JAPANESE HONORIFICS REVISITED
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1. Introduction
This paper addresses yet another concern with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) universal theory of politeness when it is applied to Japanese honorifics. This paper is organized as follows: after a brief outline of B&L’s theory, I will present in Section 2 Ide’s (1982, 1989) objections to it. I will then summarize three major counter-arguments to Ide’s theory in Section 3. I will discuss the problems with B&L’s theory in Section 4, and in Section 5 possible solutions. Conclusions follow in Section 6.

B&L contend that politeness “presupposes that potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties” (p.1). In their conceptualization, politeness is thus a manifestation of the speaker’s (S’s) strategic choice of linguistic expressions in order to minimize the risk of incurring a face-threatening act (FTA). They posit two types of face as universal notions: negative and positive. Negative face is defined as “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others,” and positive face as “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others” (p.62). They propose five strategies: (i) to do an FTA without redressive action, (ii) to use positive politeness, (iii) to use negative politeness, (iv) to go off the record, and (v) not to do an FTA. S makes a selection according to his/her calculation of the seriousness of the FTA, based on the social distance between S and A (= addressee) (abbreviated as D), the relative power of S and A (P), and the rank of imposition intrinsic to the FTA itself in a particular culture (R). The riskier the FTA, the higher the number of the politeness strategy S is likely to employ.

2. Ide’s objections
The inadequacy of B&L’s theory in accounting for Japanese politeness phenomena has for decades instigated enthusiastic and intense debates. Ide (1982, 1989), for example, criticizes it for dealing exclusively with politeness as a strategic move to minimize the impact of an FTA, while totally neglecting what she claims to be socially obligatory linguistic choices. Both Ide and Matsumoto (1988a, 1988b) consider that the purpose in using honorifics is not exclusively to save face, because honorifics occur even when there is no FTA. Ide uses the term volition to refer to the strategically-motivated practice of politeness, and discernment to refer to the polite behavior of conforming to the culturally prescribed norm, which is “independent of the speaker’s rational intention” (Ide 1989:242). For her, volition-based politeness serves to save face, in accordance with B&L’s theory, but discernment-based politeness is like a grammatical requirement, forming a sociopragmatic concordance system. Therefore, she argues, B&L’s theory, which deals only with one aspect of the politeness phenomena, is incomplete. In Western society, she continues, volition prevails, but in Japanese society, discernment does.¹

¹ Ide et al. (1992) investigated Japanese and American notions of politeness: the Japanese and American subjects were asked to associate 10 adjectives with the most appropriate scene from 14 interactional situations. They found that these American subjects tended to connect polite with friendly whereas the Japanese subjects judged teineina ‘polite’ and shitashigena ‘friendly’ as distinct. Ide et al. offer these findings as evidence supporting their claim that American politeness is volition-based, whereas Japanese politeness is predominantly discernment-based.
3. Counter-arguments to Ide’s theory

Fukada and Asato (2004) refuted Ide’s idea of discernment-based politeness by demonstrating that discernment is not obligatory in the same sense that grammatical correctness is. By way of illustration, they showed that in a depiction of a person’s dishonorable act, the use of honorifics is perceived peculiar even when the person is in a position customarily deserving of honorifics, e.g. (1):

(1) ??Sensee ga dookyuusee o gookan nasatta.
   ‘My teacher raped [honorific] my classmate.’

Fukada and Asato further contend that B&L’s theory can adequately account for Japanese politeness phenomena if one acknowledges that Japan is principally a vertical as well as hierarchical society. That is, power and distance in B&L’s weightiness formula receive markedly high values, and thus the overall significance of an FTA is inevitably elevated regardless of the severity of imposition intrinsic to the FTA itself. This is why, they assert, honorifics are used in non-FTA utterances. Fukada and Asato argue for this and other reasons that B&L’s theory is superior to Ide’s account, and, consequently, there is no need to set up a separate kind of politeness, such as discernment.

Another problem with Ide’s dual-layered conception of politeness is pointed out by Eelen (2001). Ide, like most other researchers in the field, assumes impoliteness to be the lack of politeness. Consequently, if an ability to use honorifics were like grammatical competence, then impoliteness would have no place in the Japanese speech community. That is, if one failed to use honorifics properly, it should then be taken as an indication of sociopragmatic incompetence, not as intended impoliteness. This, of course, is rarely the case.

