

On the Notion of *Wakimae*: Toward an Integrated Framework of Linguistic Politeness

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1. Introduction

Since the notion of *wakimae* ("discernment") was introduced by Hill et al. (1986) and Ide (1989) as a type of use aspect of linguistic politeness dominant in honorific languages, it also has been introduced in literature of linguistic politeness (Watts 1989, Kasper 1990). However, the understanding of this notion seems to have been only partial.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to delineate the notion of *wakimae* as a type of linguistic politeness. I shall discuss it in order to instantiate a type of language use which has been neglected in Western perspectives of linguistic politeness such as those proposed by Lakoff (1973, 1975), Brown & Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983). This type of linguistic politeness proposes a framework which takes account of the use of such formal forms as honorifics, address terms, pronouns, and speech formulas. It also incorporates the politeness phenomenon traditionally termed etiquette and protocol. This paper aims to seek a universal at a higher level by incorporating this type of language use into the already proposed frameworks of linguistic politeness rather than to illustrate something specific to honorific languages.

2. What is *wakimae*?

Wakimae means social norms according to which people are expected to behave in order to be appropriate in the society they live. This Japanese term is a noun: *Ano hito niwa wakimae ga aru.* (that person TOP *wakimae* SUB exist. 'There is observation of social norms in that person.') It has a derived verb form: *Ano hito wa wakimae te-iru.* (that person TOP *wakimae* PRES PROG ASP 'That person observes social norms.') Hill et al. (1986: 348) define it as follows: "*wakimae* refers to the almost automatic observation of socially-agreed-upon rules and applies to both verbal and non-verbal behavior. A capsule definition would be 'conforming to the expected norms.'"

We use this term to represent one type of use aspect of linguistic politeness; the other type is called 'volition' (Hill et al. 1986) or 'tact' (Arndt & Janny

1989). This term is employed because of the economic advantage of a single term over the phrase 'observation of social norms.'¹⁾

Wakimae is sets of social norms of appropriate behavior people have to observe in order to be considered polite in the society they live. One is polite only if he or she behaves in congruence with the expected norms in a certain situation, in a certain culture and society. Just like a set of rules you follow when you play a game, you follow *wakimae* in your game of life.

Thus, speaking within the confines of *wakimae* is not an act of expressing the speaker's intention, but rather of complying with socially expected norms. The speaker's attention is paid not to what he or she intends to express, but rather to what is expected of him or her by social norms.

To say "How do you do?" when you are introduced, or to begin your speech with a joke, is verbal behavior according to expected norms and may be referred to as examples of *wakimae* use in English. However, this is not obligatory.²⁾ In contrast, the prototypical observation of *wakimae* is intrinsically obligatory and situation bound, as we see in the choice of proper honorific forms and speech formulas. Among various levels of expected norms to be observed, the choice of honorific forms for the referent or the addressee, to whom due respect is required, is the most sophisticated.

The use of speech formulas are strictly tied to situational contexts, and are another kind of sophisticated linguistic forms chosen according to *wakimae*. Martin (1964: 403) states: "Japanese has an elaborate set of polite formulas, stock phrases designed to smooth every conceivable social situation. A foreigner who memorizes about twenty or thirty of the common situational exchanges can circulate in Japanese society with surprising success, even if he knows no other expressions;" What is performed by those conversational exchanges is the acknowledgment of the relative status and the relationship of the speaker toward the addressee, the indebtedness the speaker has to the addressee, etc. In such conversations, the participants are satisfied with phatic communion conveyed by conventional formulas and the recognition of the relationship expressed by social deixis of speech formulas and honorific forms.

The observation of *wakimae* is carried out on two levels. One is *wakimae* in which the speaker indexes his/her sense of place in relation to the referent and the addressee, and in the situational context. This micro-level *wakimae* is a kind of 'register' determined according to situational factors. The other is macro-level *wakimae*, according to which the speaker indexes his/her own place in each situation in the society. The latter is a kind of 'social dialect.'

The following is an account of the prototypical observation of verbal *wakimae* seen in the use of an honorific language, Japanese.

2.1. Micro Level *Wakimae*: Sense of Place in Relation to Situational Context

While *wakimae* is observed most minutely in the choice of honorifics, it is also seen in all aspects of verbal and non-verbal behavior. To briefly mention the aspect of verbal behavior, we have constraints of *wakimae* in such instances as when to speak and be silent, what to say, and how to say it.

