

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPEECH LEVELS IN ENGLISH-JAPANESE INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

Social organization and structure can often be inferred through language use in most languages. Japanese, in particular, has a linguistic system which overtly marks and encodes social structure, behaviour and patterns of affiliation (Loveday, 1986). This set of complex sociolinguistic rules are internalized and strictly observed by native speakers and deviation from established norms are often not looked upon kindly. This paper studies the level of control over these sociolinguistic rules which non-native speakers of Japanese possess when interpreting consecutively from English to Japanese. The study involved seven Australian student interpreters. An analysis of the students' performance indicates that despite possessing a fairly high level of linguistic competence in Japanese, the students had difficulty in using the appropriate speech levels required in Japanese. This resulted in 'unnatural Japanese'. The types of 'errors' made were categorized and implications were drawn for the teaching of Japanese. The significance of findings from this study to wider interpretation and translation (I/T) issues will also be discussed.

1.0 Introduction

As a system of communication, languages are also a medium through which one explores social behaviour. Halliday (1972:22) pointed out that the investigation of language as social behaviour is not only relevant to the understanding of social structure; it is also relevant to the understanding of language. Language is as it is because of its function in the social structure. Conversely, it is also true that a better understanding of the social organisation within a particular language community will also lead to a better understanding of the linguistic functions and language use. It is with this theoretical construct in mind that the following study was undertaken.

As we all know, modes of interpersonal relationship and communication are conditioned by factors such as power and solidarity (or status and familiarity). Though such concepts are known to be more inherently entrenched in Asian societies, it is certainly not alien to the English-speaking world. For example, the choice and use of pronouns, terms of address and formality of styles are all indicative of our perception of our interpersonal relationships with others (see Brown and Gilman, 1960; Ervin-Tripp, 1969 and

Labov, 1970).

However in some speech communities e.g. Javanese, Korean and Japanese it is nearly impossible to say anything without indicating the social relationship between the speaker and the listener in terms of status and familiarity. In these languages, the choice of linguistic forms as well as speech styles is often determined by the relative status of the conversers.

The rules governing when to use what to whom are certainly complex. The skilful manipulation and awareness of these rules is often an indication of 'politeness' in those languages. Though this set of rules comes without great difficulties to native speakers, people learning languages with such complex systems of politeness built into them often find themselves having to learn new sociolinguistic rules. As pointed out by Ervin-Tripp (1972:237) if a learner of a sociolinguistic system makes an error, faulty social meaning is conveyed and the consequences may be undesirable.

In this study we are concerned with the familiarity of such sociolinguistic rules in Japanese by I/T students (second language learners of Japanese). As I/T students are in the communications industry, it is therefore very important for them to be able to communicate effectively. Therefore, through this study, we hope to be able to isolate specific issues which would benefit both I/T students as well as second language learners in Japanese. The aims of the study are:

1. to identify major areas in which rules of politeness must be observed in Japanese in the context of conference interpreting.
2. to identify and categorise the errors made.
3. to suggest possible ways to incorporate the teaching of Japanese sociolinguistic rules into the I/T curriculum.

2.0 Description of Speech Levels in Japanese

The subject of speech levels covers a broad area of social interaction. It is also an area which has received extensive attention in the literature on Japanese language (see e.g. Martin 1964, Prideaux 1970, O'Neill 1970, Nakane 1974, Loveday 1986, Mizutani and Mizutani 1987,

Matumoto 1989¹). In this study, we have decided to restrict the study of speech levels to the context of conference interpreting as the dynamics of speaker-audience interaction in a conference situation is necessarily different from ordinary person-to-person interaction patterns. The unique context of conference interpretation, thus, entails a specific interaction mode which is different from normal situations.

2.1 Definition of Speech Levels

By the term 'speech levels' we mean language variations in spoken language, the selection of which is closely related to the types of speech discourse as well as certain social factors. The types of speech discourse are varied, e.g. a chat with a friend, a discussion on politics with colleagues, an exchange of greetings with an acquaintance, an interview on television, a public lecture, etc. Furthermore, within each specific type of discourse, there are also internal variations. In the context of conference interpretation, an example of internal variation would be the switch from the language used for extending greetings to the language used for presenting a set of facts or to the language used for eliciting moral support. Depending on the differing formality of the situation, the speech level will vary accordingly.