Taking a social constructionist perspective, Cook (2006) argues that the dichotomy between discernment and volition is simply irrelevant. She claims that politeness is an interactional achievement, and that discernment is “an active co-construction in which the grammatical structures and the sequential organization of talk serve as resources for the participants to construct their identities in the moment-by-moment unfolding of interaction” (p. 269). According to Cook, every move the speaker makes is his/her own active choice; there is no such thing as passive observation of social rules (i.e. discernment).

Although many aspects of Ide’s objections to B&L’s politeness theory appear refutable, the relationship of honorific language, as fossilized and grammaticalized politeness, to B&L’s open-ended strategies nevertheless merits further investigation, as B&L themselves acknowledge (p.25).

4. Honorifics and politeness strategies

Japanese honorifics, and possibly honorifics in most languages, encode the concepts of distance and deference. They are used with an unfamiliar A based on psychological distance, or with an A of a higher social ranking based on deference. While distancing can properly be categorized as a negative politeness strategy, giving deference is problematic. B&L generally consider deference to be negative politeness, but they also acknowledge that it satisfies A’s positive want to be treated as superior. In fact, when honorifics are not utilized in the way A expects, it is arguably A’s positive face that is damaged. Thus, identifying deference unequivocally with negative politeness renders their theory incoherent.

Another problem with B&L’s theory, not unrelated to the first problem, is the
dichotomization of positive and negative politeness along a single dimension, and on a per-FTA basis. Recall their ranking of the politeness strategies: (i) to do an FTA without redressive action, (ii) to use positive politeness, (iii) to use negative politeness, (iv) to go off the record, and (v) not to do an FTA. They consider that the riskier the FTA, the higher the strategy S tends to select.

However, when honorific language is available, positive and negative politeness strategies are frequently, or even typically, implemented simultaneously.

(2) *Aki-chan, itsumo itsumo tanonde bakkari de gomen ne. Demo kooyuu kototte Aki-chan igai, chotto tanomenain da yonee. Sorede, ...*

‘Aki, I’m awfully sorry to ask you to do favors for me all the time, but I don’t have anyone else. So ...’

(3) *Kondo no kooshoo wa, nankoo ga yosoku sarerun desu yone. Sokode, yyuben de, katsu kado ga tatanai kata to naru to, yahari Yamada-san de wa nai ka to ...*

‘We expect problems with our next negotiation. So, we need someone who is effective but civil. So, as you know, it ought to be Yamada-san ...’

These are presequences for making a request, which simultaneously exhibit positive and negative politeness. In the first sentence in (2), the use of the plain form as well as the hypocoristic –chan indexes S’s desire to display positive politeness. By contrast, its semantic content indexes negative politeness, viz., apologizing for intrusion. In (3), the use of honorifics and kata ‘person (honorific variation)’ indexes negative politeness, but the content aims at positive politeness, viz., praising Yamada’s tactfulness. Mixture of positive and negative politeness strategies is not an exception, but, rather, the norm in Japanese. This fact raises a serious question regarding the fundamental conceptualization of B&L’s positive and negative politeness strategies.

B&L acknowledge this problem; they are aware that their strategies can be mixed in discourse, e.g. positive politeness markers within negative politeness strategies as well as indirect requests or going off-record in positive politeness utterances (p.17). Their defense consists of pointing out that a segment of talk might contain more than one FTA with different R values which, in turn, motivate multiple strategies. They also caution that hint-like utterances might be *de facto* on the record, if there is no ambiguity or vagueness of their interpretation in particular contexts.

[O]ne possible source of confusion here is this: when describing positive politeness, ... we included the use of ‘markers’ of social closeness, like intimate address forms; and when describing negative politeness, ... we included the use of ‘markers’ of deference like honorifics. Now, although address forms and honorifics may ... be FTA-sensitive, ... on the whole such elements are tied relatively directly to the social relationship between speaker and addressee. The consequence of such direct ‘markers’ of social relationship is that they may occur with an FTA of any R-value, and thus equally with markers of positive and negative politeness; if shifts are permissible at all, we should merely expect a shift towards a more ‘formal’ address form than normally used ... when R-values increase between the same interlocutors. Thus, certain aspects of, for example, positive politeness like ‘intimate’ address forms may happily occur in off-record usages motivated by high R factors. What we did not expect, and have not found, is that there might be a shift to more ‘intimate’ address forms with an increase in R (p.18).
B&L insist that S needs to select one and only one strategy per FTA, and that in order to refute their unidimensional and mutually exclusive ranking of strategies, one needs to show that an opposing ranking is possible. They write:

Despite the various deviations from our expected hierarchy that have emerged from some of these experimental tests, no one (to our knowledge) has come up with clear evidence of a counter-ranking: where (for example) positive politeness is used for greater FTAs, negative politeness for smaller ones, or where off record is used for smaller FTAs (or to lower-status Hs [hearers]) than negative or positive politeness (p.20).

