Politeness Strategies in the Context of Argument
In Japanese Debate Shows

Yuka Shigemitsu*

The purpose of this study is to find out politeness strategies in the discourse of argument situation in Japanese. Harmony is said to be a key concept to understand the Japanese culture. Harmony is one of the unique characteristics, the keynote, especially in the Japanese interaction. I have been studying the concept of harmony in Japanese culture (Shigemitsu, 2001, 2002). From the point of view of politeness theory, negative politeness strategies function to maintain harmonious atmosphere. This effect works as avoiding conflict among speakers. Besides the negative politeness strategies, some positive politeness strategies are seen when the participants employ positive politeness strategy 5 ‘Seek agreement’. This strategy is a way of claiming common ground with Hearer. Stressing Speaker’s agreement with Hearer, Speaker satisfies Hearer’s desire to be ‘right’. Thus they collaborate each other even they have different opinions and even during the argument, Japanese participants try to maintain harmonious atmosphere as possible.

1. Introduction
The purpose of this study is to examine the characteristics of Japanese interaction in discussion and arguing situations. Yoko Haruka, a Japanese TV character, often appears in TV talk shows. She always felt uncomfortable in debate shows. It was because the participants concentrated on making harmonious atmosphere and did not say their opinion assertively and clearly in order to maintain harmony. In pragmatic sense, harmony means the verbal behavior without conflict. After that, she entered the graduate school to study how to debate. Anyway, harmony has been considered one of the unique characteristics of the Japanese culture. Therefore, it can be assumed that the structure of talk in Japanese is oriented toward harmony that underlies the Japanese culture.

2. Politeness Theory
Politeness is a common word that means ‘having or showing that one has good manners and consideration for other people’ (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary.) It is similar to ‘civility’, ‘courtesy’, and ‘good manners.’ However, politeness also means that ‘behaving or speaking in a way that is correct for the social situations you are in, and showing that you are careful to consider other people’s needs and feelings’ (Longman Advanced American Dictionary.) We have ‘commonsense’ politeness and ‘scientific’ notions of politeness.

Recently, many researchers are attracted to the relationships between the ‘correct form’ and ‘the social situations a person in.’ Politeness is one of the more popular branches of contemporary pragmatics, and a widely used tool in studies of intercultural communication. (Eelen, 2001, p. 1). Politeness is not confined to language. It also includes non-verbal behavior. Robin Lakoff is called ‘the mother of modern politeness theory, for she was one of the first to examine it from a decidedly pragmatic perspective. (Eelen, 2001,). However, Brown and Levinson’s Politeness theory has been the most influential for over thirty years. ‘Rationality’ and ‘face’ are important features for their theory. Brown and Levinson claim that these

* Associate Professor, General Education and Research Center, Tokyo Polytechnic University
Received Sept. 10, 2003
two terms are universal to all people. Rationality is defined as the application of a specific mode of reasoning that guarantees inferences from ends or goals to means that will satisfy those ends. Face consists of two specific kinds of desires (wants) attributed by interactants to one another: the desire to be unimpeded in one’s action, ‘negative face,’ and the desire to be approved of ‘positive face’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The Figure 1 shows possible politeness strategies for doing FTAs (Face Threatening Acts).

![Fig. 1 Possible strategies for doing FTA (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69)](image)

A politeness strategy is employed by the ‘weightiness.’ The weightiness is calculated by speakers from the social variables such as power difference between speaker and hearer (P), the perceived social distance between speaker and hearer (D), and ranking of imposition (R). R differs from culture to culture because they are how threatening or dangerous in a specific culture. P, D and R do not have any absolute value. Mainly a speaker valued them according to the situation and culture subjectively. Thus, weightiness is calculated as follows.

$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(S, H) + Rx$$

3. Politeness behavior in Japanese

Following Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, let us overview politeness behavior in Japanese. Scollon and Scollon (1995) roughly shows how Western people are oriented to positive politeness strategies and the East-Asian people, such as Chinese, Korean and Japanese, are oriented to negative politeness strategies. Some researches show that Japanese people seldom use positive politeness strategies in their verbal behavior. They prefer negative politeness strategies. Ohtsuka (2002, 2003) presents how JSL/JFL textbooks are centered on the usage of negative politeness strategies.