Social factors refer to the power and solidarity between the interacting parties. Hence, factors such as sex, age, position in society are all relevant to the selection of speech levels. In our opinion, the relevance of social factors to the conference interpreting situation is limited as the speaker usually faces an amorphous audience.

The different speech levels can be simplified into the following four categories²:

¹ Matsumoto's paper (1989) is especially useful for readers who are interested in comparing the Japanese polite system with the polite system in the West. It provides an interesting challenge to Grice's (1975) and Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory of politeness.

² There is also another classification of politeness often referred to as refined style or *bikago* (see Minami, 1977:16-17; Tsujimura, 1977:75) which we have not included because of its irrelevance to conference interpretation. This style, consisting of deferential expressions, is often used by women and considered as graceful. Its characteristic is that the deferential expressions do not shift from supreme to humble

1. formal/informal
2. abrupt or plain (non-honorific)
3. polite
4. deferential (honorific)

Though the four styles are categorised separately, in reality their functions often overlap one another. For example, many lexical items can be both classified as honorific and formal at the same time.

2.2 Types of Speech Levels

2.2.1 Degree of Formality

It is not easy to isolate all the differences between formal and informal style in Japanese as the distinctions between formal and informal are not binary, but rather degrees of formality in Japanese should be viewed in terms of a continuum. There are, however, two 'markers' which can indicate formality in Japanese.

In a separate study, Ng and Obana (1991) found that complex sentences and increased occurrence of Sino-Japanese words are both identifiable markers of formal style. Kanaoka (1977) has also reported that 41.3% of the lexical items used in formal contexts are Sino-Japanese noun compounds. In other studies (e.g. Mizukami, 1977 and Miyazima, 1977), the researchers also found that the occurrence of Sino-Japanese nouns is much higher in texts which are abstract. In contrast, highly descriptive texts tend to contain more native Japanese nouns. As Sino-Japanese nouns are both indications of 'abstractness' as well as formality in Japanese discourse, we can deduce that the concepts expressed in formal situations in Japanese are more abstract than those expressed in informal situations.

Mizutani (1977) and Miyazima (1977) also argued that Sino-Japanese nouns are more specific, in that they each have an exact referential meaning and are used in a narrower context. In contrast, the semantic domains of native-Japanese compounds tend to be fuzzy. That is, each native-Japanese compound could have

different and overlapping referential meanings. Hence, the consistent use of native Japanese words often has an obscuring effect in the discourse. Naturally, it is the style most adopted if the speaker deliberately prefers to remain vague or ambiguous about a particular point. However, most of the time, clarity and precision are desirable in the context of conference interpretation, therefore, a more formal style with Sino-Japanese compounds is more appropriate. These effects of using these Sino-Japanese nouns can be compared to the use of 'nominalisation' in English to increase the degrees of formality (Brown and Levinson, 1987:207-209). For example, 'I am pleased to have this opportunity' is less polite than the nominalised form 'It is my pleasure to have this opportunity'.

In addition, formal framing structures such as *mosi...naraba* 'if...then', *sitagatte* 'therefore', *sonokekka* 'as a result of' etc. are used in formal style instead of their more informal counterparts such as *nara* and *sorede*.

Though it is true that a speech consisting entirely of informal style is often unsuitable for conference lectures, it has to be emphasised that the role of informal style is not totally dispensable. There are many situations in which the speaker may deliberately intend to make the content easier. Apart from that, it is often necessary to switch to a more informal style if part of the speech involves anecdotes or jokes.

2.2.2 Abrupt or Plain Style

Abrupt or plain style can be used in interpretation if the context is one which consists of the continuous explanation of facts, statistics, and events. If the context is not continuous, the sentence usually ends in the polite style i.e., with the morphological units *masu/desu*. This polite ending is used when the speaker has to defer to the audience. Abrupt/plain style can also be used in the context where the speaker is telling jokes or providing the audience with anecdotes. As the level of honorific styles used is in direct correlation to the social or emotional distance between the speaker and the hearer, occasional use of abrupt forms in appropriate contexts serves the purpose of reducing the distance between the two parties (i.e. lower level of

levels or vice versa as the honorifics do according to different situations. The aim is not to be deferential to the addressee/referent but to create a refined self-image.

honorifics can increase the degree of intimacy between hearer and speaker). However, this skill is fairly advanced, and among the subjects in our project only one ['Debbie'] could manipulate this system (see the details in Table 1).

