

## **Adapting Brown and Levinson's 'Politeness' Theory to the Analysis of Casual Conversation \***

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### **1. Introduction**

Brown and Levinson's 'politeness' theory was originally published in 1978. It is a theory that has generated quite a degree of controversy; although widely acknowledged in the literature, it has also attracted considerable criticism (eg Matsumoto, 1988; Ide, 1989).

In this paper, I will begin by briefly describing Brown and Levinson's 'politeness' theory and identifying a type of interaction which their list of 'politeness' strategies does not cover: non-goal-oriented interaction. I will then go on to analyse a small segment of casual conversation in Japanese to show how Brown and Levinson's 'politeness' theory can be adapted and applied in non-goal oriented interaction. This adaptation of their theory to a different type of interaction has revealed some types of 'politeness' phenomena not described by Brown and Levinson. This paper concludes that 'politeness' phenomena can be identified utilising Brown and Levinson's theory not only in goal-oriented interaction, but also non-goal-oriented interaction.

### **2. Brown and Levinson's 'politeness' theory**

Brown and Levinson's work consists of two parts. The first part is their fundamental theory concerning the nature of 'politeness' and how it functions in interaction. The second part is a list of 'politeness' strategies with examples from three languages: English, Tzeltal, and Tamil.

In the theoretical part of their work, Brown and Levinson introduce the notion of 'face' in order to illustrate 'politeness' in the broad sense. That is to say, all interactants have an interest in maintaining two types of 'face' during interaction: 'positive face' and 'negative face'. Brown and Levinson define 'positive face' as the positive and consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for approval. On the other hand, 'negative face' is "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction" (p. 61).

Utilising this notion of 'face', 'politeness' is regarded as having a dual nature: 'positive politeness' and 'negative politeness'. 'Positive politeness' is expressed by satisfying 'positive face' in two ways: 1) by indicating similarities amongst interactants; or 2) by expressing an appreciation of the interlocutor's self-image. 'Negative politeness' can also be expressed in two ways: 1) by saving the interlocutor's 'face' (either 'negative' or 'positive') by mitigating face threatening acts (hereafter FTAs), such as advice-giving and disapproval; or 2) by satisfying 'negative face' by indicating respect for the addressee's right not to be imposed on. In short, 'politeness' is expressed not only to minimise FTAs, but also to satisfy the interactants' face regardless of whether an FTA occurs or not.

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Even though this theoretical part of their work seems to have the potential to apply to various types of interaction, Brown and Levinson's list of 'politeness' strategies mainly covers a certain very limited type of interaction. The examples they give consist mainly of single utterances which either have or presuppose clear communicative goals, such as asking to borrow a book or giving advice. Brown and Levinson tend to ignore the fact that most single utterances are actually just constituents of a larger exchange between two or more interactants. Firstly, they pay no attention to phenomena which occur across the entire discourse, such as back-channelling or the overall sequence of utterances (cf. Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Scollon and Scollon, 1981; Usami, 1998). Secondly, they ignore any interaction, such as simply enjoying a casual conversation, which does not involve a predetermined goal.

Therefore, this paper discusses how Brown and Levinson's theory can be applied to non-goal-oriented interaction by utilising naturally occurring casual conversations as data. The language of these conversations is Japanese. The analysis shows some examples of 'politeness' phenomena which Brown and Levinson's list of 'politeness' strategies does not cover, but which have frequently been observed in the data for this study. They can be regarded as 'politeness' strategies according to Brown and Levinson's general definition of 'politeness': they occur to satisfy the interactants' 'face' regardless of the occurrence of an FTA, or to minimise an FTA.

### **3. The data**

The segment which will be discussed in this paper is part of a 45-minute-long conversation and is chosen from the approximately 13 hours of taped data which were collected for a broader research project. The whole data set consists of face-to-face conversations between 10 pairs of native speakers of Japanese in their late twenties or thirties, who regard themselves as close friends.

The data were recorded by the participants in my absence. The equipment used for the data collection was a cassette tape recorder -- a small one so that it would not be visually intrusive. I transcribed the data myself.

### **4. Participants**

Before moving on to the analysis of an excerpt from the data, I would like to introduce the subjects in this segment of conversation. The two native speaker participants, K and R, are both female and in their mid-thirties at the time of recording. Both interactants are working mothers whose jobs involve a lot of responsibility.

