

**A Comparative Study of Japanese and English Polite Expressions:
With Special Reference to *Request****

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1. Introduction

When and how one uses a polite expression is not an easy matter. In what follows, I deal with expressions for request in Japanese and English. As usual with linguistic expressions in general that are actually used, these expressions are also divided into non-polite and polite expressions. We refer to the two kinds of expression as *Request in imperative* and *Request with an honorific ending* (henceforth, *RI* and *RHE*). For illustration, observe the following pairs of expressions.¹

- (1) a. Sono hon-o totte.
 the book-ACC pass-IMP
 ‘Pass (me) the book.’
- b. Sono hon-o totte itadakemasu-ka?
 the book-ACC pass give-POLITE-REQ
 ‘Would you pass (me) the book?’
- (2) a. Pass me the book.
 b. Could you pass me the book, please?

The first pair is concerned with examples in Japanese, and the second is for English. The two languages have parallel behavior in a certain respect, which will be made clearer in terms of the so-called “uchi/soto” distinction assumed in the tradition of Japanese linguistics. Roughly, the distinction is corresponding to the one to be made between two sets of addresses: “uchi” means “inner”, and by this term, we refer to those who the speaker feels empathy for. On the other, those who belong to “soto” are “outers”, who the speaker keeps the distance from. In short, the (a) examples, marked with *RI*, and the (b) examples, which are manifestations of *RHE*, are corresponding to that one to be made between “inners” and “outers”.

Previous studies are of two types: one is that these phenomena are explained in terms of “inner/outer” distinction (Mizutani (1985), Kikuchi (1996), Makino (1996)) and the other pays attention to the degree of indirectness and the “cost/benefit” degree (Leech (1983), Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech and Svartvik (1994), Osugi, K. (1982)). In neither party are these three factors taken in consideration simultaneously. I will show that these concepts are necessary, and indeed propose a certain mechanism for the

usage of non-polite and polite expressions that incorporates them.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 reviews the two representatives of previous studies: Makino (1996) and Leech (1983). I point out their merits and demerits respectively, and show that the two approaches can be unified in a way that leads to a certain mechanism for the usage of non-polite and polite expressions. In section 3, I examine whether we can explain the usage of RI and RHE in term of this mechanism. Section 4 makes concluding remarks.

2. Previous Studies

There is a good deal of discussion in the literature as to how people use polite expressions in one culture or across cultures. In order to make their analyses explicit, I focus on two points here: the strategy for the usage of polite expressions and the notion of politeness. Now, I review each of them in turn.

2.1. *The Strategy for Requesting in Japanese*

It is generally claimed that Japanese speakers tend to use polite expressions for a person senior or superior in social position, but not for a family member or a person who has intimate relationship with them. Based on this claim, Makino (1996) and Kikuchi (1996) propose a strategy for the usage of non-polite/polite expressions: *use non-polite expressions to inners and polite expressions to outers*. To make appropriate use of this usage strategy, one must know what "inner" and "outer" are and who counts as an inner or an outer. Summarizing Makino's and Kikuchi's discussion, an inner is regarded as a person who a speaker feels empathy for: a speaker usually feels empathy for her family members or lover because they are closely involved with her, and thus regards them as inners.² An outer, on the other hand, is those who a speaker keeps a mental distance from. A speaker normally feels a distance from a colleague or a neighbor because she feels little empathy for them.³ For simplicity's sake, I restrict my attention to cases where only a speaker and hearer are considered exclusively. In other words, what I pay the most attention to in this paper is speaker's estimation of a hearer as an inner or an outer.⁴

In terms of this usage strategy, we can explain the usage of polite expressions and impolite expressions such as imperatives shown in the following examples. Example (3a) is suitable for inners and (3b) is so only for outers but each of them cannot take the other's place (Makino (1996:172)).

- (3) a. Kore asita-madeni yattoke.
 this tomorrow-by finish-IMP
 'Finish this by tomorrow.'
- b. Sumimasenga, kore-o asita-madeni yatteoite kudasaimasen-ka?
 excuse-me this-ACC tomorrow-by finish POLITE-IMP-QUA-REQ
 'Excuse me, would you please finish this by tomorrow?'