Genuine counterexamples do exist:

(4) [A response to the survey question on how to call one’s mother]

*Ima demo soo desu keredo, “okaasan” desu. Okane o nedaru toki dake, “X-chan” to yobimasu.*
‘I still call her *okaasan* (‘mother’). Only when I ask for money, I call her *X-chan*.’
(http://matsuri.site.ne.jp/taro/taro106.htm, 6/13/2007)

For the sake of our discussion, let us assume that the respondent in (4) is a male and his mother’s name is Michiko. He usually (i.e. for FTAs with a lower R) addresses his mother as *okaasan*, but when he asks her for money (higher R), he calls her *Michiko-chan*, which is a less formal and more intimate address form than *okaasan*.

Next, let us consider examples in (5):

(5) a. [A response to the question on how to address your wife]

*Kihon yobisute, tanomu toki dake “chan”zuke nanode, kanji warui desu ne, hai.*
‘Normally, I call her with the bare name. But I add *chan* when I ask her a favor, so I may be obnoxious, I know.’

b. [From a blog]

*Asa kara attama kitaa!!!* *Ii kibun de pasokon hiraitetara, danna ga “X-chan, tabako kattekitee”* *tte nekonade-goe de iu kara (yatsu wa hito ni mono o tanomu toki dake “chan”zuke shiyagaru) “yada!” tte itteyatta kedo …*
‘I’ve been driven mad since this morning!!! When I was playing with my PC, my husband said “X-chan, go buy me cigarettes” in a wheedling tone of voice (the guy uses *chan* only when he’s asking me for a favor), so I said “No way!”, but …’

In these cases, the go-bold strategy (i.e. *yobisute* ‘bare name’) is used for lower R, and the positive politeness address form (*-chan*) for higher R, so that, unlike (4), they are in accordance with B&L’s strategy ranking. However, as a native speaker of Japanese, I believe that there is no difference in motivation between (4) and (5). As B&L themselves acknowledge, address terms are fairly stable; therefore, it does not matter how S normally calls A, more formal or less formal than the use of *-chan*. What is significant here is that this positively marked address term, *-chan*, can be used when higher R is involved, rather than negatively marked address term, e.g. *-sama*, which is also possible, as B&L predict. I argue that B&L’s unidimensional and mutually
exclusive ranking of strategies is untenable because there is no a priori reason to assume one strategy per FTA.²

5. Suggested solutions
I have pointed out that B&L’s theory poses two problems when it applies to Japanese politeness phenomena. First, identifying the use of honorifics categorically with negative politeness is untenable because honorifics typically satisfy A’s positive want. Second, dichotomizing positive and negative politeness as mutually exclusive concepts is unjustifiable because there is no inherent reason for S to appeal to only one facet of A’s face-maintenance wants.

There appear to be three possibilities to resolve these problems. One is to adopt R. Lakoff’s (1973, 1990) theory of politeness, which regards politeness to be ultimately an attempt to make A feel good. She posits three rules to accomplish this goal: (i) don’t impose, remain aloof (Distance); (ii) give options (Deference); (iii) make A feel good, be friendly (Camaraderie). She considers that while the rules of Distance and Camaraderie are mutually contradictory, the rules of Distance and Deference can be applicable together, and so can be the rules of Deference and Camaraderie.

In this framework, the use of honorifics can be analyzed to be triggered by either the Distance rule or the Deference rule.³ Therefore, utterance (2) can be analyzed in such a way that its form signals S’s observation of the Camaraderie rule, whereas its content signals the Deference rule. In (3), the form signals Deference, and the content, Camaraderie.