Ide (1982, 1989) claims that there is a second and separate component of politeness especially prominent in Japanese, which is ‘discernment.’ Discernment is the act in which people forced to choose some verbal behavior. Her development of Discernment is based on the Japanese use of honorifics. Shigemitsu (1992, 1993) shows how Japanese participants’ roles in interaction are restricted in each situation according to where they are and who they are. Japanese people are very sensitive to follow the traditional, social and cultural unwritten rules.

This paper tries to show how conflicts are avoided in Japanese debate show. According to the findings above, it is assumed that participants mainly use negative politeness strategies to keep harmony among the participants. Both discernment and such unwritten rules function as caring other participants’,
especially the elders’ and superiors’ negative face. Therefore, negative politeness strategies fit Japanese social and cultural customs when we perform interactions. From the point of view of Brown and Levinson’s Politeness theory, Shigemitsu and Ohtani (2003) study Japanese people’s verbal behavior and show how they try to use more negative politeness strategies comparing with the people from the United States. Hori et al (in print) demonstrate Japanese people are oriented toward negative politeness strategies. Therefore, when they speak with English native speakers, there arise some misunderstandings in attitude toward each other because English native speakers are oriented to positive politeness.

4. Data

In order to see the harmonious atmosphere in Japanese discussion, this study focuses on data taken from several Japanese TV programs that are constituted by debates and discussion of topical issues. Target viewers of these programs are well-educated people. The video-recorded programs were analyzed in terms of the sequences of actions that were found to be common to them. All of the programs are live shows. Data 1 is from Nichiyo-toron (we could literally translate it as ‘Sunday debate’, Aug, 18, 2002). The topic is about education reform in Japan. Participants are the chair, MEXT minister, Ms. Toyama, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, a specialist of education, a professor of Tokyo University, a junior high school teacher and a primary school teacher. Data 2 is also from Nichiyo-Toron (January 20, 2003). The topic is about ‘Next ordinary Diet Session’. The participants are three Diet members from the ruling party, and four Diet members from Opposition Party and the chair. Both Data 1 and 2 can be said that they are very controlled and formal interactions. There is no commercial break. Data 3 is from ‘Asa made Nama Terebi’ (we could call it midnight debate, February 28, 2003). The topic is ‘Should Japanese cooperate with USA in the war against Iraq without UN resolution?’ There were twelve participants plus the chair. They are three professors (they are not specialists in the on-going topic), one diet member, one journalist, two researchers, one medical doctor and four writers (essayists and novelists and critics). The data was selected one commercial break to the other which shows heated discussion.

In Data 1, the university professor, the high school teacher and the primary school teacher tell their opinion on the school reform to the minister. Data 2 clearly showed that participants from two opposite sides have a conflict of opinions.

Data 3 is different from Data 1 and 2 because the selling point of the program is ‘arguing and conflict.’ Who and who conflict is not clarified. The participants were selected because they are so to speak telepoleticists, not debaters. It can be said that they are selected because they speak loudly, strongly, insistently and assertively. They seem to say about their opinions without a bit of hesitation. Most of them have studied abroad. So they have experiences debating and arguing in English. Therefore, the participants seem to concern Japanese tradition of harmonious attitude. They are overlapping, interrupting and violating other conversational rules. They give accusatory and hostile questions. However, some participants say in the newspaper that they do not show their true colors in the program. They say they overdo in the program. They feel more comfortable following Japanese traditional interactional structure. They also say that they behave like this only in this program. During the course of the debating, the conflicted groups were changing dynamically.
5. Analyses and Discussion

5.1. Negative Politeness Strategy

Let us begin from the negative politeness strategy found in the three debates. Negative politeness is redressive action addressed to the hearer’s negative face. His or her wants to have his/her freedom of act in unhindered and his/her attention unimpeded. It is the heart of respect behavior. Negative politeness strategies are the most elaborated and the most conventionalized set of linguistic strategies for FTA redress. They always fill the etiquette books (Brown and Levinson, 1987). So it can be assumed participants tend to use negative politeness strategies compared to other strategies since they strive for maintaining harmony. Following strategies are picked up from the data. The strategies number follows the Brown and Levinson’s.

Negative Politeness Strategy 1. Be conventionally indirect.