Although the usage strategy explains the fact efficiently, there still remains a question of what polite expressions are. Note that the question is not given any detailed discussion in either Makino or Kikuchi. This issue will be dealt with in the next section on the basis of Leech's idea.

2.2. *The Politeness Principle in Leech (1983)*

One of the contributions of Leech (1983) to the study of politeness lies in his claim that the degree of politeness is determined mainly by two factors: one is the actual cost at which the hearer performs the action denoted by an expression, and the other is the degree of imposition involved in the performance of the action at issue, which is evaluated in terms of the degree of indirectness of the expression. Let us overview these two factors in turn, before proceeding to the principle that dictates the way we use polite expressions.

First, according to Leech, a speaker evaluates an action performed by the hearer on a "cost-benefit scale": how much the action leads to cost or benefit to the hearer. Leech furthermore claims that there is an interaction between politeness of an expression and cost of an action; the more the action involves costs, the less the expression becomes polite. This interaction is shown in the following scale (Leech (1983:107)).

- | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|---------------------|-------------|
| (4) | | cost to a hearer | less polite |
| a. Peel the potatoes. | ↑ | | |
| b. Hand me the newspaper. | | | |
| c. Sit down. | | | |
| d. Look at that. | | | |
| e. Enjoy your holiday. | | | |
| f. Have another sandwich. | ↓ | benefit to a hearer | more polite |

Informally speaking, the actual cost in peeling potatoes is greater than that in having a sandwich; the benefit to be involved in the latter makes up for the cost to the hearer partly. In terms of politeness, example (4f) is regarded as most polite because the benefit of having sandwich reverses the cost of being forced.

While (4a) is considered to be least polite because the action leads only to cost to the hearer. On the grounds that politeness is focused more strongly on outers than that on inners, he claims that when a speaker wants a hearer to act on her suggestion, she should minimize cost to outers and maximize benefit to outers, and reverse to inners.

The second factor is indirectness of expressions. As for this factor, Leech claims that using more indirect expressions is another way of increasing the degree of politeness. Consider the following set of examples given in Leech (1983:108).

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| (5) | | indirectness | less polite |
| a. | Answer the phone. | ↓ | ↓ |
| b. | I want you to answer the phone. | | |
| c. | Will you answer the phone? | | |
| d. | Can you answer the phone? | | |
| e. | Would you mind answering the phone? | | |
| f. | Could you possibly answer the phone? | | |
| | etc. | | more polite |

By using imperatives such as (5a), a speaker forces a hearer to perform the action. In this respect, they are hardly considered to be polite expressions, since it does not make allowances for the hearer's declination. On the other hand, as Leech claims, expressions such as (5e) and (5f) seem to be more polite because their indirectness reduces the sense of obligation involved and increases the degree of optionality the hearer has. To put it another way, the degree of indirectness correlates with the degree to which a hearer is allowed the option of not performing the intended action. It is this optionality that ensures politeness of the expression (5e,f). To sum, the more indirect a sentence is, the more polite it is.

On the basis of the two factors, Leech (1983) proposes a certain principle that speakers must follow when they talk to someone, which he calls the politeness principle. Of the six maxims he argues this principle consists of, he pays most attention to the Tact Maxim (indeed he has given this maxim a whole chapter). That is, 'Minimize cost to *other*' (Leech (1983:132)). In his terminology, *other* is normally identified with *hearer*. Since the cost-benefit degree plays a significant role in determining the polite/non-polite status of an expression, the usage of the expression can be predicted from the maxim. According to him, when a speaker asks a hearer to perform some action, she may evaluate his cost or benefit on a cost-benefit scale. Following the maxim,

a speaker must use polite expressions when her request will lead to the hearer's cost, because she should minimize hearer's cost on the basis of her estimate.

