

A Gender-Difference of Request Realization in Pragmatic Strategies: The Case of Japanese Speakers

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INTRODUCTION

It is world-widely reported that women speak more politely than men do. However, current research clearly identifies opposite situations depending on different cultures.

... in societies where politeness is normatively valued or seen as a skill, or where acquisition of politeness is not an automatic part of language learning but requires additional training, men tend to be understood as more polite, and women are understood as impolite or too polite. In societies where directness is valued, and politeness is seen as a form of deference rather than a skill, women tend to be more polite, or at least are perceived as more polite (Freeman and McElhinny, 1996, p.251)

Which society does Japan belong to? In Japan, politeness seems to be regarded as a norm. If so, then are men more polite than women? If women are more polite than men, then is Japan a society where directness is valued? In Japan, many men speak standard Japanese in the public whenever they cannot use their dialect, while most women must always speak standard Japanese with feminine particles. Japan is indeed a society where gender difference of language exists.

Politeness can be defined as the speaker's thoughtful consideration toward the interlocutor(s) to carry on smooth communication. The kind of and the degree to which politeness strategies are employed are different according to different cultures. In a society like Japan, where social distance is valued, Lakoff's 'rule of formality' (i.e. keep aloof) or her 'rule of deference' (i.e. give options) is used, while in a society like the United States, where equal human relationship is valued, her 'rule of camaraderie' (i.e. show sympathy) is used (Lakoff, 1975, p.65; Kawamura, 1996, pp. 125-6).

This paper attempts to investigate the differences of Japanese politeness realization in request between men and women, and between the young and the elderly. Request, one of speech acts, is decided to be used to elicit data. It is considered that request situations vary according to the relation between addressers and addressees in social distance and in psychological distance as well as requesting imposition. In addition, it is expected that there still does remain some gender difference and/or age difference of request realization in Japanese.

THE STUDY

The Purpose of the Study

1. What differences are seen in one illocutionary act—request—between generations and between genders?

2. What differences are found between genders in two generations?

The discovery of differences by answering the questions above will shed light on the pragmatic aspect in gender differences of language use in Japanese.

Subjects

The subjects are 18 college students (9 female and 9 male friends of theirs) and 18 parents (9 mothers and 9 fathers). The college students are in the early 20's and the parents are from the 40's to the 60's. They are all in the middle class and typical Japanese in the local district. They surely use local dialects almost all day.

Procedure of Data Collection

The data were collected by means of a discourse-completion test (DCT) questionnaire made in reference to Eisenstein and Bodman's (1993) questionnaire for gratitude and Blum-Kulka and House's (1989) questionnaire for request. Situations were modified in accordance with the campus life of Japanese colleges and the office and family life of Japanese fathers and mothers. The number of situations is limited to three directions toward higher, equal, and lower status, with two situations for each direction. The few questions are decided in consideration for replying subjects' reluctance. The size of data is so small that we might not be able to make a definite conclusion. However, this is a pilot study and another research is planned in a larger scale, involving interlanguage of Japanese learners of English.

The situations for college students are as follows (see Appendix II for ones for parents).

- S1 A student asks his/her sibling to turn down the volume of music.
- S2 A student asks his/her neighbor to turn down the volume of music.
- S3 A student asks his/her friend to change the date of meeting.
- S4 A student asks his/her professor to extend the deadline of submitting a paper.
- S5 A student asks his/her father to lend some of the traveling expenses.
- S6 A student asks his/her colleague to lend some money for return on the first day at the working place

These situations are differentiated in terms of the relationship of speaker-hearer, social distance and familiarity, following Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989a), as follows:

Table 1 Situational Variation

Situations	Social Distance	Familiarity
1	+	s>h
2	—	s<h
3	+	s = h
4	—	s<h
5	+	s<h
6	—	s = h

Analysis

Ellis (1992) defines requests as “attempts on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to perform some kind of action or cessation of action” excluding information and permission getting. The success of requests results in the speaker’s benefit.

Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) categorize the parts of the request sequence as alerters such as address terms, supportive moves such as checks on availability or precommitments, and head acts of request proper (p. 17). The CCSARP¹ scheme classifies requests on a nine-point directness scale.

By simplifying the pragmalinguistic categories of Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) and the linguistic categories of Ellis (1992), the framework for analysis was remodeled. Then the number of lack or existence of the following categories in the collected data was counted as the basis of analysis.

1. Structural components (or segments)

Alerters (e.g. ‘Look’, ‘Excuse me’, address terms)

Supportive moves (e.g. ‘Are you free?’ to check on availability, ‘Will you do me a favor?’ to get a precommitment)

Head acts (e.g. ‘... lend me 100 yen ...’ to indicate the major speech act)

Grounders (e.g. ‘I forgot to bring enough money’ to state a reason or excuse for requesting)

2. Mitigating devices (or downgraders)

Interrogatives (e.g. ‘Will you lend me...?’)