It should be noted that overall conversational style is formal, using full of honorifics. If participants keep honorifics rules, they do not take risks in interpersonal relationships. The participants tend to take their turn when they are given permission from the chair. In Data 1 and 2, which are more controlled debating by the chair, participants were selected one by one from the chair. They could not select themselves for the next speaker. Generally, Japanese people mind the order of participation, from the older to the younger, from the powerful to the powerless (Watanabe, S., 1993). So it is reasonable that the chair designated one participant to give him/her a turn. Even in Data 3, which is less controlled debating, chair sometimes neglected the self-selective speaker and then chose another participant as the next speaker among the twelve participants.

In data 3, overlapping and interrupting are welcome because they are the selling points in the program. However, in data 1 and 2, they are not welcome because they violate the conversational rule. In data 2, one opponent diet member sometimes tried to overlap and to interrupt to insist his claim or asked challenging questions to the other participants from the ruling party, directly. However, the chair would neglect his claims because the way he took turn violated conversation rules.

Negative Politeness Strategy 2: Question, hedge

The main body of each program typically centers on question-answer sequences. The chair on behalf of the participants commonly asks general questions to a participant such as

(1) *doo goran ni nari masu ka* (How do you view this point?)
(2) *doo omoimsu ka* (What do you think about this?)

These two types of questions are mainly found in the data. The nuance sounds bit different between original Japanese and English translation, but it can be said that these types of questions are oriented toward participants’ feelings.

(3) Chair: *Hoshi-sensei. Koucho sensei no otachiba kara mite doudesuka? Atarashi shidouyouryou wa umaku itte imasuka?* (Mr. Hoshi, from a principal’s point of view, does new education reform system work well?)

(4) Chair: ((several lines omitted) *Kono kyousei naikou o kiso kihon ni shibotta to iukotode desu ne, souiu*}
(Since the content of teaching material consists of very basic matter. Is it effective?)

As (5), (6) shows, the chair usually picks up a point in the current speaker’s talk and asks it on behalf of the current speaker. It is performed to avoid the direct conflict between the participants.

(5) Chair: ((several lines omitted)) *Kore wa umaku susunde iru to iu huuni gorannni natte imasuka?* (Kore indicating the content what the former speaker said.)(Is this going well? Do you regard it as going well?)

(6) Chair: *Soko no tokoro o daijin ni ukagatte mimashouka. Yutori no kyouiku to iukotowo iu ippoude, gakuryokuno koujoumo, yutorino sokonotokoro wa dou nande shouka. Houkou no tenkan toiu koto ga atta n desu ka.* (Let us ask Minister at that point. Whereas we need more spare time in school schedule, we require progress in learning. What do you make of this?)

In such open questions, what point is asked is very ambiguous and the person who answers is said to be allowed to interpret the target of the question by his/her own way. So what to talk in the answering sequence is left to the answerers.

Answers are usually presented with hedges, such as *omoimasu* (I feel / I think --- ) forms. So, the debate seems to go preceding exchanging opinions. Even when each participant has a different opinion, his/her collision is not explicitly identified.

**Negative Politeness Strategy 4: Minimize the imposition.**

Participants seldom respond, (never emphatically) to the other participants’ talk. Exaggerated response (a positive politeness strategy) conveys that H’s is admirable or interesting to S or he or she may stress common membership in a group or category, thus emphasizing that both S and H belong to some set of persons who share some wants (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 103). However, such emphatic responses are seldom found. Even back-chandelling is seldom found compared to ordinary casual conversations.

The following example shows that the chair designated the next speaker. But at the same time, the other participant tried to slot his turn in the transition-relevance place (TRP) to correct the misunderstanding of the former speaker’s talk. However, the chair went on after the inserted utterance without mentioning that.

After the participant A, no one including chair responded it, and chair designated the other participant (participant B) as a next speaker. So the chair controlled the verbal interaction to maintain harmonious atmosphere. Even to the interrupting turn, no one responded.

(7) Chair: *kore wa, B-san* (Mr. B, This…)

Participant A: *chotto matte kudasai. Watashi wa daiseikou to iuno wa ima made hitei shiteita koto o mitome saseta n desu yo. Sono itten o itteiru wake desu.* (Wait a second, What I mean in the word successful is that we made them admit what they had denied. I have been saying that one thing)

Chair: *B-san ne, ima masa ni muzukashii mondai ga nokotteiru n desu ga…douiu huu ni okangae ni natte imasuka* (Mr. B, now we have left some difficult problems. What do you think about it?)

Participant B: *yappari ne…* (After all…)
The chair did not respond to the participant A in (7) as if he didn’t hear it.