There are cases where Leech's maxim alone does not provide appropriate basis for explanation, however. Consider the following example:

- (6) [To a family member / *To an acquaintance]
 Pass me the book

As observed in (6), this expression can be used to a family member but not to an acquaintance, but Leech's maxim says nothing about this fact. This observation suggests that just identifying *other* with *hearer* is not enough and should be divided into two on the basis of the inner/outer distinction mentioned earlier.

It has now become clear that neither Makino's nor Leech's theory is sufficient to explain the details of the usage of polite expressions. Makino fails to explain what polite expressions actually are, although he correctly points out the usage of polite expressions. Leech, on the other hand, gives a proper definition of polite expressions but his theory does not cover the usage of polite expressions. In view of this, I will propose a new mechanism that incorporates the two theories, which gives a full account of the usage of polite expressions. Roughly, the mechanism includes the following procedures: in evaluating the degree of politeness that an expression has, a speaker must take into consideration the two factors given above, the degree of cost/benefit and the degree of indirectness. The interaction of two factors determines how much politeness an expression has. In accordance with the degree of politeness, the strategy then specifies to whom the expression can be appropriately used.⁵ In the following section, we will examine how this mechanism works in the actual use of polite expressions in Japanese and English.

3. Proposal

With the discussion in the previous section borne in mind, let us go on to examine examples that will make explicit details of the mechanism. First of all, at least four combinations will be considered in terms of the two factors adapted from Leech, yielding in four patterns: the cost-direct expression, the cost-indirect expression, the benefit-direct expression and the benefit-indirect expression. The followings examples illustrate these patterns:

- (7) a. Sono hon-o totte. [cost, direct]
 the book-ACC pass-DIR

- a'. Pass me the book.
 b. Sono hon-o totte itadakemasu-ka? [cost, indirect]
 the book-ACC pass give-POLITE-REQ
 b'. Could you please pass me the book?
 c. Mou ippai nonde. [benefit, direct]
 another cup drink
 c'. Have another cup of coffee
 d. Mou ippai ikagadesu-ka? [benefit, indirect]
 another cup how about-POLITE-REQ
 d'. Would you like another cup of coffee?

In both Japanese and English, (7a/a') and (7b/b') express the imposition of cost on the hearer without giving any benefit, making a contrast with (7c/c') and (7d/d'), which express the hearer's benefit rather than his cost. Notice also that examples (7a/a') and (7c/c') on the one hand, and (7b/b') and (7d/d') on the other are distinguished from each other, yielding a direct-indirect opposition. We will not deal with the latter two sentences in this paper, however; they do not relate to the speech-act of *request* since the speaker's demand leads to a benefit rather than a cost to the hearer. At any rate, turning to the first two examples, we may say that (7b/b') are polite while (7a/a') are impolite. According to Leech, indirectness of expressions reduces the cost in question to the hearer, although both requests (7a,b) involve the cost to a hearer.

Let us now turn to the usage of expressions (7a) and (7b). Following the usage strategy, both Japanese and English examples are given a satisfactory explanation. For concreteness, let us put these examples under contexts to be considered, as shown in the following pairs of examples:

- (8) a. [To a family member / *To an acquaintance]
 Sono hon-o totte.
 b. [*To a family member / To an acquaintance]
 Sono hon-o totte itadakemasu-ka?
 (9) a. [To a family member / *To an acquaintance]
 Pass me the book.
 b. [To a family member / To an acquaintance]
 Could you please pass me the book?

Example (8a) and (9a) are used to inners rather than to outers, while (8b) and (9b) are usually used to outers.⁶ This observation is in harmony with what the mechanism says, which confirms that it is at work both in Japanese and English.

In short, a speaker can use the expressions (8a) and (9a) to inners but not to outers because of their directness and the cost imposed on the hearer, two factors which decrease their degree of politeness.⁷ Examples (8b) and (9b), on the other hand, are used only to outers; since their indirectness reduces the cost imposed, and thus they are regarded as polite expressions.

There is an apparent counterexample to the mechanism, however. Look at the following examples with the polite expression 'kudasai'.