Negations (e.g. ‘Won’t you lend me...?’)

Conditionals (e.g. ‘if you don’t mind, ...’)

Understaters (e.g. ‘I’m sorry’, ‘I’ll never do it again.’)

Politeness markers (e.g. ‘please’)

3. Level of directness

Direct (e.g. ‘Turn down the volume’ in the directive form, ‘I’m asking you to ...’, ‘I’d like to ask you to ...’)

Conventional (e.g. ‘How about ...?’, ‘Would you ...?’ ‘Will you do me a favor?’)

Indirect (e.g. ‘I’m studying’ meaning ‘I can’t help you’, ‘I feel cold’ meaning ‘I want you to warm this room’)

Results and Discussion

The data collected consist of 162 from 36 informants in six situations. The reactions from almost all informants in Situation 2 were, however, that they hesitated to make an oral request to their neighbor, even if they might vent their anger by shouting in their home, which was what we had expected. So this situation was excluded for the analysis. The number of samples does not agree with the number of informants in some situations, especially with female adults. They could not image the situation they had not experienced, as Eiseinstein and Bodman (1993) reported with NNSs in his study.

In Japanese it is said that there is a big difference in the way of speaking toward the

lower or equal position and toward the higher position, or toward more familiar relations and toward less familiar relations. Among my situations, Situation 1, 3, and 5 are from higher to lower or equal relationship, and Situation 4 and 6 are from lower to higher. Although the percentage of use in the two categories above was analyzed, there was no distinctive difference between male and female except that more female Japanese make a request with plausible grounders than male Japanese even when they ask something to their subordinators

Structural components

Table 2 The use of structural segments

	FS	MS	FA	MA
segments	n = 46	n = 43	n = 32	n = 40
Alerters	12(26%)	4(9%)	2(6%)	5(13%)
Supportive Moves	27(59%)	13(30%)	14(42%)	18(45%)
Head Acts (Direct)	44(96%)	38(88%)	26(81%)	35(86%)
Head Acts (Hint)	2(4%)	4(9%)	6(19%)	3(8%)
Grounders	39(85%)	28(65%)	27(84%)	31(78%)

Note: FS stands for female students, MS for male students, FA for female adults, and MA for male adults. 'n' means the number of samples.

The most frequently used pragmatic strategy for requesting is grounders but Head Acts. Female speakers used a little more (85%, 84% for students and adults respectively) than male did (65%, 78% for students and adults respectively). Japanese speakers seem not to use hints so much. More alerters are used only by female students (26%).

Mitigating devices

Table 3 The use of mitigating devices

	FS	MS	FA	MA
	n = 46	n = 43	n = 32	n = 40
Interrogatives	16(35%)	11(26%)	13(41%)	12(30%)
Negations	12(26%)	6(14%)	10(31%)	8(20%)
Conditions	4(9%)	0	1(3%)	0
Understaters	12(26%)	9(21%)	4(13%)	4(10%)
Unfinished	12(26%)	3(7%)	3(9%)	5(13%)
Politeness markers	16(35%)	16(37%)	9(28%)	9(23%)
Total	72(26%)	45(17%)	40(21%)	38(16%)

Note: FS stands for female students, MS for male students, FA for female adults, and MA for male adults. 'n' means the number of samples.

Request is a face-threatening act and requires to some degree mitigating devices especially when this act is conducted from the lower status to the higher status. The results

show that more female informants use all the mitigating devices examined above than male ones, although there is a little difference in percentage. This fact might suggest that Japanese women are in the lower status than Japanese men or they feel so unconsciously.

Level of directness

Table 4 The use of direct/indirectness strategies

strategies	FS	MS	FA	MA
	n = 46	n = 43	n = 32	n = 40
Directness	19(41%)	18(42%)	10(31%)	16(40%)
Formulaic use	18(39%)	17(40%)	16(50%)	13(33%)
Indirectness	9(19%)	7(17%)	4(12%)	10(25%)

Note: FS stands for female students, MS for male students, FA for female adults, and MA for male adults. 'n' means the number of samples.

There is no or little difference between male and female of young students. However, judging from the figures of dichotomy—male-female, women use more formulas (44%) than men (36%), and men use more direct grammatical mood (41% compared with women's 37%). i.e. hints.

I had some difficulty identifying the distinction of these three categories from the samples. Blum-Kulka et al. call the second category 'conventionally indirect.' However, since I assume that conventional expressions may not be as direct as directives, nor as indirect as suggestives, here in this paper, I take up the term 'formulaic use.' These categories remain reconsidered.