Let us suppose the following situation. The speakers are a professor and graduate students sitting in a seminar in a Japanese university. What *wakimae* are they to observe? Students keep listening to the professor speaking, sometimes nodding but not uttering any sound until the professor yields the floor to his/her students. Given the floor, the students speak, observing *wakimae* in regard to what to say and how to say it. They speak within the constraints of allowed topics. The greater the status difference, the greater the constraint on what is allowed to be said. There is less spontaneity allowed to students than to the professor. As to how to speak, it is an obligatory *wakimae* for a student to choose honorific forms in a seminar. His/Her choice of honorifics indexes his/her sense of place in the situational context through expression of a formal attitude to the setting and a deferential attitude toward the professor, either as the addressee or as the bystander. The professor will speak with honorifics indexing his/her sense of place in the formal setting, the seminar. He/She may speak without honorifics outside of class, but the students will not reciprocate in non-honorific forms even in an informal setting.

The use of honorifics makes it possible to equilibrate the status difference existing between students and the professor. The principle underlying this equilibrium is the stabilization of conventional social order by placing participants in their own places in terms of social status, age, role, gender and power. Thus, the subtle attitude of the speaker is conveyed by the choice of honorific forms together with referential meaning conveyed by the content of utterances.

Just as speakers of European languages pay attention to the grammatical categories of person, number and gender for concord of predicate forms, speakers of honorific languages pay attention to interpersonal categories of socially determined superiority/equality/inferiority and familiarity, together with situational formality, to achieve a pragmatic concord of honorifics. This

is where pragmatics rules of situational context merge into syntax in honorific languages. The *wakimae* type of linguistic politeness is achieved when concord of predicate forms (in verbs, adverbs, nouns) is observed in accord with subject/object (which often appear in deleted forms and can be traced from honorific forms) referring to the referent/the addressee. Thus, the observation of *wakimae* is not the speaker's volitional speech act, but an obligatory speech act observed in accord with social norms of interpersonal relationships and the formality of situations.

Acknowledgement of interpersonal relations and situational context is also made by the choice of speech formulas. Most formulas are chosen with regard to a certain situation. For example, *Yorosiku onegai-itasi-masu*. (in a good way, I ask, HUM HONO, ADD HONO, 'I humbly ask you to look favorably upon me.') is chosen at some phases of interpersonal relationships. Its use acknowledges the beginning of a new phase of interpersonal relationship, and is obligatory. Another example is *Itadaki-masu*. (eat-HONO, ADD HONO, 'I am going to eat.') It is considered proper etiquette to utter this formula before eating meals. Thus, it is situationally bound *wakimae*. Most speech formulas are made to be used for specific interpersonal or situational *wakimae*.

2.2. Macro Level *Wakimae*: Sense of Place in Relation to Society

Besides acknowledgement of the sense of place in the speaker/addressee relationship and situation, the speaker acknowledges his or her own place in the structure of society he or she belongs. The speaker manifests his/her identity in terms of social status, age, role, gender, ethnicity, culture and regional background by the linguistic forms he/she uses.

Identification of oneself according to expected norms of the speaker's place in society is a macro-level *wakimae*. As in the case of regional dialects, the speaker acquires this level of social dialect as a part of his/her own culture. Let us illustrate cases of macro-level *wakimae*.

The non-reciprocal choice of second person pronouns used as address terms by a typical middle aged Japanese couple indexes role and gender identification of speakers: i.e. the husband addresses the wife *omae* (deprecatory 'you'), while the wife addresses the husband *anata* ('you').

Housewives' choice of honorific forms (*irasyaru*, suppletive form of 'come,' *kata*, polite form of 'person') in the same status and familiar relations is the manifestation of women's class. Women's frequent use of honorific prefixes *o-* or *go-*, which are called beautification honorifics and have no

relevance to deference, is another example of women's dialect.

A speaker of high status uses high level honorific forms in the public sphere. This is the politeness used to manifest one's dignified social standing. These uses of high level honorific forms in women's dialect and in the dialect of higher status persons manifest the speaker's good manner, which is called demeanor by Goffman (1967).

In some of the earliest Japanese literature around the 10th century, emperors and samurais used honorific forms, e.g. *tamau* (polite form of 'do'), to refer to themselves. This has been interpreted by Japanese linguists as honorific use for self respect. It is not used for self-respect *per se*, but for the manifestation of the speakers' dignified status.