2.2.3 Polite Style

The term 'polite' may be confusing because of its wide-ranging meaning. Brown and Levinson (1987) discuss politeness both as linguistic as well as extralinguistic phenomena. In their definition, politeness refers to numerous aspects of strategies which aim at avoiding 'Face Threatening Acts'. Face Threatening Acts are acts which offend or which induce the hearer to lose face. However, in this paper we use the term to mean the translation equivalent to the Japanese term *teinei-tai* which is limited only to linguistic structures including verb endings *desu/masu*, prefixes *o/go* to nouns and adjectives. We also distinguish between polite style and honorifics. This is because the former always conveys a courteous implicature towards the addressee, while the latter not only does the same but also towards the referent.

The distinction in vocabulary used between polite style and formal style is often unclear as their domains overlap each other (see Figure 1). For instance, *tyotto*, *sukosi* and *syoosyoo* all mean 'a little'. The word *tyotto* is very colloquial, and it is not usually used in a conference interpretation context. A more polite form is *sukosi* which is more neutral than polite, and the most polite form is *syoosyoo*, but this can be classified as a formal word.

2.2.3 Deferential Styles

Depending on the degrees of honorification, there are various deferential styles. However, these different degrees of deference can be simplified into two distinct categories. One is 'subject-deferential' and the other is 'object-deferential'. The subject-deferential style aims at exalting the audience or the topic person in the context. This is called *sonkeigo* in Japanese, literally meaning 'respect words'. The use of deferential forms are often reported to be determined according to the social or emotional relationships between the speaker, the hearer and

the third party in the topic. However, in the situation in which both the hearer and the topic require the use of deferential treatment, it is the hearer who ultimately assumes priority over the topic.

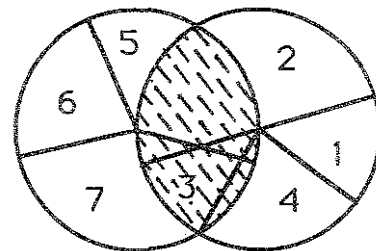
There are various degrees of subject-deferential style. The word 'to eat' for example has the following forms; *otabeninaru*, *mesiagaru*, *omesiagarininaru*, *omesiagarininarareru*. The longer the phonological expression, the more deferential it is to the relevant person.

The object-deferential style also aims at exalting the audience or the third party in the topic. But this style takes a circumlocutional route to reach this aim by presenting the speaker himself in a humble way. Often this is generally called humble expression.

In the case of conference interpretation the range of usage of both subject and object deferential styles is more restricted than in normal conversations. The use of supreme honorifics in conference interpreting situations is rare as supreme honorifics are normally used in situations where the speaker and the hearer are both at extreme ends of the power scale (e.g. the emperor vs. ordinary citizen). Similarly, the speaker does not have to overly humble himself by using extreme object-deferential forms. In fact, the overuse of polite forms can be deemed inappropriate in conference interpretation situations.

The range of those speech levels discussed above is depicted in Fig. 1:

Degrees of formality Honorifics



- | | | |
|-------------|----------------|---------------|
| 1. crude | 2. deferential | 3. polite |
| 4. plain | 5. formal | 6. colloquial |
| 7. informal | | |

Figure 1: The Range of Speech Levels Used in the Context of Conference Interpretation

The intersection of the two circles designates the area suitable for conference interpretation. The size of each arch indicates the frequency of occurrence of each style. Note that the formal and deferential styles occupy a larger area than any other combination.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Subjects

Seven subjects were involved in this study. They all offered their time and services voluntarily. Five are students enrolled in the I/T postgraduate course in the Department of Japanese and Chinese Studies in the University of Queensland. Two graduated from the course and have been practising as professional interpreters. All the subjects are native speakers of English with Japanese as their second language.

