Politeness and Linguistic Relationship between Speaker and Hearer: From the Perspective of the Three-Tier Model of Language Use

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The conversational maxims proposed by Grice (i.e. Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner) are considered to guarantee maximally efficient communication; we can achieve the most efficient communication by observing them. We do not, however, always conform to the maxims; we use seemingly unnecessary elements like parentheticals or tag questions in ordinary conversation. In order to explain utterances violating the maxims, various politeness theories were advanced (Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), Brown and Levinson (1987), etc.). They argue that such extra elements are strategically used for politeness purposes.

In subsequent years, however, it was pointed out that there is another kind of politeness, which does not involve conscious application of strategies: that observed automatically and obligatorily in accordance with the given interpersonal relationship (Matsumoto (1988), Ide (2006)). For example, consider the choice in honorific/non-honorific in Japanese:

(1) Today is Saturday.

(2) a. Kyoo wa doyoubi da yo
   Today TOP Saturday COP SFP

b. Kyoo wa doyoubi desu
   Today TOP Saturday COP.POL

c. Kyoo wa doyoubidegozaimasu
   Today TOP Saturday COP.SUPER-POL

‘Today is Saturday.’ (Matsumoto (1988:415), slightly modified)

As shown in (1), in English the speaker can convey the given information by the same form Today is Saturday regardless of his socio-psychological relationship with the addressee. By contrast, in Japanese it is impossible for the speaker to communicate the information without taking such interpersonal relationship into consideration; he is forced to choose an appropriate expression among non-honorific da and honorific desu and degozaimasu as in (2a-c). Note that such choice is not made consciously or volitionally, but it is automatic and obligatory in nature. Ide (2006) calls this social-norm-like politeness wakimae ‘discernment.’

Discernment is especially prominent in some languages like Japanese in which grammatical forms like honorifics are well developed, while not in others like English. Although some (e.g. Hill et al. (1986), Ide (1989)) suggest that such
discernments exist cross-linguistically, they do not elaborate on precisely what discernment is at work in languages like English. In this study, therefore, we attempt to clarify the kind of discernment in language use that English speakers must comply with, based on Hirose’s (2013) three-tier model of language use. In particular, we propose that the discernment at work in English is “Choose linguistic forms that show the equality of the speaker and the addressee,” which naturally follows from the perspective of the model. In addition, Ide (1989:231) argues that discernment has its root in social and cultural aspects, but we focus more on the linguistic aspect of this matter.

In a series of his studies (e.g. Hirose (1995, 1997, 2000)), Hirose proposes that the notion of speaker is decomposed into two aspects. One is the “private-self,” the subject of thought and consciousness which does not presuppose the existence of hearer, and the other is the “public-self,” the subject of communication which confronts the hearer. Based on his earlier studies, Hirose (2013) proposes the three-tier model of language use, which is intended to capture certain grammatico-pragmatic phenomena from three aspects of language use. The relevant three tiers are given in (3):

(3)  a. **Situation Construal Tier**: Speaker as private self forms thoughts.
   b. **Situation Report Tier**: Speaker as public self communicates the thoughts.
   c. **Interpersonal Relationship Tier**: Speaker as public self pays attention to the interpersonal relationship with hearer.

Languages differ with respect to how these tiers are combined. Because we focus on the discernment to which the speaker is supposed to conform, let us direct our attention to how the situation report tier and interpersonal tier are organized in Japanese and English. In Japanese, a private self-centered language, the situation report tier and the interpersonal relationship tier are unified. The unification of these two tires means that in communication, the speaker has no choice but to consider the interpersonal relationship with the addressee and choose appropriate forms accordingly (see (2)). In addition, the speaker must be conscious of the state of knowledge between speaker and addressee at the speech time, and employ sentence final particles such as *yo* ‘I tell you’ and *ne* ‘you know’ to indicate it. In English, by contrast, the situation report tier and the interpersonal relationship tier are dissociated. Consequently, it is possible for the English speaker to engage in verbal communication without any forms that encode interpersonal relationship like honorifics and the expressions corresponding to the Japanese sentence final
particles; he can use the same form regardless of the speaker’s and the hearer’s socio-psychological relationship and their states of knowledge at the speech time.