- (10) [*To inners / ^{ok/?}To outers]
 Sono hon-o totte kudasai.
 the book-ACC pass POLITE-IMP
 'Pass (me) the book, please.'

To the extent that this expression is a polite expression, we can easily explain the fact that most Japanese speakers usually do not use it to inners. Yet, this does not necessary mean that it can be used to outers without difficulty. Indeed, judgment varies among native speakers as to whether this expression can be used to outers. For those who accept to use this expression to outers, it is a polite expression. For those who do not, on the other hand, they seem to have an intuition that the expression is not polite enough to use to outers. Then, what gives rise to this intuition?

A key to this question is that the degree of politeness of expression (10) cannot be determined easily. First of all, let us consider the degree of indirectness. Note that the degree of indirectness of expression (10) is not so high as (8b), and its degree of politeness decreases, accordingly. The relative degree of indirectness and politeness that (8a,b) and (9) respectively have can be summarized as follows.

- | | | | |
|------|--|----------|-------------|
| (11) | a. Sono hon-o totte. (= (8a)) | direct | less polite |
| | b. Sono hon-o totte kudasai. (= (10)) | ↑ | ↑ |
| | c. Sono hon-o totte itadakemasu-ka? (= (8b)) | ↓ | ↓ |
| | | indirect | more polite |

The expression with 'kudasai' is placed at the middle point on the indirectness scale, and thus the degree of politeness is intermediate. It is true is that both (11b) and (11c) are regarded as polite expressions, compared with (11a). But the crucial point here is that the former is not so polite as the latter. This status in turn suggests that the notion of indirectness alone is not enough to make sure that expression (11b) can be used to outers.

Let us now turn to the cost/benefit degree. What is interesting here is that

most Japanese speakers agree that the expression with 'kudasai' cannot be used to outers in the following situations.⁸

- (12) [*To outers]
- a. Juman-yen-o kasite kudasai.
 a hundred thousand yen-ACC lend POLITE-IMP
 'Lend (me) a hundred thousand yen, please.'
- b. Kuko-made okutte kudasai.
 airport-to drive POLITE-IMP
 'Drive (me) to the airport, please.'

Compared with (11b), examples in (12) denote a case where a speaker imposes more cost on a hearer. Generally speaking, forcing to lend a large amount of money or forcing to drive a long way impose more cost on the hearer than forcing to pass the book. Since the expressions in (11b) and (12) have the same degree of indirectness, the difference in acceptability between them suggests that the degree of politeness of an expression with 'kudasai' is mainly determined by the degree of cost imposed rather than its degree of indirectness. Note also that acceptability of (12a) improves when the direct object is changed as in (13). Again, what is relevant here is the degree of cost. Compare (12a) with (13):

- (13) [To outers]
- Enpitu -o kasite kudasai.
 pencil-ACC lend POLITE-IMP
 'Lend (me) the pencil, please.'

Example (13) is more appropriate to use to outers since the cost involved is regarded as smaller than that in (12a): we usually feel that to lend a pencil is a trivial matter while to lend much money is a serious matter which involves greater effort. It is concluded then that Japanese speakers cannot use expressions with 'kudasai' to outers when they see an enormous cost in the performance of the required action.

When Japanese speakers want to make requests that have the same propositional content as (12), they should, in their place, use more indirect expressions than the expression 'kudasai' as shown in (14).

- (14) [To outers]
- a. Juman-yen-o kasite itadakemasu-ka?
 a hundred thousand yen -ACC lend give-POLITE-QUA-REQ
 'Could you please lend (me) a hundred thousand yen?'

- b. Kuko-made okutte itadakemasu-ka?
 airport-to drive give-POLITE-QUA-REQ
 'Could you please drive me to the airport?'

Examples (14) are more appropriate than (12) because of the degree of indirectness that 'itadakemasu-ka' has, which matches with the degree of cost involved. In other words, in (14), the indirectness is making up for the cost. The difference in degree of indirectness between 'kudasai' and 'itadakemasu-ka' shows that higher degree of indirectness ensures politeness in the case of enormous cost.