3.2 Procedure

The subjects were required to consecutively interpret a pre-recorded speech on '*Japan's Technological Competitiveness*' from English to Japanese. The participants in this project were told to approach the exercise like they would in real-life when asked to interpret the speech to the audience who understand only Japanese. (The point that they should have an imaginary Japanese audience in mind was emphasised a few times and efforts were made to ensure that the experimental conditions were as close to the real-life interpreting event as possible.³)

The subjects performed their interpretation individually and though they were aware of the research purpose of this study, they were all naive to the aims of the research. They were assured that the information they provided would be used anonymously. The speech was played to the subject segment by segment. Each segment of about two minutes provided the usual amount of discourse material used in consecutive interpretation. At the end of each segment, the subjects were required to carry out the

interpretation into Japanese swiftly. Occasionally, the subjects did ask for assistance when they found themselves 'stuck' with difficult words. At the end of the interpretation, the subjects were encouraged to talk about the problems and difficulties they experienced while interpreting the speech. This part of the experiment provided the retrospection data which are to be used as a reference in our analysis⁴. Each session lasted approximately 1.25 hours for each subject. Both the interpretation data and the retrospection data were recorded on tapes.

4.0 Results and Discussion

In the analysis, we evaluated the students' interpretations according to the different speech levels as set out in section 2. As none of the interpreters were native Japanese speakers, it was not surprising to find that there were ample data indicating that the complex sociolinguistic rules of Japanese had not been fully internalised. In fact, we noticed that, in general, the high incidence of errors demonstrated that their competence was far from native-like. On examining the interpretation process again, a pattern regarding the types of errors made gradually emerged. The types of errors fell into three broad categories, namely the mixture of styles, appropriateness and content.

4.1 Mixture of Styles

Mixture of styles refers to a situation where the interpretation contains different alternating degrees of formality and/or different levels of honorifics within a sentence or related paragraph. All the seven subjects made this mistake. The following are examples of errors involving the mixture of styles.

1. *suginakatta ga ima daitai... natteimasu*
abrupt polite

'Though it was only..., now overall,...is...'

³The presence of an experimenter does affect the authenticity of the situation. However, unless the subjects solicited help from the experimenter, interruption of the interpreting process was minimal.

⁴The subjects were familiar with this method of self-examination as they had participated in another study which required them to provide similar verbal data quite intensively (see Ng and Obana, in press).

2. ...*tyanto* *zibun-no kuni de tukaeru yooni*
colloquial
'in order to be able to use it in their own
countries'

In Example 1, the subject mixed the abrupt ending verb form *katta* 'bought' with the polite *masu* form and in Example 2, *tyanto* 'effectively' is too colloquial in the context of the sentence and it sounds out of place. The effect of such mixtures is often disconcerting to native speakers.

For two of the subjects, problems to do with maintaining a consistency in style were recurrent throughout the interpretation. For these two subjects the final product of their interpretations was cumbersome and unnatural. In fact, the quality of their interpretation can be seen to have been flawed by their inability to maintain a consistently appropriate style.

4.2 Appropriateness

A different language is used when directed to the addressee, to a certain set of factual information and to the speaker himself. As one moves from one topic to another, it is necessary to shift to the appropriate speech level. The appropriateness of language use can be further subdivided into three categories:

1. addressee
2. factual
3. self

4.2.1 Addressee

In the case of conference interpretation, the addressee is the audience. The speaker is always supposed to be more formal and polite than in a normal conversation. In this situation, even if the speaker is higher on the power scale than the audience, the audience is exalted. Also, the difference in age and sex is not considered. However, unlike certain person-to-person conversations in which one is at the top end and the other is at the bottom end of the power scale, the power relationship between speaker and hearer in a conference situation tends to converge towards the middle. Therefore, conference interpreting does not necessitate the use of supreme honorifics. Consequently, the range of speech levels in conference interpretation is more

limited compared with normal conversations.

The following are instances when the audience was referred to inappropriately.