### **5. Summary of the segment of conversation**

At the beginning of this segment, principal speaker K begins her story about how recently she has finally managed to balance things quite well, after being a working mother for one year. She goes on to talk about the stressful time she had before she regained her confidence. That is to say, she was used to working as much as she liked, without thinking of the consequences, but after the arrival of her baby, she started to modify her work habits. Strangely enough, it was very hard for her to avoid overworking. The flow of K's story moves gradually from the issue of 'balance' to K's stress. In the first part of this segment, K has rather a fragmented way of talking, and hearer R's short responses sound very neutral and function as mere continuers. As the conversation moves on, hearer R tries to understand what K is saying and to reflect this understanding back to K in her own words. This patient process of reaching mutual understanding seems to be the most important thing in this segment of conversation.

The segment starts rather quietly, even perhaps with some slight hesitation indicated by a short silence. However, the exchange gradually gains liveliness and eventually reaches a chorus of mutual understanding. Regarding ‘politeness’ phenomena, both ‘positive’ and ‘negative politeness’ can be seen at the beginning of the segment while both interactants negotiate their own roles in this part of the conversation. The more ‘positive politeness’ becomes dominant, the more the conversation livens up and both participants become actively engaged. The whole sequence sounds as if one person is making a tentative invitation to dance and the other, shyly at first, accepts. Gradually they tune in to each other’s rhythm and eventually start to ‘dance’ cheerfully and enthusiastically in conversation together.

According to differences in the manner of speaking and listening of both interactants, this segment of conversation can be divided into three parts: first, from line 20 to 42; second, from line 43 to 51; and third, the rest of this segment. Each part will be analysed in turn in the following section.

## 6. Analysis of the data

### 6.1 “Invitation to dance” (Part 1)

:  
20 K dekinai ne(..) demo ne:: saikin yappari ne baransu ga ne::  
21 (..) ichinenme tte iu ka sa:=  
22 R =un  
23 K (chotto) yappari kyonen wa sa:  
24 (..)  
25 R un  
26 K kekko: kyonen ichi-nenkan wa=  
27 R =un  
28 K baransu no torikata ga sa:=  
29 R =un  
30 K kekko: muzukashikatta tokoro ga [aru  
31 R [a: honto::  
32 K un [kotoshi haitte kara wa ne:  
33 R [a:::  
34 R un  
35 K kanari(..) toreru yo: ni natta [(yo: na)  
36 R [a:: so: un un(..) yasumu  
37 toki wa yasumu (to)  
38 K u:n(..) ato dakara shigoto-suru toki wa gyaku ni  
39 R un  
40 K kyonen wa dakara(.) hen ni shigoto-shinai  
41 R un  
42 K nante iu no ka na:(..) sutoresu ga atta no  
:  
:  
20 K [We] can’t, can we?(..) But, recently, y’know, a balance, y’know::  
(..)in the first year, y’know:=  
22 R =yeah  
23 K well, last year, [It was] (a bit)...  
24 (..)  
25 R yeah  
26 K the last one year was, quite...=  
27 R =yeah

- 28 K How to find a balance was... y'know... =  
29 R =yeah  
30 K there were points that were quite difficult.  
31 R //aa, really::  
32 K yeah, from the beginning of this year, y'know:  
33 R //a:::  
34 R yeah  
35 K ([I] think) [I] pretty well(..) started to find...  
36 R //I see, yeah, yeah.(..) When one has a rest,  
37 one should have a rest.  
38 K yeah (..) Then, so when one works, [it's] the other way around.  
39 R yeah  
40 K Last year, I mean,(.) strangely [I] was [trying] not to work [too hard]  
41 R yeah  
42 K What can I say?(..) So [I] was stressed.  
:

(Transcription Conventions are given after the References.)

The general feature of the first part is that K gradually gains the status of principal speaker and starts to talk about her situation, and R accepts this initiation and adopts the role of principal hearer. Both 'positive' and 'negative politeness' phenomena can be seen in this initial part of the conversation.

For instance, principal speaker K speaks very slowly and inserts some short gaps, and hearer R inserts a number of soft minimal responses which only occasionally overlap K's speech in lines 22, 25, 27, 29, 31, 33, 34, 39, and 41. These phenomena, which may at first glance, appear unrelated, seem to be strongly connected and can be regarded as involving both 'positive' and 'negative politeness'.

