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## **SPEECH LEVEL SHIFTS IN JAPANESE DISCOURSE: AN APPROACH FROM POLITENESS THEORY**

### Abstract

“Speech level shift” is a phenomenon in which formal speech is used in casual conversations. This paper aims to clarify when and why this temporary shift occurs and considers whether its functions are unique to the Japanese language by employing the concept of “politeness theory”. According to this theory, a speaker has two choices of strategy for successful communication. The first, namely “positive politeness strategy”, attempts to decrease their distance with the listener, while the second, “negative politeness strategy”, tries to maintain this distance. Using examples from a database of Japanese conversations, four functions of speech level shift based on politeness strategies were found. When the shift appears at the beginning or the end of a topic, its function is to reduce the suddenness of conversational transition, while in the case of communicating blame, criticism, or requests, the shift has the function of softening something hard to say. These two functions are based on negative politeness strategy. When the shift is used to emphasize something important in the conversation, its function is to make the speech clearer, while in the case of telling a joke, the shift can create an emotional connection through humor. These two functions are based on positive politeness strategy. In this way, speech level shifts in the Japanese language have four principal functions, which are explainable by theories developed internationally. This fact shows that there is a commonality between Japanese and other languages regarding the function of consideration for others.

Keywords: Japanese language, speech level shift, politeness theory, communication

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## INTRODUCTION

Using casual expressions and formal expressions properly is important for successful communication. In the case of the Japanese language, there are two types of speech styles identifiable as casual speech and formal speech. For example, when one says “I am Japanese” in casual Japanese speech, it is phrased as 私は日本人だ (*watashi wa Nihonjin da*), but in formal speech, it becomes 私は日本人です (*watashi wa Nihonjin desu*). The main morphological differences between these two styles appear in auxiliary verbs such as だ (*da*) and です (*desu*), or verb forms such as the plain form and the ます (*masu*) form at the end of sentences.

Basically, the speaker chooses either style depending on their relationship with the listener. Generally, casual speech is used when talking to someone equal in age or rank or junior to them, and formal speech when talking to someone senior. However, sometimes the styles are mixed temporarily in the same conversation. The following is an example of a conversation between speaker A and B who are friends and equal each other.<sup>2</sup>

- (1) A: 笑うと元気なるじゃん。(Warau to genki n naru-jan.) [Laugh and get well.]  
 B: うん、絶対それ大切だよ。(Un, zettai sore taisetsu da yo.) [Yes, laughing is certainly important.]  
 A: まー、あたしはその辺はね、いろいろとこう計算してるんですよ。(Maa atashi wa sono hen wa ne, iroiro to kō keisan shiterun desu yo.) [Well, I always calculate this kind of thing.]

This is a conversation between friends that is basically conducted in casual speech. Although the first and second sentences end with casual speech forms, in the last sentence, the marker of formal speech – *desu* – can be found. Therefore, the style changes distinctively from casual speech into formal speech here. This is an example of “speech level shift”.

This kind of shift is not limited only to “casual speech to formal speech” as in this example, but also includes “formal speech to casual speech”. This paper, however, will focus on the former type of shift, as in the casual

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<sup>2</sup> The original text is Japanese. The pronunciation is shown in *italics* and the English translation is shown in square brackets.

conversation we just saw. Since the functions of these two types of shifts are different, the latter type should be considered in another paper.

Speech level shifts from casual speech to formal speech seem to have the function of pushing the listener to consider and adjust their relationship with the speaker. For this reason, formal speech can be used even in casual conversations among friends. In order to determine why and when this shift occurs, and whether it is particular to the Japanese language, I will present the examples of conversations between friends and conduct an analysis employing the concept of “politeness theory” that is shown in *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* written by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987). The applicability of this theory, which has been used to study languages around the world, will serve as an indicator of the particularity or universality of speech level shifts as they appear in Japanese.

## REVIEW OF SPEECH LEVEL SHIFT RESEARCH

This paper will begin with a brief look at the results of previous research on the subject of speech level shifts. Table 1 shows the conclusions reached by three researchers regarding the circumstances under which the speech level shifts they observed occurred.

Table 1. Results of previous research

| Situation                                | References         |                    |                   |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
|  | Yoko Mimaki (1993) | Tomomi Otsu (2007) | Yajing Liu (2013) |
| To start the topic                       | o                  |                    |                   |
| To end the topic                         |                    |                    | o                 |
| To add comments or supplementary remarks | o                  |                    |                   |
| To cast blame or criticism               |                    |                    | o                 |
| To focus on something important          | o                  |                    |                   |
| To tell a joke                           |                    | o                  |                   |

Mimaki Yoko (1993, pp. 41–50) conducted a survey using scripts of TV shows and found that the shift appeared when the speaker intended to

start a new topic, add comments or supplementary remarks, or say something important. Otsu Tomomi (2007, pp. 47–53) recorded the conversations of friends and found that the shift was used when the speaker was telling a joke to the listener. Liu Yajing (2013, pp. 36–45) also used friends' conversations and found that the shift appeared when the speaker intended to end the topic or to express blame or criticism.