3. ... *min-na gakkuri suru kamo*
siremasen
'you all may be disappointed'
4. ...*hanasi wo kikitai to omotte*
kitara, situboosuru to omoimosu
'I think that you'll be disappointed if you
came here, expecting to listen to the story
of...'

Example 3 is not appropriate because of the colloquial expression of *gakkuri* 'disappoint' and of the abrupt usage in the verb ending. It should be *situboo-nasaru-kamo siremasen* (*situboo* is the formal word for *gakkuri* 'to be disappointed', and *nasaru* 'do' is more deferential than *suru*). As for example 4, the verbs *kikitai to omotte* 'expect to listen to...' and *kitara* ('if you came' should have honorific markers since they refer to the audience's actions. The more polite version is *wo okikininaritai to omotte, irassyatta ra*. The underlined morphemes are honorific markers which increase the polite level of the expression *kikitai to omotte kitara* though it carries the same semantic content.

4.2.2 Factual

At a conference, the speaker often refers to information such as facts, events, or explanations to clarify a point. They are categorised as 'factual' utterances. The use of honorifics is not necessary unless the speaker intentionally wishes to exalt a particular person quoted in the utterance to indicate his or her empathy with regard to that person. However, too much deference will produce an adverse result; that is, the audience, who are supposed to be on top of exaltation scale, will be insulted. Also, cited references or references to historical personages need not be exalted.

In our study, the subjects tend to overuse honorifics. The following examples will demonstrate the point.

5. *Kipling-san ... hokorino takai kata desitaga.*

polite polite
'Kipling... was a proud man.'

6. *(Nihonzin ga)...ryuugaku wo nasatte orimasu*

'(Japanese people) who are studying overseas.'

The use of the polite expression *kata* in Example 5 to refer to 'Kipling' who is a historical person, and *nassatte orimasu* in Example 6, which is a factual report both indicate that the subjects were being overly polite. In both examples, the underlined polite morphemes i.e. *katta* and *nasatte orimasu* are unnecessary.

4.2.3 Self

Recall that in order to exalt either the topic or the hearer, any reference to the speaker himself or herself has to involve object deferentials or 'humble-expressions' (see 2.2). Self-appropriateness means that at a conference the speaker, in order to exalt the audience, refers to himself with humble expressions. As in the case of deferentials directed to the hearer, there is no need to use extreme humble language. In our study it is noted that the subjects were able to use this level of speech appropriately. However, in some situations some subjects safely avoided such humble expressions by using other words to make the utterance sound neutral. For instance,

7. *gosyookai wo arigatoogozaimasu*
'Thank you for introducing me.'

The subject 'Brian' used only the polite prefix *go* in this sentence and avoided other complex humble expressions whereas 'Chris' used the following to interpret the same context.

8. *tadaima gosyookai ni azukarimasita Samuel...*

'I am Samuel... who was right now introduced.'

Example 8 is probably the ideal way to refer to the 'self'. However, Example 7 can also be

accepted by the audience. Though not exactly ideal, the successful avoidance of complex honorifics in example 7 is acceptable to native speakers. It must be emphasized that once the interpretation starts with a certain level of style, the interpreter should maintain this level throughout the speech wherever appropriate expressions are necessary. Thus, if the interpreter starts with the most humble 'self' expression in Example 8, which is still acceptable at a conference, he or she will be expected to maintain this level of style in the ensuing interpretation. This process is, of course, extremely difficult and requires a lot of attention from the interpreter. Some subjects are overly polite which often results in cumbersome and lengthy interpretation. Therefore student interpreters should be taught to use honorifics economically as well as appropriately.

4.3 Content

Though the aim of the study was not to analyse the content authenticity of the interpretation, it was an issue which cropped up repeatedly in the analysis. As the accuracy of the message inevitably affects the final output of the interpretation, we decided that it should be taken into consideration. Wrong choice of vocabulary, grammatical errors contributing to content distortion were noted.