The second possible solution is to consider honorifics as a different kind of channel, i.e. one that is neutral with respect to B&L’s open-ended negative and positive politeness strategies. Thus, honorific language can be employed independently of these strategies. This idea is alluded to by B&L in the quoted passage above. They assert that honorifics are associated more directly and tied more strongly to the social relationship of interlocutors, and, therefore, they are more stable and less sensitive to R values.

This remedy is superficially identical with Ide’s proposal of separating volition-based and discernment-based politeness; however, their psychological underpinnings are quite different. Ide considers that these two types of politeness are triggered by different motivations: volition politeness is used strategically to minimize the impact of an FTA, but discernment politeness is used to show one’s willingness to conform to the culturally prescribed norm. By contrast, B&L would argue that they are both motivated by the same principle, viz. S’s desire to minimize the risk of an FTA. The latter is compatible with Cook’s social constructionist analysis. These two are certainly legitimate arguments and merit further scrutiny.

The third possible solution is the one I would like to explore in the balance of this paper. I contend that the concepts of negative and positive face as well as negative and positive politeness strategies are all universally valid. However, I disagree with B&L in that minimizing the risk of an FTA is not the sole reason for striving to be polite. I may apply a politeness strategy driven by affection, especially when I select a positive-politeness strategy, e.g. (6):

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² Russell Lee-Goldman drew my attention to the possibility that the same type of FTA addressed to the same person might have different R values depending on some factors not considered by B&L, e.g. asking one’s mother for money to buy a luxurious good vs. a necessary article, or requesting the same when the mother is well off or when she has economic difficulties.

³ Hasegawa (2006) discusses the ambiguity of the use of honorifics and problems caused by it.
When I utter (6), I have most likely been overwhelmed by the devastating situation and try to express my sincere sympathy towards A; minimizing the potential risk of the FTA would be my least concern in this case. This stance contradicts directly Fukada and Asato’s contention. They argue that because Japan is a hierarchical society, every utterance may possibly create a risky situation, and therefore the Japanese exhibit politeness based solely on their desire to minimize the risk of an FTA.

The second issue on which I disagree with B&L is that S must select only one strategy from the ranked super-strategies per FTA. They assert:

One problem encountered in assessing the ‘ranking’ of positive as opposed to negative politeness is the different nature of the two. … However, while acknowledging the fundamental differences between positive and negative politeness, we do not see them as incompatible with a systematic use in one case versus another … (p.18)

This seems an unreasonable restriction. We acknowledge that all competent adult members of society have both negative and positive face. However, they are also aware that being totally free from impediment hinders attainment of positive face. Therefore, people normally somehow balance these competing wants. Given that, it seems more natural for S to consider both types of desire together. Therefore, if there are linguistic resources available to perform negative and positive politeness simultaneously, it is logical for them to combine them.

I hypothesize that at the beginning of conversation, S decides heuristically the degrees of negative and positive politeness s/he wishes to apply, considering affection towards A, S’s own desire regarding how to present him/herself, and the potential risk of the FTA, if any. Such a decision can be fairly stable within the stretch of a conversation, or S can modify it at each Transition Relevance Place.4 The situation represented in (6) is close to the maximum in both negative and positive politeness.

On the other hand, if one wishes to be impolite, positive politeness will be determined to be minimum, but negative politeness might vary, mostly due to S’s self image. Some do not mind being vulgar, e.g. (8a), whereas others prefer to keep a certain level of politeness to represent themselves as refined, e.g. (8b).

(7) Situation (6)

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4 Transition Relevance Place: a point of possible completion of the current utterance in a conversation, so that a transition from one speaker to another is possible.

(8) a. *Urusai! Dete ike!*  
‘Shut up! Get out!’
### 6. Conclusions

Regarding the relationship of honorifics to the use of their open-ended politeness strategies, B&L mention that in Tamil some direct requests of low R may occur from subordinates to superordinates, if such requests are mitigated with appropriate honorifics. This might suggest that in some languages politeness might be carried more by honorifics and less by matters of language use. However, they conclude that this inference is not generally correct; there is not “a certain quantity of politeness to be conveyed by one channel (the grammaticalized honorifics) or another (strategic language use) – politeness is usually redundantly expressed in both” (p.25).

What I propose is very different from what they describe. I suggest that negative and positive politeness strategies are considered separately, and that they are used simultaneously, contrary to B&L’s strategy ranking.

### References


Ide, Sachiko, Beverly Hill, Yukiko Carnes, Tsunao Ogino, and Akiko Kawasaki. 1992. The