of the first things they are trained in at many of corporations is the use of honorifics. They learn how to use honorifics to customers, or to other people they meet in business. In order to interact with people appropriately in the work place, they learn which linguistic forms to use in certain situational contexts. What they are learning is appropriate ritualistic behavior, because certain forms and certain situational practices are correlated, and the learning of this is the initiation ceremony for those newly employed in order to fit in in the society they will be working in. Therefore, the use of honorifics in Japanese society is not just an exercise in training people to respect certain other people in a certain way, or maintaining distance with certain people. It is first and

foremost a way of learning the rules so that you can get along with language in the society to which you belong. It is not like learning the rules to get a driver's license in a society where you have to drive a car. We learn the social rules by learning the rules concerning the use of linguistic forms, the core of which are honorific use.

## 7. Why is the use of honorifics polite?

Why is it that it is polite to use honorifics and formula? In other words, how does the pragmatics of ritualistic forms contribute to politeness? Ethologists have found that the basic wants of human beings are negative wants and positive wants. All human beings have the basic wants of negative face and positive face to be saved. Negative face has to do with the wants of a person not to be imposed on or hindered by others. On the other hand, positive wants have to do with the wants of every person that they want be desirable to others. A way to achieve the satisfaction of negative wants is to do things indirectly. In order for the positive face wants to be satisfied, it is good to claim that the speaker's wants are the same as the hearer's wants.

The use of formal forms such as honorifics and formula can be viewed from this perspective. The use of formal forms according to the expected situational context is firstly accommodating to the positive face of the speaker and the hearer, because saying "Good morning" in the appropriate context, that is, in the morning, is an interactional behavior to establish common ground. Since it is uttered according to expected social behavior, it gives pleasure to both the speaker and the hearer by satisfying their positive face wants, giving both parties a sense of sharing. At the same time, since the speaker makes use of firmly established formula, it does not have a personal touch, and thus is a way of expressing things indirectly, which makes clear that it is a way to satisfy negative wants. Therefore, the use of rituals can be interpreted as the way to fulfill linguistic politeness with regard to both negative and positive face wants.

In Brown and Levinson's framework (1978, 1987), honorifics are treated under strategy No. 5, negative politeness. It means that the honorifics can be used as a strategy according to the speaker's intention using the speaker's rationality. It does not explain the most crucial aspect of this ritualistic use of honorifics. It is not the calculation of the speaker's intention that the honorific form is chosen to be appropriate to the context, but rather it is the employment of the set pattern of language use. People say "Good morning" in the morning, it just comes automatically in the context. This is an aspect of language use in

high context cultures, where there are many varieties of modal expressions including honorifics for saying the same thing. By now it should be obvious that it is highly “economical” to achieve linguistic politeness by linguistic rituals. Unlike Brown and Levinson’s framework of politeness strategies, one does not have to calculate options, and one need only follow the rules for automatically matching the ritualistic forms and the context.

Honorifics are just one of a number of modal expressions. In Japanese, there is no grammatical agreement, like number, person, gender, or tense, but there is a pragmatic agreement between modal expressions and agreement with the context of the situation. While grammatical agreement is a strict kind with one to one agreement, pragmatic agreement is flexible. Several options of linguistic forms are often acceptable for one context. But there is a borderline of unacceptability such as that between *uchi* (in-group) and *soto* (out-group) that determines the use or non-use of formal forms.

While Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) framework of linguistic politeness, and Leech’s (1983) principle of politeness did not adequately cover the use of honorifics in the societies where they are used, Robin Lakoff’s Rule of Politeness, published back in 1973, provided a foundation for the understanding and ultimately the incorporation of honorifics and all that they imply into pragmatic theory. Thirty years after its publication, it is now time to focus on Rule 1 of Robin Lakoff’s linguistic politeness rules. It is this Rule 1 “Formality,” which has not been touched upon in detail until today. Lakoff’s outstanding insight into pragmatics led her to pinpoint the aspect of politeness that is made by the use of formal forms. In some societies, the choice of formal forms, formulaic expressions, and honorifics are the primary focus of linguistic politeness.

How can a universal principle of linguistic politeness be posited if, as Brown and Levinson did, this very important aspect of linguistic politeness in high context societies is excluded? In order for linguistic politeness to be truly universal and balanced, it seems indicated that a universal principle of linguistic politeness should be proposed that incorporates this aspect of ritualistic language use, which can be called *wakimae*.

## 8. How honorifics express dignity and elegance

How and why can honorifics signify dignity and/or elegance? It has been shown that honorifics are formal linguistic forms that cannot be used independent of the context. They are basically ritualistic linguistic forms chosen to fit to the particular situational context. The use of honorifics functions as linguistic



politeness because the fitting of the proper linguistic forms to the contextual factors makes the interactants feel secure in the interaction and the situation.

What does using honorifics accomplish? The use of honorifics expresses, or more precisely indexes, the appropriate relationship between the speaker and the hearer. It also indexes the formality of the situation. But honorifics do more than that. Honorifics can index the speaker's attributes. While honorific use for the interactants is geared to politeness for others, their usage to index the speaker's attributes is quite different in nature. It indexes the speaker's identity. People are judged as to what kind of person they are by the linguistic forms they choose. If honorifics are used appropriately according to the social norm, i.e. *wakimae*, a person is likely to be judged as a nice person.