However, some questions still remain. Why does the shift appear in these situations? In other words, what is the function of temporary formal speech? In addition, are there any other situations in which the shift appears? These questions can be explored by using conversational data and employing the concept of "politeness theory".

There are some studies that have considered speech level shift in relation to politeness theory. Usami Mayumi (1995, pp. 28–40) picked out examples of speech level shift from recorded data of conversations and found that the shifts function as a politeness strategy adjusting the distance between listener and speaker. This indication is important as the investigation was conducted by connecting speech level shift and politeness theory. However, Usami only focused on the conversations conducted during first-time meetings. In contrast, the ways of communicating used between friends and those between strangers meeting for the first time would be markedly different. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the function of speech level shifts in casual conversations between friends in order to produce a clearer understanding of this phenomenon.

## OVERVIEW OF POLITENESS THEORY

Politeness theory was formulated in 1987 by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, according to whom people in a society have the desire to be protected. They call this desire "a face". There are two types of faces. The first is "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62). This is defined as "positive face". The second is "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62). This is defined as "negative face".

The method employed to protect these faces is "politeness strategy". The strategy used to protect positive face is to talk in a friendly and clear manner and try to reduce one's distance from the other person. This is

known as “positive politeness strategy”. For example, when one friend understands what another needs without any words, the second friend might respond: “Great! You are a real friend! You know exactly what I need”. They express exaggerated praise by using the word “great” and show the strength of their friendship by confirming that the person is a real friend. The strategy employed to protect one’s negative face, specifically, is to talk politely and indirectly and to try to maintain a distance from the other person. This is known as “negative politeness strategy”. For example, when one wants to borrow a pen from someone, one might ask: “Would you mind if I used your pen?”. Using the conditional form to pose the question makes it indirect and polite. These two types of faces and strategies are summarized in Figure 1.

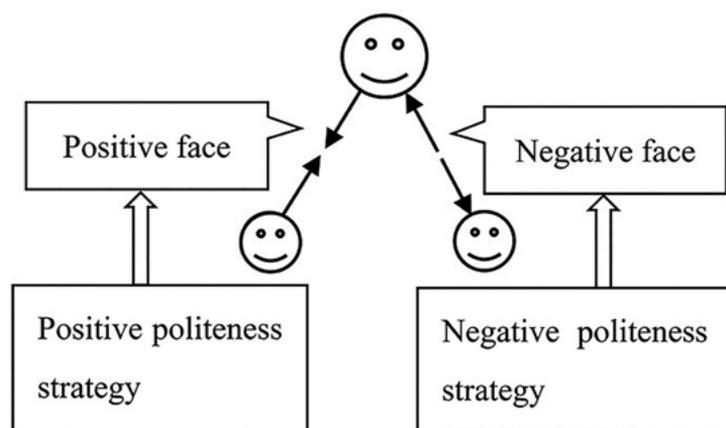


Fig. 1. Overview of politeness theory

Incidentally, Brown and Levinson are not claiming that “positive” is good and “negative” is bad. These words are intended to express whether speech is active or passive. What is important in their viewpoint is that there are two types of consideration for a listener to process going in different directions.

## RESEARCH DATA

This research uses examples drawn from the “Corpus of Spoken Japanese by using Basic Transcription System for Japanese. (Transcription and Audio

Recordings)". This is a database of natural Japanese conversations by native speakers, that are recorded in the Usami laboratory at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. All conversations are transcribed and classified by the age, gender, and relationship of the speakers. I have chosen conversations between friends that were basically conducted in casual speech, and quoted examples of speech level shifts into formal speech. All the examples listed in this paper were collected from this database.

The number of quotations that include speech level shifts was seventy-six, collected from twenty-three distinct conversations. Each example was classified by its purpose, before the functions of its speech level shifts were analyzed. When a purpose differed from those appearing in previous research, new purpose types were added.

## RESULTS: SITUATIONS AND FUNCTIONS

Table 2 shows the situations in which speech level shifts were found and the number of each example.