To sum up the discussion about Japanese, it has now become clear that we have to use more enormous degree of indirectness than it is actually expressing when the degree of intermediate status of the expression 'kudasai' does not match with the degree of cost. These discussions made so far can be summarized in the form of an additional strategy, which we will call the "accommodation strategy". The strategy goes as follows: *accommodate the degree of indirectness to the degree of cost involved in a request.*

Now, let us proceed to the case of English, and show our mechanism is also valid in this language. Moreover I will show that English and Japanese are distinguished in a certain respect. What makes the two languages different from each other is that in English, the additional strategy operates upon a request that a speaker makes for inners, though both of them are equipped with this strategy.

To make this point explicit, let us first consider the following examples.

- (15) [To inners]
 a. Pass me the package.
 [*To inners]
 b. Send me the package.

Examples (15a) and (15b) differ as to whether they can be said to inners, although they are both regarded as non-polite expressions. The usage strategy cannot make a distinction between them, however, since it merely states that non-polite expressions are equally used to inners. Then, the question is, what is responsible for this difference? We answer this question by claiming that this difference should be attributed to how much cost a speaker imposes on a hearer. For the action of sending a package requires complex procedures, and the request expressed in (15b) brings about more cost than that expressed in (15a). Along these lines, we propose that English speakers cannot use non-polite expressions to inners when they make a request which leads to an

enormous cost. This proposal is confirmed when we consider a situation that is concerned with loan arrangements. For illustration, observe the following examples:

- (16) [To inners]
 a. Lend me a dollar.
 [*To inners]
 b. Lend me five hundred dollars.

Intuitively speaking, (16a) is more costly than (16b): we can easily agree that the more amount of money a speaker requires the more cost she imposes on a hearer. Then, the relevant degree of cost makes it impossible for (16b) to be used to inners. More interesting is the fact that the addition of words that express reduction of the hearer's cost cancels that impossibility, as shown in (17).

- (17) [To inners]
 Lend me five hundred dollars, and you can get a new computer.

Besides, there is another way that saves (16b). In that way the strategy of accommodation, I have mentioned above, operates as in the case of Japanese (cf. (12) and (14)). English speakers prefer to use more indirect sentences such as (18) in the place of (16b).

- (18) [To inners]
 Could you please lend me five hundred dollars?

Notice also that the same is true of example (15b), which should be replaced by the following sentence.

- (19) [To inners]
 Could you send me the package?

Finally, for the sake of reference, let us summarize the consequences obtain from the discussion about the strategy of accommodation. It is important to see that Japanese and English have a certain thing in common, that is, the strategy of accommodation is at work in both languages. This strategy states that speakers of both languages accommodates the degree of indirectness and that of cost when they use RHE. What makes the two languages distinguished from each other is the target of the strategy: Japanese speakers are sensitive to the strategy just when they speak RHE to outers, while in English the strategy has an effect only on RHE for inners. Their properties are summarized in the following tables.

(20)

	cost	indirectness	outer
a. Enpitu-o kasite kudasai.	low	low	outer
b. Enpitu-o kasite itadakemasu-ka?	low	high	outer
c. Juman-yen-o kasite kudasai.	high	low	* outer
d. Juman-yen-o kasite itadake masu-ka?	high	high	outer

Crucially, to lend a pencil 'enpitu' does not require as much cost as to lend such an enormous amount of money as one hundred thousand yen 'Juman-yen', and this much of cost makes the usage of 'kudasai' to outers inappropriate, and allows more polite expressions like 'itadakemasuka' to take its place.

(21)

	cost	indirectness	inner
a. Lend me a dollar.	low	low	inner
b. Could you lend me a dollar?.	low	high	inner
c. Lend me five hundred dollars.	high	low	* inner
d. Could you lend me five hundred dollars?	high	high	inner

What is important with the English case is that when a speaker makes a request that imposes an enormous cost, and even the request is made to inner, she cannot use non-polite expressions contrary to what the usage strategy predicts. In this sense, an English speaker is sensitive to the cost that she imposes to the hearer, irrespective of whether he is an inner or an outer.. Thus, she favors more polite expressions like (21d), which takes the place of (21c).