In general, content is a variable which is distinct from speech levels. While the misuse of speech levels does make it more difficult for the listener to filter the message, it should, in principle, not distort the message itself. Therefore, it should be theoretically possible to give an accurate interpretation without observing any speech level rules. However, in assessing speech levels, we have noticed that the accuracy or lack of accuracy of message *does* negatively affect the interpreter's ability to use speech levels appropriately. We can only hypothesise that interpreters who are likely to distort the incoming message are also likely to have more difficulty with the process of interpretation itself and therefore cannot devote as much attention as they would like to the finer points of the language. Conversely, in this case, it was also true that student interpreters e.g. 'Chris' and 'Debbie' who

gave the more successful interpretations are also the two who are considered to have a better grasp of the use of speech levels.

Table 1 contains the number of errors each subject made in each of the categories. Despite the fact that attempts were made to quantify our data, we have to point out that though it serves as a good reference, quantification is often misleading. For example, according to the table 'Greg' only made 10 mistakes in speech styles. However, in reality, this number is likely to be higher as the serious distortion of content in his interpretation made it impossible for us to analyse his speech levels.

Another subject, 'Chris', consistently used

polite forms throughout the entire speech even when it was not necessary. In Chris' case, the over-polite interpretation was lengthy and monotonous. Admittedly, Chris' over-polite interpretation is certainly more desirable than a crude offensive interpretation. However, her low score of errors (lower than 'Debbie') on speech levels is also not an accurate reflection of her true competence in Japanese. In contrast, even though 'Debbie' appeared to have made more mistakes than 'Chris' according to our scoring system, her performance was easily judged to be the most competent within the group. Her skilful shifting of styles in appropriate places resulted in a more animated and natural interpretation.

TABLE 1: SPEECH LEVEL CONTROL OF I/T STUDENTS

	MIXTURE				APPROPRIATENESS			CONTENT	
	Formal/ Informal	a) Addressee	b) Factual	c) Self	TOTAL	M&A	Connection	Mistakes	Stilted
Anne	11	11	5	0	16	27	3	0	4
Brian	10	4	6	0	10	20	0	3	0
Chris	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Debbie	2	0	2	0	2	4	1	4	0
Ellen	2	0	2	0	2	4	1	4	1
Frank	7	3	5	0	8	15	5	7	1
Greg	2	2	6	0	8	10	0	7	1

5.0 Conclusion

Though the students are considered to be adequately fluent in Japanese, there are still socially conditioned rules which they have not learnt to incorporate into their language. In many cases, this is not accepted or, at best, it is just tolerated by native speakers.

In her discussion on learning socio-linguistic rules in the U.S.A., Ervin-Tripp (1972) suggested

that a contrastive analysis of formal rules, in combination with a theory of social meaning would allow specifications of what will happen.

In line with that principle, we propose that sociolinguistic rules can be formally taught within the classroom. We acknowledge that the full grasp of the system will continue to elude most of us and has to be acquired after a long period of exposure to the target language. However,

cumulative reinforcement of the awareness of these linguistic principles can, we feel, only enhance the learning process. In advocating this we are not suggesting that learners be subjected to memorising complicated paradigms of rules governing social interaction. Rather, that it would be beneficial for students to infer those rules through actual experience in and out of the classroom with some assistance from their language teachers. As Matsumoto (1989) pointed out in his paper, the politeness phenomena in Japanese are highly contextual. Naturally, native speakers would be more sensitive to these contextual cues than second language learners. We suggest that in the teaching of I/T especially, such contextual cues should be made explicit to the students, and students should also be encouraged to form the habit of constantly monitoring that aspect of their training.

Though there is no doubt that the primary importance in the practice of interpretation is the accurate interpretation of the content, other factors such as correct use of speech levels in Japanese are finer aspects of interpreting skills which should also be cultivated.

The significance of speech levels in Japanese discourse cannot be over emphasised. The number of books published on the topic of 'How to be polite in Japanese' is an indication that 'clearly, there is a peculiar obsession at work here'⁵. The report by Ogino *et al.* (1985) that Japanese speakers perceive the usage of honorifics as an effective variable in predicting the socio-economic background of other speakers confirms the point that Japanese speakers are intensely aware of this aspect of their language. It could be the case that these language related preconceptions are imposed on native-Japanese speakers only. In a forthcoming study, we hope to see if such preconceptions are extended to foreigners interpreting into Japanese. If so, such findings would be relevant to the orientation of future Japanese I/T training courses.

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