Discourse Strategies involving Topic Nomination in English and Japanese Language Usage

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Introduction

Conversation strategies are an important feature of discourse competence, and are currently studied in many EFL classes in Japan. It is generally accepted that while cultures may employ rhetoric patterns (Loveday, 1983) that are similar in nature, they frequently tend to use patterns that are different or unique. Rhetoric patterns are also usually taken for granted by native speakers of any language, but foreign language students need to be aware of specific cultural patterns so that they do not make the mistake of using their own discourse style in a country where different discourse patterns apply. Differences in discourse style can ultimately lead to the types of misunderstandings that tend to frequently occur in cross-cultural interactions and which can have potentially serious implications:

> [D]eviant or inappropriate use of rhetoric patterns can have unfavourable consequences in cross-cultural interaction: negative stereotyping, confusion, discomfort, suspicion and hostility or even communication breakdown may arise. (Loveday, 1983, p. 187)

This research project was prompted by differences in discourse styles that we noticed after making a trip to Australia. When first returning to one's own country after a lengthy absence the norms of English-speakers can be freshly perceived and considered from the perspective of another culture. This paper consequently involves a discussion and analysis of interactions which occurred with strangers soon after returning to Australia. The conversations illustrate the broader range of topics which tend to occur in daily conversations with strangers in Australia and provide practical examples of the utilisation of a conversation strategy which is commonly taught in EFL courses in Japan. We investigate the significance of cultural differences in the usage of one particularly important conversation strategy, that of 'Adding More Information,' in which the speaker responds to a question by providing additional information either of an explanatory nature or in order to extend the conversation to a different topic area. We consider a series of conversations which occurred during sales transactions in Australia, and contrast these interactions with discourse occurring in similar situations in Japan. The dialogues in Australia tended to stray from the business at hand, whereas in Japan exchanges in similar situations were usually confined to the topic of the transaction. The discourse samples hence serve to demonstrate a conversational strategy which is used with much higher frequency in English than in Japanese. The situations in which the topic shifts occurred are considered and subsequently interpreted in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1978) framework of positive politeness, particularly as a means of expressing empathy with a stranger. The use of positive politeness is also discussed in terms of the interplay of the key factors of Distance, Power, and Rank between the participants in a conversation.

Conversation Strategies as Cultural Discourse

Conversation strategies tend to vary between cultures even in cases of closely related languages. Beal (1992), for example, argues that Australians

may be surprised at the lengthy and detailed answers provided by French speakers as a standard response to questions. It also appears likely that the significance of differences in discourse strategies will be increased in situations involving high distance between cultures and languages, as is the case involving the usage of English in Australia and Japanese language discourse. As Gumperz observes, "conversing involves more than context-free principles of sequentiality that can be applied by anyone who knows the language. Participants do not enter the negotiation process relying only on their command of grammar and lexicon" (1984, p. 287). Indeed, the importance of context-dependent practices underlines the necessity of presenting EFL students with the pragmatic norms of a speech community, although pragmatic norms tend to be complex and difficult to address in the language classroom. However, commonly used conversation strategies which are not available through positive transfer from the first language (L1) can be explicitly taught. This type of instruction is often highly effective in raising students' knowledge of specific strategies as well as their awareness of the general significance of cultural differences in language usage.

Previous studies have shown that cultural values regarding the appropriateness of providing opinions vary significantly between cultures and tend to directly affect the length and detail given in responses to questions. For example, English speakers are thought to express their opinions freely in contrast to Japanese but from the point of view of Polish or French speakers, English speakers appear to be relatively restrained in giving their opinions. Wierzbicka (1985), in a contrastive study of Australian and Polish speakers, concludes: "Polish cultural tradition does not foster constant attention to other people's 'voices', other people's points of view, and tolerates forceful expression of personal views and personal feelings without any consideration for other people's views and feelings" (p. 158). In her study of French and Australian pragmatic norms, Beal (1992) similarly observes the: "the strong cultural value French places on the public display of one's opinions, even in everyday life and on any kind of topic" (p. 46). By contrast, English speakers are characterised as being more phlegmatic in both studies: "from a Polish speaker's point of view, English ways of speaking may be seen as reflecting a lack of warmth, a lack of spontaneity, a lack of directness" (Wierzbicka, 1985, p. 166). And from the French speakers' point of view, Australians pay "great attention to the individual's right to privacy and personal territory. As a result, the overall tone of many exchanges observed within the workplace was friendly but non-committal" (Beal, 1992, p. 49).

The amount of detail which is typically given in responses to questions between speakers of unrelated languages such as English and Japanese can hence be expected to vary according to a variety of cultural presumptions. Consequently, conversation strategies are now being taught in many EFL classes in Japan and are featured in many recently published textbooks. One of the more common strategies taught in Japan is that of *Adding Extra Information* or *Answer, Add, Ask* (Hadfield, 1992); rather than simply answering a question with a simple confirmation or denial, interlocutors should add additional information which is in some way related to the content matter in order to extend the conversation. Indeed, this process seems so natural to native English speakers that it may appear unnecessary to be made explicit in the classroom. However, since so many Japanese EFL students simply respond to an English question with a brief 'yes' or 'no,' it is clearly important for Japanese students to develop this skill.