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have discussed the usage of RI and RHE in Japanese and English. In order to give a full account of their difference in usage, I have proposed a unified mechanism that incorporates the three factors adapted from previous studies: the inner/outer distinction; the degree of indirectness; the cost/benefit degree. Of these factors, the latter two play important roles in determining the degree of politeness of RI and RHE. Once their status with respect to politeness is determined, Japanese and English native speakers judges to whom the expression can be appropriately used, based on the usage

strategy. I have also argued that both Japanese and English speakers make use of the strategy of accommodation when the degree of indirectness and the degree of cost do not match.

NOTES

* This paper is a revised version of part of my M.A. thesis submitted to University of Tsukuba in 2001. I am grateful to Yukio Hirose, Nobuhiro Kaga, Minoru Nakau, Ryuichi Washio and Izumi Yasui for their insightful comments. I would also like to express my thanks to Hiromitsu Akashi, Taichi Hirota, Kazunori Kan, Hiroaki Konno, Joe Morita and Keigo Yamada, who offered useful and invaluable advice on an earlier version of this paper. Of course, the responsibility for remaining mistakes is mine alone.

¹ The following abbreviations are used in the glosses of example sentences: IMP=imperative marker, POLITE=polite verb/ oliteness marker, Q=question marker, QUA=quasi-honorific word, REQ=request marker. I use the term 'quasi-honorific word' as a function word to make a sentence and word rather polite such as 'o' at the top of nouns or verbs 'desu' and 'masu' at the end of verbs.

² Throughout this paper, I will refer to a speaker as feminine and to a hearer as masculine.

³ One might wonder whether *outers* refers to strangers. Concerning this point, I tentatively assume that the set of *outers* does not include strangers. For as opposed to strangers, even *outers* are in a speaker-hearer relationship as *inners* are (cf. Arita (2001a)). Since strangers are not regarded as those involved in the situation at issue, they are not taken into consideration.

⁴ Although the inner/outer distinction is intuitively clear but it is often difficult to identify to which party each individual belongs to: a person of the same status may belong to each party, varying culture to culture. Suppose for concreteness a situation where a manager asks her secretary to do some work, as follows:

- (i) [From a boss to his/her secretary.]
 - a. ?Kore kopi site moraemasu-ka?
 this copy do please-QUA-REQ
 'Would you copy this, please?'
 - b. Kore kopii site-kure/kopii site.
 this copy do-IMP/copy do-IMP
 'Copy this.'

- (ii) a. Susan, would you type this letter, please?
 b. *Susan, type this letter, please.

In these examples, she can use imperatives to her secretary in Japanese but cannot do so in English. This difference seems to come from the cultural factor: a boss tends to regard his/her secretary as an inner in Japanese-speaking society, but as an outer in English-speaking society. This kind of difference is found seen especially in upper-lower relationship, such as the employer-employee relationship or the teacher-student relationship.

⁵ Brown and Levinson (1984) also make a similar proposal. Their theory is similar to ours in that they consider the strategy for politeness based on the interpersonal relationship and an imposition of a cost. They, however, do not deal with cases of intermediate status. For detailed discussion, see Brown and Levinson (1987).

⁶ Example (9b) can be also used to inners, which goes against the strategy. This fact suggests that English speakers are not so strictly subject to the latter part of strategy (about inners). We leave this issue open for further research.

⁷ Note here that there are some expressions which seem to be non-polite but can be used to outers. They include: *Have a drink on me; Give me a call sometime; Come over and see me sometime, Wait a minute*, and so on. Concerning the first example meaning 'I'll buy you a drink', it is not regarded as a request because the speaker does not impose cost on a hearer rather gives benefit. As for the latter three, they seem like idiomatic expressions and thus the usage strategy of polite expressions usually does not work in that case.

⁸ One might think that these expressions cannot use to anyone. They, however, can be used in the upper-lower relationship such as clerk-costumer relationship and [about (16)]

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