Conclusion

Although the collected data size was very small, the following findings were obtained concerning the request realization in Japanese.

1. In structural construction, there is difference between genders and generations. The Japanese like to make a direct request with some respect and have little suggestive devices.
2. Mitigating devices are most frequently used by young female students. This fact may suggest that they are in the lowest status in gender and age. From the male-female perspective, women use more mitigation in kind and frequency than men do (totally 24% and 17% in frequency respectively).
3. There is little difference seen in the degree of direct/indirectness between genders, but if anything, women use more formulaic expressions than men. As a whole, the Japanese do not express requestive acts indirectly so much (female 17% and male 20%).
4. Young female students make most use of a variety of devices – alerters, supportive moves, grounders, mitigating devices, and others, which makes their expressions longer than those of their boy friends, mothers, and fathers.
5. Fathers learn to use more indirect strategies than others. This fact may indicate that

they need to be more socialized in the business fields.

The situations were determined in terms of (1) social status between the speaker and the hearer and (2) familiarity between them. The variables of this study were status, gender, age, and familiarity with two levels per variable. The central consideration is on gender difference. However, the other three factors can be based for investigating gender difference. In terms of familiarity, situations 3 and 6 can be contrasted between equal status and situations 5 and 4 can be contrasted between lower to higher status. Considering based on social distance, situations 3 and 5 can be contrasted for strong familiarity and situations 6 and 4 can be contrasted for weak familiarity relationship. These considerations remain to be investigated in the future.

Even a small scale study like this with a simple analyzing framework showed the mirror of male-female relationships in language use. This study will be the first step toward the new field of pragmatics.

Note:

1. The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project

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APPENDIX I

Questionnaire (Student Version:English Translation)

Please circle the appropriate item(s).

- | | | |
|--------------|------------|--------------------|
| 1. Your sex: | Male | Female |
| 2. Your age: | Early 29's | Late 20's |
| | Early 30's | Late 20's |
| | Early 40's | Late 20's |
| | Early 50's | Late 50's or above |

Directions: Below are six situations. Read the description of each situation and write down what you would say in that situation. Pretend to be the person in the situation. You may say a lot, or a little, or keep silent, it is up to you. Just write what you think you would say.

1. You are trying to study in your room and hear very loud music coming from your younger brother/sister's room. You will have an important examination tomorrow, so you have to concentrate on preparing for it. What would you say?
2. When you are about to begin studying at night, you hear very loud music coming from your neighbor's house. You are in trouble because you have to study for an important exam tomorrow. What would you say?
3. You have promised to have a meal/drink with your friend but something has come up and you have to change the date. What would you say?
4. You are a student who finish an assignment by the due date. You want to ask your professor for an extension. What would you say?
5. You have a plan to go for a sightseeing tour in Europe with your friends. So you have been trying to earn money by working part-time. But you are short of 200,000 yen. You want to ask your father to give/lend you that amount. What would you say?
6. You have noticed you have only 100 yen in your purse. You want to ask someone to lend you 1000 yen for your fare home. You are new in your company and you do not have any friends except one other freshman. What would you say?

APPENDIX II

(Office Worker Version English Translation)

Please circle the appropriate item(s).

- | | | |
|--------------|------------|--------------------|
| 1. Your sex. | Male | Female |
| 2. Your age: | Early 29's | Late 20's |
| | Early 30's | Late 20's |
| | Early 40's | Late 20's |
| | Early 50's | Late 50's or above |

Directions: Below are six situations. Read the description of each situation and write down what you would say in that situation. Pretend to be the person in the situation. You may say a lot, or a little, or keep silent, it is up to you. Just write what you think you would say.

1. You are about to start working on something that you have to finish tonight when very loud music starts coming from your son/daughter's room. You become irritated by the noise and cannot concentrate on your work. Then what would you say?
2. Tonight you are looking forward to seeing your favorite TV program. The program has just come on when you hear very loud music coming from your neighbor. You turn up to the TV volume but you still cannot hear clearly. What would you do? What would you say?
3. You have promised to have a meal/drink with your friend, but something has come up and you have to change the date. What would you say?
4. You cannot finish preparing the documents your boss ordered for tomorrow so you want to ask him/her for an extension. What would you say?
5. Your son/daughter has been accepted by a private school but you do not have enough money for the tuition fees because of a sudden accident. Your father is retired and you know he has some savings. You want to ask him to lend you a million yen. What would you say?
6. You are asked to for a beer after work by your subordinates. You visit a new snack-bar/restaurant and spend a good time but when it comes to leave you open your purse and find only 1000 yen left in it. You want to ask one of your subordinates to pay this time. What would you say?