Starting from the aspect of 'positive politeness', the interactants satisfy each other's 'positive face' by showing their engagement in this interaction. The principal speaker sounds as if she invites the hearer into the conversation by creating opportunities for the hearer to insert short responses at the boundaries of phrasal units (Maynard, 1989). To a certain extent, one might say that it is the occurrence of the boundary itself which creates the opportunity for the hearer to respond. However, principal speaker K enhances this opportunity in this part of the conversation by speaking slowly and by prolonging the final syllable before the phrasal boundary in many cases. The hearer, in turn, indicates her engagement in the interaction by taking advantage of the opportunities created by the speaker and inserting short responses. As a result of the creation of these opportunities, there are significantly fewer overlaps in this first part than in later parts of the conversation.

In addition to this aspect of 'positive politeness', the interactants also satisfy each other's 'negative face' by not imposing on each other. That is to say, the principal speaker seeks the hearer's approval to continue her talk, and the hearer makes soft minimal responses which only occasionally overlap her interlocutor's speech, and do not disturb it in any way.

Another significant feature which can be related to 'negative politeness' in this initial part of the conversation is that both interactants speak rather unclearly in terms of propositional content. Principal speaker K's speech is full of ellipses and inversions. For example, from lines 20 to 35, K does not mention what kind of balance she is talking about. Moreover, in line 38, K does not complete her sentence. Hearer R also paraphrases the speaker's talk with a proverb-like expression in lines 36 and 37: '*yasumu toki wa yasumu* (When one has a rest, one should have a rest)'. This expression has a broad or generic reference, rather than referring specifically and

directly to K's situation. In these ways, both interactants satisfy each others' 'negative face' by utilising unclear expressions, which can be seen as an attempt not to impose on each other and to give the other some space to comprehend.

Despite the lack of clarity of their expressions, the interactants are rapidly approaching mutual understanding. Therefore, these ellipses and proverb-like expression can also be regarded as indicating their confidence in the fact that they can understand each other without requiring a great deal of clarity or detailed description. This can be seen as a form of 'positive politeness' which emphasises the fact that the principal speaker and the hearer share commonality.

## 6.2 "Let's dance" (Part 2)

:  
43 R A::::(.) A NARUHODO NE:[:?  
44 K [un(..) ima wa ne:(.) konogurai nara  
45 daijo:bu da to omotchau to ne[:  
46 R [fun fun fun  
47 K ma: i: ya tte omotte ne:[:(..) hora watashi DOCHIRAKatte  
48 R [un  
49 K iu to sa: chotto ko: un kibishi: ka na: tte omou tokoro o:  
50 R un  
51 K EI YA tte ya yari nagara yaru taipu da kara sa:=

:  
43 R Aaaa!(.) I see, naturally!  
44 K //yeah (..) Now,(.) 'this much is okay', y'know,  
45 if [I can only just] make myself believe [it]...  
46 R //yup, yup, yup  
47 K then, [I] will be okay, y'know.(.) As you know, I [am] the type -  
48 R //yeah  
49 K -who tends to do things which [I] think are pretty difficult like this -  
50 R yeah  
51 K - really exerting myself, so that's the type [I am], I reckon: =

The second part of this segment begins with hearer R showing a great deal of understanding, with the expression 'A:::: NARUHODO NE::?' (Aaaa, I see, naturally!) in line 43. This variation in the hearer's response can be seen as an indication of more active involvement. R continues to insert short responses in lines 46, 48 and 50, while listening to principal speaker K. R's short responses sound more rhythmical than they did in the first part. On the other hand, after having gone through the initial process of tentative negotiation to assume the role of principal speaker, the pace of K's speech now becomes faster and each of her turns becomes longer than in the first part.

The 'positive politeness' phenomenon by which the hearer inserts short responses occurs in a more rhythmical way, and thus starts to express her more active involvement, rather than just passive attention. The hearer satisfies the principal speaker's 'positive face' by repeatedly expressing agreement with her talk. The principal speaker's faster pace and longer turns prove that the hearer's 'positive politeness' is functioning well. The style of the speaker at this point may be likened to the 'high involvement style' described by Tannen (1984). However, whereas Tannen discusses this as a characteristic style of particular interactants, it appears here as a

characteristic of the process of topic negotiation and establishment in this segment of a particular conversation.

