Japanese Politeness: An Enquiry
Yasuko Obana (2021)
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Featuring role-identity and honorifics, this monograph *Japanese Politeness: An Enquiry*, authored by Yasuko Obana, launches a diachronic investigation on politeness with unique Japanese characteristics. Contrary to the universalistic view of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) in English, the author borrows the concept of role-identity from Symbolic Interactionism (a role theory in sociology) to extract what constitutes politeness in Japanese and critically presents argumentations on the subject matter by reviewing previous politeness research both inside and outside of Japan.

The book consists of three parts with a total of nine chapters. The first part, Chapters 1–3, defines the origin and the content of politeness; the second part, Chapters 4–7, targets the explanation of honorifics; and the last part, Chapters 8–9, stipulates strategies of politeness in Japanese.

Chapter 1 ‘Definition of politeness’ addresses the conceptualisation of politeness. The etymology of ‘politeness’ is introduced, and it is defined as “a social tool whereby we aim to achieve smooth and conflict-free communication” (p. 5). Politeness enquiry has undergone three stages, namely, speech acts theory, face theory, and discursive approach to politeness (Eelen, 2001). It is not appropriate to label Japan as a collectivist society and the United States as an individualist...
society, because Japanese politeness is flexible and negotiable, and there are variations in culture, region, and even individuals. Obana points out that previous theories are normative accounts of politeness, and habitus is an alternative view of it. Personally, I agree with her that politeness should be examined discursively, and evaluations of politeness should be conducted by the hearers instead of the linguist.

Chapter 2 ‘The underlying meaning of politeness’ explains the discursive approach to politeness from four dimensions, namely, communities of practice (Mills, 2003), discursive face (Geyer, 2008), rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), and relational work (Locher, 2004). Obana agrees with Locher’s view that “politeness evaluation comes from the expectations” (Locher, 2004, p. 85) and proposes that politeness enquiry inevitably comprises social norms, evaluation, and expectations. Involvement and independence (Scollon & Scollon, 1995) are basic human needs/wants, and politeness is a negotiation tool for reaching a balance between them. This balance is maintained by social norms, which is illustrated as a guideline for interpreting the phenomena of social actions, determining how to behave in a context and evaluate others’ behaviour. Since politeness is an element of social norms and evaluation work is the basis of politeness, politeness results from the evaluation of a role performance accomplished by identity.

Chapter 3, ‘Politeness as a social norm, its contingency and discursiveness’ further explores social norms to reveal their nature and demonstrates how norms of politeness are related to transformative polite phenomena. Aided by a sociological inquiry, Obana reveals that social norms are not static but changeable and dynamic according to the current context. They are strongly supported by shared expectations that others should behave in line with these norms. As a result, “social norms, expectations and evaluations form a triangular mechanism” (p. 50). Local norms and individual norms should be treated with circumspection. Social norms of politeness are multi-layered and intertwined, honorific terms can be dynamically used in various situations considering social status, age difference, formal situations, and familiarity. Hence, we can negotiate identity (Chen, 2018, 2022) and adjust and revise our behavior to meet the proceeding contexts.

Chapter 4 discusses the conceptual differences of the term polite between Japanese and English. The Japanese equivalent of polite can be reigi tadashii (禮儀正しい) and teineina (丁寧な). The explanation of these terms dates back to ancient Chinese characters. The author clarifies the differences between the two languages: in English, it means friendly, kind, approachable, considerate, well-mannered, humble, etc.; in Japanese, it represents keigo (‘honorifics’), hikaeme (‘reserved’), waki-maeru (‘know what to do’), enryo (‘discretion, hesitation’), jooge kankei (‘vertical relationship’), etc. Japanese terms are more strongly tied with formality, reserve, and humility, whereas its English counterpart embraces a much wider scope of
associative meanings. This chapter also offers a constructive reference for comparison between Chinese and English politeness.

Chapter 5 handles the origins of honorifics from a diachronic perspective and traces the connotation of modern honorifics. Obana disagrees with the taboo hypothesis of honorifics, which suggests that the purpose of using honorifics is to express taboo (tabu in Japanese), because Japanese honorifics are not the replacement of forms but are mere ‘markings’ on strategically structured utterances and can be traced to different languages. Then she brings in norito (祝詞 or celebrating words) as the origin of honorifics. There are two main honorific styles, sonkei and kenjoo, which are based on the relationship between the absolute ruler (gods and later emperors) and the ruled (ordinary people) (p. 74). As a result, modern Japanese honorifics are contextually determined and are induced by the speaker’s decision regarding the current situation.

Chapter 6 ‘Understanding honorifics’ classifies six types of honorific forms with a diagram: sonkei-styles (deferential styles), directional kenjoo-styles, situational kenjoo-styles, desu/masu forms for addressee honorifics, situational formal styles, and directional formal styles (p. 78). The selection of honorific terms is determined by the speaker’s choice in displaying his stance or emotional state. The term wakimae (‘discernment’) implies not only ‘to distinguish’ but also ‘to know how to distinguish’, which highlights the capability for discerning and choosing the most appropriate action to perform. Obana rejects the view of negative face and argues that honorific forms comprise a double-layered linguistic structure. Honorifics are indexical of social distance, by which interactants can perceive their social relationship. Since honorific use can perform diverse socio-pragmatic functions, I also contend that honorifics manifest the democratic progress of society, and they should be advocated.