As we have also noticed, the role of chairs is very important. They behave like gatekeepers or traffic controls. They select the next speakers, addressing them as in “Mr. XXX, what do you think about this?” The chair usually paraphrases some opinions of a participant, and asks about it to the other target participants. Only the chair asks question to the participants. When one participant showed intentions to have questions to the other participants, the chair asks the questions or repeats the question as a formal turn. Therefore, to exaggerate, each participant did not exchange talk directly even in the face-to-face situation. This observation is supported from the point of eye contacts. The current speaker did not usually see the other participants but they had an eye-contact with the chair as if they talk only to the chair.

Negative Politeness Strategy 5: Give deference

Speech style in Data 1 and 2 is rather formal. The participants use honorifics as a whole. Speech style in data 3 is rather casual and sometimes rough. But when a participant quotes other participant’s utterance, they use honorifics to show deference.

(8) Miyazaki Tetsuya: *ima Kudo san ga oshatta youni* (What Ms. Kudo said + honorifics)

It is noteworthy to mention that the participants follow the social and hierarchical structure in the speech event. The chair selects the next speaker according to the power and status. In data 3, we have some example of the argument grew heated. Even during the heated argument, overlapping and interruptions, when the older started to speak, suddenly other participants stopped to talk. In Data 3, we could also find some examples, that participants talk casually to the younger but the participants talk with honorifics to the older. The chair in Data 3 is the oldest among the participants, so he can control the chaotic situation.

Prosodic element also functions to show deference. Talking calmly is welcome, being less attacked. When a speaker preserved or recover the harmonious atmosphere, other participants reset their radial attitude even during the heated argument. Calm tone is preferred.

Negative Politeness Strategy 7: Impersonalize S and H

Offensive questions are asked in impersonalized forms with a ‘let’s-think-about-it-together’ atmosphere. The followings are typical and frequent occurred examples of the question-answer sequences found in the data. Yes-no questions are very rare. To the dubious opinion and answer, the chair gives follow-up questions. We can usually find yes-no style questions.

There is one ‘why’ question. However, it does not target the other participant. Impersonalising, they target to the content of the question and moreover they are open questions. They are ‘let’s-think-it-together why it happened’. Thus, they are not target the weakness in opponent logic and theory.

(9) Chair: *((several lines omitted)) Gakko genba ni yutori ga umareruka to omoimashitara sakihodo no ohanashi de wa zenzen souatte inaito kore wa doushite nandesukane.* (In school, we thought leeway comes in school schedule. According to a talk before, it does not. Why?)
5.2. Off Record Strategy

A communicative act is done “off record” if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. So, the actor leaves himself an ‘out’ by providing himself with a number of defensible interpretations. He or she cannot be held to have committed himself/herself to just one particular interpretation of his or her act. Thus if a speaker wants to do an FTA, but wants to avoid the responsibility for doing it, he can do it off record and leave it up to the hearer to decide how to interpret it (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Off record strategy 8 is prominent in the data. This strategy is used for refutation. So participants try to avoid conflicts by leaving the interpretation to the hearer.

Off Record Strategy 8: Be ironic.

By saying the opposite of what he means a violation of Gricean Quality Maxim (‘Speak the truth, be sincere’), S can convey his or her intended meaning, if there are clues that his intended meaning is being conveyed indirectly. Such clues may be prosodic, kinesics, or simply contextual. Some phrases can mark that S is saying irony (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The findings show that assaulting is done with sarcastically and ironically in the data. Participants use irony, sarcasm, and satire to attack the others. When a participant says such ironic expression, the other participants neglected it and the chair selected one participant as a next speaker. It is observed that such sarcasm can be totally neglected and other participants can go as if there was no such satire and attacking from other participant.

(10) Yamazaki:  

hazukashii hanashi da to omoi masu ga ne (I think it is a very shameful story)

Speech style in data 3 is somewhat casual and sometimes rough. Refutations are supported by emotionally and they are interpreted as indirect insulting. Such insulting, an inadequate behavior in the situation, can be neglected and other participants do not have to be treated seriously.

5.3. Positive Politeness Strategy

Positive politeness is redress directed to the hearer’s positive face, his or her perennial desire that his/her wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable. Redress consists in partially satisfying that desire by communicating that one’s own wants (or some of them) are in some respects similar to the addressee’s wants (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The following strategies are found in the data.