### 6.3 “Chorus” of mutual understanding (Part 3)

- :  
52 R =un un [un un un un un un  
53 K [shigoto no shikata ga(..) soko o sa: [EI YA tte  
54 R [un  
55 K yaranaide yatteta [kara sa:  
56 R [a: a: a: kaette [yokunakatta (wake)  
57 K [KEKKO: sutoresu datta no yo  
58 R a: a: a:(.) MURI [SHINAIDE OKO: TTE [IU MURI GA ATTA [(wake)=  
59 K [koko wa [so: so: so: [SO: SO:  
60 R =da ne?(.) fu::[:n  
61 K SO: SO: SO::(.)[masa ni sore sore  
:  
:  
52 R =yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,  
53 K //The way [I] work is.(..) In that case, [I] wasn't pushing myself-  
54 R //yeah  
55 K -to the limit, so...  
56 R //Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh. So actually [it] wasn't good [for you]?  
57 K // [It] was pretty stressful.  
58 R I see.(.) So [you] were trying not to overdo it and that's what was such an effort,  
59 K //Here //Right, right, right.. //Right! Right!  
60 R wasn't it?!(.). I see:::  
61 K Right! Right! Right!(!.) //That's it, that's it exactly.  
:

Moving on to the last part of the segment, the speech of both interactants overlaps significantly and this part sounds quite noisy. The absolute dominance of ‘positive politeness’ is the main characteristic of this part.

Firstly, the hearer starts to show her involvement more actively than at any stage so far. For example, R indicates her agreement with rigorous repetition of ‘un (yeah)’ in line 52. She tries to complete K’s talk (a phenomenon termed ‘co-construction’, eg Lerner, 1991; Hayashi and Mori, 1998) in line 56, saying that it wasn’t good for K. And in lines 58 and 60, she summarises principal speaker K’s talk, suggesting that K was trying to avoid overworking and that that was such an effort for K. These phenomena can be seen as a form of ‘positive politeness’; they satisfy the principal speaker’s ‘positive face’ since the hearer is trying to show her understanding.

Secondly, another ‘positive politeness’ phenomenon can be observed in this part when the principal speaker emphatically agrees with the hearer’s summary of her own talk. In lines 59 and 61, principal speaker K says in a loud excited voice, ‘SO: SO: SO: SO: SO: (Right! Right! Right! Right! Right!)’, and in line 61, ‘masa ni sore sore (That’s it, that’s it exactly)’. These comments satisfy hearer R’s ‘positive face’ since they show strong agreement with R’s summary of what K has said. For this reason, they can be regarded as further examples of ‘positive politeness’.

## 7. Conclusion

The segment of conversation discussed in this paper involves one of the interactants gradually gaining the status of principal speaker and continuing to talk about her situation, while showing respect to the hearer; at the same time, the other interactant gradually increases her involvement in the conversation, from minimal short responses to trying to complete or summarise the principal speaker's talk.

This paper has discussed some 'politeness' phenomena which are not included in Brown and Levinson's list of 'politeness' strategies. These phenomena are related to the interactants' manner of speaking and listening and to the sequence of the exchange in extended interaction. For instance, the principal speaker introduces a statement gradually, rather than all in one turn, and the hearer shows his/her involvement by back-channelling or by summarising the principal speaker's statement. These phenomena are not related to goal-oriented interaction and there is no trace of FTAs in the propositional content of the speech. Nevertheless, they do exhibit certain features which satisfy the criteria of 'politeness' according to Brown and Levinson's theory, so they can be regarded as forms of 'politeness'.

I would like to conclude that Brown and Levinson's 'politeness' theory can be a powerful tool to analyse 'politeness' phenomena, not only in goal-oriented interaction, but also in non-goal-oriented interaction of this nature. However, there is considerable room to expand Brown and Levinson's list of 'politeness' strategies, such as by focusing on the manner and sequence of an extended interaction like the casual conversation examined in this paper.

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### **Transcription conventions**

[	the point at which the current speaker's talk is overlapped by the other's talk
(.)	micro pause
(..)	pause slightly longer than micro pause
CAPS	relatively high volume
<u>underline</u>	stressed part of syllable
::	noticeable lengthening
=	latched utterances, with no interval between them
?	rising intonation
( )	inaudible utterance
[ ]	ellipsis in Japanese, which cannot be tolerated in the English translation
//	talk which overlaps the current speaker's talk in the English translation. Note: The precise place of overlapping cannot be indicated since the English translation does not exactly correspond to the Japanese word order. Therefore, the placement of the marker // is somewhat arbitrary.