What is the mechanism of the function of this language use? It is observed that female executives use more elaborate honorific forms than do women of lower status in the same corporation. This contradicts the popular belief that honorifics are supposed to be used by a person of lower status towards a person of higher status to show respect. What is the reason for this result that contradicts what people have always presumed? The findings show that women of higher status signify their dignity or elegance by using more elaborate, higher honorific forms than those used by lower status women (Ide & Inoue 1992).

How can this reality be accounted for? Even though, in a democratic society, talking about varieties of language in terms of social class is somewhat taboo, it is a fact that there are dialects that differ on the basis of categories of social roles and status. Female executives are one case in point, since they are indexing their high status by the use of more elaborate honorifics.

Regional or geographical dialects are a familiar occurrence the world over. Osaka can serve as an example. People in Osaka, the second biggest city in Japan, speak in what is called the Osaka dialect. Listening to somebody speaking in Osaka dialect, one understands the referential meaning, but also that the speaker is from the Osaka area.

Parallel to this, people tend to have different dialects according to their social roles and status. The higher the social status of the speaker, the more elaborate the linguistic forms they are likely to use. Regardless of an individual's ability to employ the more elaborate honorifics, people in a speech community share at least passive communicative competence concerning their use. Just as people from the Osaka area are identified by their accent, hearers are able to categorize the social roles and status of speakers by the speech forms they use.

There are varieties of language that differ on the basis of geographical, social, gender, and generational differences in a society. To the extent that a society is complex, the same propositional content can be expressed in con-

junction with varieties of linguistic forms that index social differences of the speaker. Since these linguistic forms cannot be omitted, some linguistic form must be chosen. And it is by this choice that speakers index their own attributes according to the social context. If one uses forms that signal the Osaka dialect, women's dialect, middle class dialect, and young people's dialect, one indexes with great precision where one belongs in the society. The reading of the attributes of the speaker is possible only and if hearers share the sociolinguistic passive competence of varieties in the community. To the extent shared context is high, the reading of the speaker's attribute may be elaborated. People from Tokyo who do not share high context with the Osaka area, for example, find it difficult to distinguish between Osaka dialect and Kobe dialect, the dialect of the neighboring city.

It is very often the case that high status people, such as executives in big corporations, use honorifics appropriately, not hypercorrecting, and with a relaxed tone. That variety of speech can be recognized as that of people of that social category. In this way, in the mind of the members of a speech community, the correlation between the type of speech and the type of person is widely recognized. The elaborate use of high honorifics indexes the features of the category of high status persons. Since speakers who choose to use high linguistic forms are very often those who hold high positions and whose behavior exhibits dignity and elegance, this information is attached to the speaker of such speech. The speech itself does not have dignity or elegance, but the features of the people who make habitual use of that speech are reflected through their speech, offering metalinguistic meaning of dignity or elegance. This becomes possible owing to the reflexive capacity of language (Lucy 1993, 1999). In this way, speakers are able to index their identity as persons of dignity and elegance.

## 9. Implication for linguistic relativity: Concluding remarks

As has been emphasized, linguistic forms and contextual factors are closely connected in high context cultures, where the speaker's vantage point is that of a tree-in-the-forest or on the stage as seen in Figure 3 and thus limited to that which is in the immediate area. High context cultures therefore require that speakers obligatorily pay attention to the contextual factors in the speech event in order to make the linguistic forms to be chosen agree with the relevant context.

The above statement does not entail that low context cultures do not require appropriate linguistic choices according to situational context. For ex-

ample, in English, when you want to leave, you say "May I please be excused?" to a person with authority over you, "I've got to be off now" to an equal, but perhaps "I'm out of here" to a close friend. The last option, said to a boss, could be grounds for disciplinary action or firing, because it is inappropriate for the situation. The levels discussed do exist in Western languages and cultures, too. These features have just been ignored, because they have to do with situations, and linguists have confined themselves to words, not people and situations. The choice of linguistic forms appropriate to situational contexts is a universal phenomenon. However, it has not been systematically investigated in the Western languages. One goal of investigating honorifics and some other linguistic phenomena in East Asian languages is to highlight these phenomena and shed light on what has been neglected in other languages, above all the Western languages.

What are the implications of this argument for the theory of linguistic relativity? It was stated above that the appropriate language use according to context can be found in English and many other languages, and therefore is universal. However, the focus should be made on the obligatory nature of systematic pragmatic agreement. The appropriate choice of predicate forms according to context for "Today is Saturday," for example, is automatic, just as the third person singular subject in English automatically takes "-s" morpheme. Slobin (1996:74–75) comments on Turkish narrative examples that have obligatory grammatical markings of evidentials, "We (English speakers) do have available optional lexical meaning for expressing notions that lie outside of the set of obligatory grammatical distinctions in a language." He further posits the aspect of "thinking for speaking" as the medium of language and thought, and says, "A 'verbalized event' is constructed on-line, in the process of speaking. Von Humboldt and Whorf and Boas were right in suggesting that the obligatory grammatical categories of a language play a role in this construction."

What have been discussed so far are pragmatic, not grammatical phenomena. But, as long as pragmatic constraints are obligatory, it can be claimed that honorifics and other modal expressions play distinct roles in the process of speaking. Having observed how linguistic forms are context saturated and pragmatic agreement is often obligatory, it becomes clear that language does not stand by itself but it is embedded in our everyday lives.

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