Table 2. Purposes and Their Frequency

| Situation                                  | The number of text (rate) |
|--|---------------------------|
| ① To start the topic                       | 4 (5.3%)                  |
| ② To end the topic                         | 2 (2.6%)                  |
| ③ To add comments or supplementary remarks | 0                         |
| ④ To cast blame or criticism               | 5 (6.6%)                  |
| ⑤ To present requests and orders           | 6 (7.9%)                  |
| ⑥ To express something shameful            | 7 (9.2%)                  |
| ⑦ To boast or talk about hardships         | 6 (7.9%)                  |
| ⑧ To focus on something important          | 4 (5.3%)                  |
| ⑨ To tell a joke                           | 42 (55.3%)                |
| Total                                      | 76 (100.0%)               |

The most frequent situation was “⑨ To tell a joke”. With as many as forty-two examples, this accounted for more than half of the total. On the

other hand, the search for examples that followed the pattern of “To add comments or supplementary remarks” produced no results in this survey. In addition, the purposes described in ⑤, ⑥ and ⑦ were added, because they did not appear in the scholarship.

From these examples, the intended functions of the speech level shifts emerged. In the next section, we will look more closely at each example and consider these functions by relating them to politeness strategy.

#### TO REDUCE SUDDENNESS

There were four examples of the purpose “① To start the topic”, and two examples of the purpose “② To end the topic”. The shift in these purposes has the function of reducing suddenness in the conversation. The following is an example of situation ①. This is a conversation between speaker A and B, who are friends. Underlined letters show the speech level shift into formal speech.

- (2) A: さあ、そういうことですねー。(Saa, sō iu kotode desu nee.) [And now, with that...]  
 B: はいはいはい。(Hai hai hai.) [Ok, ok, ok.]  
 A: 学校生活について。(Gakkō seikatsu ni tsuite.) [About school life.]

These sentences appeared at the beginning of the conversation, with the shift appearing in the first sentence. Therefore, we can see that speaker A started the topic with the formal speech marker *desu*. Why did the speaker do this?

In situations such as the starting or ending of a topic, the direction of the conversation is being changed. If this change is sudden, the listener might be surprised or become unable to keep up with the conversation. However, by using formal speech, the change is softened and suddenness is reduced. The speaker is probably trying to reduce suddenness and surprise out of consideration for the listener. In other words, this is an action that blunts the impact on the listener by maintaining distance.

Therefore, the kind of speech level shift with the function of reducing suddenness can be regarded as similar to negative politeness strategy. Negative politeness strategy is a way of communication that maintains one’s distance and avoids excessive interference. Shifts at the beginning or end of a conversation can be explained as a part of this strategy.

## TO SOFTEN SOMETHING HARD TO SAY

As we have seen above, formal speech in casual conversations has the function of maintaining one's distance and softening impact. This function is useful not only at the beginning or end of a conversation, but also in the following purposes: “④ To cast blame or criticism”, “⑤ To present requests and orders”, “⑥ To say something shameful”, and “⑦ To boast or talk about hardship”. All of these purposes have the common point of expressing something difficult to say. The following is an example of purpose ⑤. Here, speaker A is presenting a request to speaker B.

- (3) A: でも、まあ、なんかを話さなきゃいけないからー、じゃ、〇〇(人名)の話でもしてください。(Demo, maa, nanka wo hanasanakya ikenai kara, ja 〇〇 [person's name] no hanashi de mo shite kudasai.) [But we have to talk about something, so please talk about 〇〇.]  
 B: よーし、〇〇の話か。(Yōshi, 〇〇 no hanashi ka.) [I see, let me talk about 〇〇.]

ください (*kudasai*) is a marker of formal speech that is used when presenting a request to the listener. Therefore, the shift occurred in the first sentence here. To present a request means the speaker is asking the listener to do something. The speaker might hesitate to make the request directly, because the request might place a burden on the listener. However, if the speaker presents the request in formal speech, it becomes polite and soft. This is not just true of requests, but also of other things that are hard to say. Therefore, out of consideration for the listener, the speaker makes the speech polite and soft.

This kind of approach is a typical aim of negative politeness, so this function also can be regarded as being similar to negative politeness strategy.

## TO FOCUS ON SOMETHING IMPORTANT

Speech level shifts are also found in situation “⑧ To focus on something important”. The following is an example.

- (4) A: ほんとに考えなくちゃ。(Honto ni kangaenakucha.) [We have to think about it seriously.]  
 B: ね。Ne. [Exactly.]

A: やっぱりお昼は一、当日、どこで食べるか。(Yappari ohiru wa tōjitsu doko de taberu ka.) [Where are we going to have lunch that day?]

B: 問題?(Mondai?) [Is it a problem?]

A: が、問題ですね。(Ga, mondai desu ne.) [It is a problem.]

In the last sentence, speaker A emphasizes the previous word *mondai* (“problem”), as it is regarded as the important part. By using the formal speech marker *desu* in a casual conversation, the speaker can attract the listener’s attention and focus it on the important part, making the information being communicated clearly.