Positive Politeness Strategy 1: Notice, attend to H (his interests, wants, needs, goods)

In general, this output suggests that S should take notice of aspects of H’s condition (noticeable changes, remarkable possessions, anything which looks as though H would want S to notice and approve of it)(Brown and Levinson, 1987).

In posing questions, participants even show their sympathy to and understanding of their opposition. Asking question is a way to refute and there will be conflict by asking questions. However, the conflict does not seem to appear from the words. The asker shows sympathy and understandings, (11).

(11) Chair:  

zetthiyouka to iuno wa tsukeru hou no sensei no hou ga kurou ga ooinode wa naidesuka?  
( Doesn’t absolute evaluation give the teachers who fill the report card a difficult time? )
Attacking is also done with showing sympathy. Even when being fought back, the participant shows agreement to the previous speaker who fought back to the participant.

Strategy 5: Seek agreement.

This is a way of claiming common ground with hearer. Even when arguing against the others, the speaker showed agreement with the opponents’ opinion and showed understanding.

(12) Yamamoto:  *Miyazaki san kouhan ittakoto sugoi daiji da to omou* (I think what Mr. Yamamoto has just said is very important)

The speaker repeated the same phrase three times before he made refutation. The following example is also uttered before refutation.

(13) Yanamoto:  *Miyadai-san no itteiru koto ga watashi kihon teki ni sansei na no wa* (The reason why I agree with Mr. Miyadai…)

(14) Nikai:  *sakihodo yoto ni sekinin ga aru to osshatte orimasu ga yappari yoto ni sekinin ga aru to omoi masu* (Just before, you said that we have responsibility, I think we have responsibility)

Positive Politeness Strategy 11: Be optimistic

Optimistic expressions of FTAs seem to work by minimizing the size of the face threat – Wx—implying that it is nothing to ask or that the cooperation between S and H means that such small thing can be taken for granted (Brown and Levinson, 1987). I include ‘Smiling and laughing effect’ in this strategy because it shows that the speaker does not sound serious.

When one was attacked, not being challenged, the target participant tended to laugh and scoff as if the speaker is ridiculous. Moreover, when one could not refute other participants, one tends to smile to cover up his/her embarrassment. As mentioned above, the heated discussion ends up in smiling and laughing.

5.4. Bald on Record

Whenever speaker (S) wants to do the face threatening act (FTA) with maximum efficiency more than he wants to satisfy hearer’s (H’s) face, even to any degree, he will choose the bald on record strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 95). Talking assertively and loudly is not welcome. It tends to be being attacked. If the action extremes limit of other participants’ endurance, the speaker is neglected. However, once such atmosphere broke, participants were going to be overwhelmed with emotion and ruled by passion. Japanese people are good at maintaining harmony but they seem to be not good at repairing such breakdowns.

6. Concluding remarks

This study focuses on data taken from several Japanese TV programs that are constituted by debates and discussions of topical issues. As it is assumed, negative politeness strategies function to maintain harmonious atmosphere. Those negative politeness strategies help the participants keep aloof
even in a direct face-to-face speech events. This effect works as avoiding conflict among speakers. But we must not miss the positive politeness usages. Besides the negative politeness strategies, positive politeness strategy is limited when the participants employ positive politeness strategy 5 ‘Seek agreement’. This strategy is a way of claiming common ground with H. Stressing Speaker’s agreement with Hearer, Speaker satisfies Hearer’s desire to be ‘right’. Thus they corroborate each other even they have different opinions. During the interactions, Japanese participants try to maintain harmonious atmosphere as possible. Future research should focus positive politeness usages in Japanese interactants. Also, the repair of conflicts and confusing situation after a harmonious atmosphere breaks down should be included in a future research.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to express my special gratitude to Prof. Scott Saft at Tsukuba University and Prof. Sachiko Ide at Japan Women’s University who organized the Panel Session at 7th International Pragmatics Conference (IPRA) in Toronto. They encouraged me and included me in their panel. It was very disappointed the panel session was cancelled because of the SARS in Toronto. I also wish to thank other panel members. We are too good to dismiss. I would like to express my special thanks to enthusiastic Prof. Motoko Hori at Kansai Gaidai University who encouraged me to attend the ICSWC2. I was given valuable comments on the earlier version of the paper. I am also indebted to all the members of JACET Taigu Hyogen Kenkyukai (JACET Politeness SIG). I had fruitful discussion with them.

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