Notice here that the three-tier model immediately explains the nature of the discernment in Japanese. That is, since the situation report and interpersonal relationship tiers are combined, the communication of information necessarily involves the consideration of interpersonal relationship and choice of forms that indicate it.

In a similar fashion, we assume that the characteristic of discernment in English can be elucidated in terms of the combination of the tiers. We propose that the discernment at work in English is (4):

(4) Choose linguistic forms that show the equality of the speaker and the addressee.

As seen above, the situation report and interpersonal relationship tiers are dissociated in English and consequently, there is no need to consider social and informational relationship between speaker and addressee. In other words, English has an unmarked level of communication where the speaker and the hearer are assumed to be “linguistically equal” in the sense that no particular attention is paid to the actual difference, if any, in their socio-psychological relationship and their states of knowledge at the speech time (Hirose (2013)). If the speaker and the addressee are by default put in an equal relationship, it follows that the speaker is expected (i.e. as a norm) to choose forms that show the equality of the speaker and the addressee. Below, we will present some evidence for the existence of this discernment.

**Be Friendly:** As noted, in response to Grice’s maxims, Lakoff (1973) proposed some politeness principles, one of which is “Be friendly.” While this principle seems to be at work in English, it does not have great importance in Japanese. For example, however close they may be, one cannot speak to a professor like he does to his friends as in *Kyoo wa ii tenki da ne* (It’s a beautiful day today), with the non-honorific form *da*. This difference concerning the principle “Be friendly” is accounted for by our claim: in Japanese, since the speaker is expected to choose linguistic forms that indicate appropriate interpersonal relationship, “Be friendly” is not given a privileged status. In English, on the other hand, the speaker is required by (4) to use linguistic forms that show the equality of the interlocutors and so “Be friendly” functions as a powerful politeness principle.

**Informational Superiority:** We pointed out that the interlocutors’ states of knowledge at the speech time must be linguistically expressed with forms like *yo*
and *ne* in Japanese, whereas in English it is not necessary. Thus, Japanese *yo*, which indicates that the speaker has a fuller grasp of the information (Masuoka (1991) or “informational superiority”, is frequently employed regardless of who the addressee is, as long as it reflects the actual state of knowledge between speaker and addressee. In contrast, the use of the English performative clause *I tell you*, which also indicates the speaker’s informational superiority (Ikarashi (2013)), generally tends to be avoided in conversation (Lakoff (1972), Brown and Levinson (1987)) (e.g., *A: How’s the weather in Tokyo?  B: *I tell you, it’s raining*.*). If used, it gives the impression of being rude or impolite and needs contexts that justify its use (Ikarashi (2013)). The proposal in (4) also accounts for the behavior of *I tell you*: its use disturbs the informational equality between the interlocutors and thus violates the discernment in (4).

**Politeness Strategies:** Finally, the proposal in (4) accounts for uses of certain expressions as (im)politeness strategies. According to Watts (2003), a particular form is judged neither as polite nor impolite as long as one is following a certain norm: only when the norm is deviated (violation or overstress of its observance) is a given form evaluated with regard to politeness. Based on our claim, the norm at issue is the discernment in (4). As long as the speaker is using unmarked forms, the interlocutors’ linguistic equality is guaranteed and such forms are considered neither polite nor impolite. As pointed out, the use of *I tell you* deviates from the discernment in (4) and so can be employed as an impoliteness strategy. In fact, it is, for example, used to impose on the addressee information which he refuses to accept (see Ikarashi (2013) for details). In contrast, tag questions are often felt to be polite (Lakoff (1973)). This is because they used to indicate the addressee’s involvement in the truth judgment and thus overly stress the equality of the interlocutors. Such a deviation leads to the polite interpretation of tag questions. In this way, the discernment in (4) elucidates the im(polite) interpretations of certain expressions in the English language system.

In sum, we have re-construed the politeness related to the English language system from the perspective of the three-tier model of language use. In particular, we proposed that in English, the discernment at work is “Choose linguistic forms that show the equality of the speaker and the addressee.”