Moreover, this speech level shift is a positive politeness strategy, unlike the previous two types. Positive politeness strategy is a method of communication that clarifies what one wants to say and makes it easier to understand. Since the speech level shift in the example works by making the speech clearer for the listener, it exhibits similarities to positive politeness strategy.

#### TO ADD HUMOR BY USING STYLISTIC INCONGRUITIES

The last purpose discovered in this research concerns the use of incongruous speaking styles to introduce humor into a conversation. Purpose “⑨ To tell a joke” is the only category in which this function is seen. The following is an example. Here, speaker A is curious to know if speaker B went to an amusement park with his love interest.

(5) A: 誰と行ったの?(Dare to itta no?) [Who did you go there with?]

B: や、一人だよ。(Ya, hitori da yo.) [By myself.]

A: えー。(Eee.) [No way.]

B: そんな一緒に行く人がいるなら、一緒に行きますよ。(Sonna isshoni iku hito ga iru nara, isshoni ikimasu yo.) [If I had someone to go with, I would go with them.]

*Masu* is a marker of formal speech fixed to the end of verbs. In this situation, speaker A asked speaker B teasingly, and speaker B replied with formal speech. In addition, speaker B laughed after he had said the last sentence. The use of incongruous formal speech makes it appear that the conversation is not between friends. The difference from the actual circumstances generates humor. This humor then reduces the distance between the two speakers.

As an example that aims to decrease the distance from the listener and build an amicable relationship between the conversation participants, this conversation can be regarded as being similar to positive politeness strategy. In addition, this was the purpose that appeared most frequently in this study. Therefore, this can be interpreted as the main function of speech level shifts in conversations between friends. It is notable that formal speech, originally used to preserve distance and enable polite expression, is used here instead to add humor.

## COMMONALITIES BETWEEN JAPANESE AND WESTERN LANGUAGES

As we have seen, the reason why speech level shifts occur can be explained by politeness theory. From this fact, we can see a commonality between Japanese and other languages regarding linguistic approaches adopted out of consideration for others.

Japanese and Western languages, such as English, have clear differences in terms of formality and roots, and Japanese is often considered to be high context and Western languages low context. Nevertheless, politeness theory is equally applicable to these different languages. In fact, the functions found in the above research, such as reducing the distance from a listener by adding humor or avoiding interference by softening something hard to say, appear to be common expressions of consideration that transcend the boundaries between languages.

Further study on the subject of considerate expressions will further deepen this perspective. Although studies of considerate expressions in Japanese have been popular since the beginning of the 21st century (Yamaoka et al., 2019, p. 19), they are still at an early stage. Politeness theory has found a place in this sub-field. Yamaoka Masaki et al. (2019) suggest the possibility of studying considerate expressions using politeness theory, and have shown the functions of consideration concerning not only honorifics but also adverbs and idiomatic expressions in association with politeness theory. It is expected that the sense of consideration partially revealed in this research that is common to both Japanese and Western languages will be further explored in the future, reducing the sense of absolute distance between them.

## CONCLUSION

Table 3 summarizes the results of the research regarding the purposes, functions, and corresponding politeness strategies. As we have seen, speech level shifts from casual speech to formal speech in friends' conversations appear in nine types of purposes and have four types of functions.

Table 3. Situations and functions of speech level shift

| Situation                                  | Function                              | Politeness strategy          |
|--|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| ① To start the topic                       | To reduce suddenness                  | Negative politeness strategy |
| ② To end the topic                         |                                       |                              |
| ③ To add comments or supplementary remarks |                                       |                              |
| ④ To cast blame or criticism               | To soften something hard to say       | Negative politeness strategy |
| ⑤ To present requests and orders           |                                       |                              |
| ⑥ To express something shameful            |                                       |                              |
| ⑦ To boast or talk about hardships         |                                       |                              |
| ⑧ To focus on something important          | To focus on the important part        | Positive Politeness strategy |
| ⑨ To tell a joke                           | To add a humor by using unusual style | Positive Politeness strategy |

Formal speech is used not only to speak politely to superiors, but also to facilitate conversations and improve relationships between friends. This kind of example is common, while the functions connected with engaging in lively conversation appear to have become established as a basic usage of formal speech.

Another point is that each of the functions of speech level shifts into formal speech can be explained by politeness strategy. Although there is a limited number of languages that have different styles of casual speech and formal speech marked by auxiliary verbs, the usages and functions of these styles can be explained by a theory developed internationally. The commonality of a sense of consideration seen in Japanese and other languages will become an important element in future studies about considerate or polite expressions.

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