This level of *wakimae* may be considered parallel to the businessmen's *wakimae* of wearing suits and women's *wakimae* of using cosmetics.

3. Why is it polite to observe *wakimae*?

Our next question is to ask why it is polite to observe *wakimae* and to discuss how we can incorporate it in the universal framework of linguistic politeness.

The choice of forms according to *wakimae* makes the speech polite because of the following two reasons. First, as was clarified in Ide (1990), formal forms and honorifics are derived from indirect expressions (circumlocutions, defocussing the agent, euphemism) in one way or the other made into frozen conventional implicature. Honorifics, therefore, implicitly convey meanings of psychological distance by conventional forms. Likewise, speech formulas are examples of formalism in which meanings are implied by conventional forms. The use of these formal expressions creates distance between the speaker and the hearer because of indirect meanings implied by conventional forms. This makes expressions work as a means of negative politeness strategies: strategy 1 'Be conventionally indirect' in Brown & Levinson's framework.

Second, the use of honorifics and speech formulas according to *wakimae* is delicately determined according to the contextual situation. Therefore, participants in conversations expect what they assume to be the most appropriate forms in light of social norms, as to both macro-level and micro-level *wakimae*. When the most appropriate choice of honorific forms and speech formulas are observed which matches expected social norms, it creates the feeling of sharing among participants. This sentiment of sharedness works

as one of Brown & Levinson's strategies for positive politeness: 'Claim common ground.' Thus, the use of honorifics and formulas functions as positive politeness.

In this way, both negative and positive politeness are achieved in the use of situationally bound formal forms like honorifics and speech formulas according to *wakimae*.

4. *Wakimae* Dominant Society vs. Volition Dominant Society

The major difference in the two types of use of linguistic politeness, *wakimae* and volition, lies in the targets for politeness. In *wakimae*, politeness is oriented to social norms, while in volition it is oriented to the face of the individual addressee. In the former the participant is recognized as a member of society, while in the latter the participant is recognized as an individual. In the former the participant is assumed to be different in status, age, role and gender, and the relationship among participants are determined in terms of complex factors. In the latter individuals are supposed to be equal under egalitarian idealism.

Edward Hall (1976) described Japanese culture as a proto-typical case of a high context culture, in contrast to American low context culture. In a high context culture people share a large amount of common knowledge. Complex meanings are attached to conventional patterns and protocols. There is little room for an individual to be spontaneous or creative, and there are ample expressions of honorifics, donatory verbs and speech formulas which are strictly context bound. On the other hand, in a low context culture like America, what controls people is not other people but the law, and under the law everybody is supposed to be equal. Little contextual factor is taken into account in dealing with interpersonal matters. It is a culture in which what is said is taken as it is, and eloquent, spontaneous and creative verbal behavior is cherished.

Wakimae is a characteristic of a high context culture, while volition is a characteristic of low context culture. They constitute dichotomous extreme types. In actual speech, however, two types of linguistic politeness co-occur with varying degree of proportion in each culture and society.

5. Concluding Remarks

The notion of *wakimae* has been delineated in order to supplement earlier frameworks of linguistic politeness. Linguistic features normally used for

politeness but have not been properly dealt with in earlier frameworks, such as address terms, pronouns, honorifics, donatory verbs and speech formulas, have been proved to be accounted for in the framework of *wakimae* type of linguistic politeness.

It is the social norm imposed on the speaker of each society as a kind of prescriptive criteria of social rules of politeness. The speaker perceives the criteria of *wakimae*, and expresses his/her own position in society according to the expected norm in terms of macro-level *wakimae*, and then expresses his/her sense of place in terms of a micro-level situational context. Thus, he/she can interact without friction with interactants in each situation.

In actual conversations, however, *wakimae* and volition are seen to be working simultaneously. The relationship of *wakimae* and volitional use of politeness remains to be investigated.

Notes

- 1) In Hill et al. (1986) and Ide (1989) *wakimae* is replaced by 'discernment,' the closest equivalent English term. But, this equivalence has been doubted from the outset, as Hill et al. (1986: 347-348) state: "No single English word translates *wakimae* adequately, but 'discernment' reflects its basic sense." As we will see in this paper 'discernment' is insufficient to cover the range of meaning of *wakimae*. For want of an exact equivalent term, we will have to stick to the original Japanese term hereafter.
- 2) The term 'obligatory' used here means pragmatic obligatory which should be distinct from syntactic.

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