Chapter 7 ‘Variations and derivations of honorific use’ demonstrates how strategic honorifics are manipulated in diverse contexts to produce different pragmatic effects. As examined by Obana, honorifics are negotiable social norms with contingencies. The grammar of the Japanese language permits linguistic units to be adjusted to suit community needs and even be tailored to reveal individuality. Interactants may suddenly adopt honorific forms, especially addressee honorifics, to express psychological stance. This phenomenon is called ‘speech-level shifts’ (p. 119), which consist of minus-level shifts and plus-level shifts. The plus-level shifts can fulfil pragmatic effects such as creating psychological barrier and revealing emotional reactions. Therefore, the appropriate measurement of motivational factors, such as vertical (jooge kankei), horizontal (shinso kankei) and spatial (kookyoo no ba) distance, can evoke social expectations for honorific use.

Chapter 8 ‘Strategies as the implementation of one’s Role-Identity’ elaborates the concept of role-identity in relation to strategic planning and discloses the
underlying motivations (or strategic planning) for strategy construction. Obana reiterates the term Symbolic Interactionism and provides a diagram to illustrate sub-categories of role identity. She assumes that direct and indirect requests will provoke role shifts. A direct request can be made when its content belongs to the domain of the speaker's role-entitlement, while an indirect request is raised when it is outside one's responsibility. In addition, repetition (or mimicry) can be manipulated to assimilate with the other's role. It may perform functions such as confirmation-request and positive-reply.

Chapter 9 'Honorific strategies' expounds the contrastive features of honorific strategies between Japanese and English. In English, asking the other's wants directly is a strategy to avoid a potential face-threatening act (FTA). But for Japanese, it is normative to describe what the speaker should or can do, instead of asking others what is on their mind. English honorific strategies are measured by the degree of FTA and what linguistic approaches should be used to mitigate a potential threat; in contrast, Japanese honorific strategies depend on how the speaker perceives his role-identity in relation to that of the other. Thus, elements such as responsibilities and entitlements involved in the interactants' role-identities are of primary consideration for Japanese. In addition, evaluative statements like praising and recognition are condescending. These Japanese features are quite different from in Chinese. Asking the other's wants and praising other's performance in Chinese, in most cases, are polite behaviours.

As an enlightening enquiry into Japanese politeness, the book not only offers a remarkably detailed explanation of politeness, but it is ground-breaking in several ways. The first distinctive quality of this work is its unparalleled native account of Japanese politeness, differing from the Western view of face and politeness. Early approaches to politeness embody a universalist paradigm of face and positive/negative politeness. But the author argues that in Japanese, politeness operates under the guidance of a triangular mechanism among social norms, evaluations, and expectations. In terms of Japanese politeness strategies, the author proposes a role identity strategy and an honorific strategy. As a tool for making linguistic choices to achieve politeness, role-identity is often prioritised over FTA considerations.

The second distinctive feature of this research is that a diachronic route has been taken for investigating Japanese politeness, assisted by exhaustive literature reviews and rich data analysis. In order to define politeness, the author starts with fundamental needs/wants and then moves to social standards intertwined with social norms of politeness. The origin of honorifics is another diachronic exploration. The ancient word norito indicating the origin of honorifics has many features of modern honorifics such as 'distance', 'public performance', and 'upward-respect'. Undoubtedly, this diachronic approach cannot be implemented
without the assistance of abundant reviews. In the section of References, 14 pages of bibliography bear witness to the huge endeavour that the author has devoted to this work. Furthermore, examples permeate every chapter and are carefully discussed. They not only justify the validity of the viewpoints but offer readers a chance to catch a glimpse of Japanese culture.

Thirdly, and perhaps more profoundly, the comprehensive enquiry reported in the book lays the foundations for establishing a theoretical framework for Japanese politeness. The author prepares the ground for later scholars to conduct in-depth probes into role-identity and role-based strategies. Role-identity is believed to entail processes of determinate politeness; that is, one's identity in a given context and its implementation as a role performance are steps to select appropriate behaviour. The author explores the sub-categories of role-identity shifts to unveil the mechanism of dynamic changes of politeness. The second attempt at formulating a theory of politeness concerns the differentiation of role-based strategies from other types of strategy. The author suggests that one's identity and its corresponding role performance are often prioritised over the nature of an utterance. These attempts at theorising suggest that different languages employ their own route to politeness. Furthermore, this account provides reference for other Asian politeness research, such as for Chinese and Korean.

Apart from the remarkable achievements of this work, some issues need to be settled in future research. First, in this book, role-identity seems to be a dominant factor for Japanese politeness, but is there any possibility that other elements equally matter? If so, what can they be? Since one single term cannot address all factors, variables such as social rank, education background, gender, non-verbal language, and emotional states may restrain the explanatory power of role-identity. While role-identity is of crucial significance, its exposure in the titles of chapters is insufficiently manifested. Despite these inadequacies, this monograph may well serve as one of the cornerstones for future research on Japanese politeness.

References