A number of underlying factors appear to contribute to the low frequency of usage of this strategy by Japanese EFL students. One important difference is the less common usage of a similar strategy in Japanese, a practice which also tends towards a reduced likelihood of positive transfer occurring to English discourse situations. Hence, although EFL students are linguistically capable of employing this strategy, they have different

perceptions concerning its appropriateness based on their knowledge of Japanese usage situations. Ogasawara (1995), for example, observes that: "although they may have questions or comments, the Japanese do not want to bring it up, because they consider presenting a question or making a comment in such as situation as a kind of trumpet-blowing" (p. 109). Loveday (1983) provides another explanation for the different cultural behaviour: "the articulation of thoughts and feelings in oral language is often taken by the Japanese as an unmistakable sign that the speaker is neither profound nor sincere. For them, the world is not verbalizable nor is it aesthetically pleasing to try" (p. 173). Furthermore, Ogasawara (1995) explains that Japanese responses may provide less detail than English responses because of a tendency to make unstated assumptions:

> If you ask a Japanese person, "I want to visit the Ise Shrine, the mecca of Shinto. How far is it from Tokyo?" he or she will say, "It takes about three hours." To Japanese people, such an answer is not puzzling. But to many native English speakers, the answer is incomplete. They say they want to know three hours by what type of transportation. To Japanese it is usually obvious . . . (p. 111)

A range of other cultural factors may also have a significant bearing on the adoption of conversation strategies by Japanese EFL students. One commonly cited example is of the Japanese hesitating to express their opinion in order to avoid their interlocutor losing face (Ogasawara, 1995). Such reluctance to express an opinion may be interpreted as indifference by English speakers but such an interpretation is clearly misguided. Different frequencies of usage of conversation strategies may also to some extent be explained in terms of politeness strategies, particularly those involving varying conceptualisations of hierarchical power relations between cultures. In Japanese society, age and position convey considerable authority so that younger Japanese interlocutors may not readily offer their opinions to an elder. If this social practice were directly transferred to the EFL classroom, students would find it difficult to express their opinions to the EFL teacher simply because of differences in age and social position. This consequently may be another factor explaining the brevity of responses typically provided to EFL teachers' questions.

Also of significant importance are cultural perceptions of the appropriate level of formality between interlocutors. Beal (1992) argues that Australians value informality highly and thus whereas in Australia it may be appropriate to ask one's superiors about their weekend, this would be perceived as overly familiar by the French. Japanese speakers are even more conscious of hierarchal relations and thus there would be expected to be even greater differences in the perception of rank-appropriate behaviour than occurs between France and Australia. Furthermore, Beal notes that in French there are distinct private and public modes, and that the only requirement to demonstrate politeness in French is in formulaic greetings. This is in marked contrast to the Australian requirement to demonstrate politeness to strangers through "being nice."

Conlan (2000) presents another interesting difference in discourse strategies between Japanese and Australian English when he highlights the importance of using preamble in Australian English before reaching the real purpose of an interaction. He provides an example of a request by a university lecturer to a secretary to do some typing. Before the actual request is made, the speakers engage in unrelated small talk, with the request for typing not being made until line 20 of the conversation. Conlan argues that this kind of preamble constitutes "empathetic face-saving criteria" (p. 64) which is an essential element of polite discourse in Australian culture. His study also reveals that the volume of Australian utterances was typically three times higher than the volume of Japanese utterances occurring in similar situations. Conlan argues that

these differences are a frequent cause of cross-cultural politeness dysfunctions. Interestingly however, he does not recommend prescriptive teaching approaches to address potential conflicts because "such differences in discourse-staging strategies have their roots in primary socialisation practices" (p. 76).

Types of Cultural Discourse Strategies

Several types of conversation strategy have been identified as being culturally dependent to the extent to which they are used in common discourse situations. One of the more common strategies involves offering personal information to establish rapport with other members of a speaking community. Talking about oneself and one's family has been noticed as occurring more frequently in Australia by Japanese who are teaching their language in Australian schools. For example, in Kato's (2001) study of Japanese teachers working in Australia, one respondent explicitly discussed her awareness of this difference: "[S]he also realised that she did not talk about her personal life as much as other staff did in the staffroom, and thought perhaps this was an important part of building a positive rapport in the Australian context" (p. 33). The inclusion or exclusion of personal information is another cross-cultural difference which is evidenced in sales interactions. Tsuda (1988) draws a distinction between the exchange of personal information between Japanese and Americans in business exchanges:

> [S]alespeople as well as customers in the American speech community tend to exchange opinions more personally and more directly by offering personal comment freely and forthrightly. On the other hand, one can observe that both salespersons and customers in the Japanese community are more concerned with using appropriate standard forms in the appropriate contexts and render their desired image more indirectly (p. 346).

Clearly the nature of the personal information being provided is also critical. Although Kato's (2001) Japanese respondents indicated that Australians volunteer more personal information in a formal context, this does not occur indiscriminately. In fact, Beal warns that the characteristic Australian informality does not imply personal closeness: "This 'distance' takes the form of minimum self-disclosure and respect of each others' privacy and territory" (1992, p. 44). As a consequence, some personal questions asked in Japanese may appear overly inquisitive to English speakers. Ogasawara (1995) refers to the Japanese expression *Dochira-ni-o-dekake-desu-ka ?* ('Where are you going ?') which is frequently used as a form of greeting rather than as a genuine request for information. The English-speaking learner of Japanese may consequently be taken aback by this casual question and misinterpret it as an invasion of privacy, since there is no equivalent usage in the English language.

Different types of conversation strategy that also tend to vary significantly between cultures involve the use of appropriate topics and various politeness strategies. Inappropriate topic nomination was identified in a study of French conversations when a French language examiner first interviewed a group of British teenagers studying French and subsequently repeated the interviews with a group of French teenagers. The personal topics used in the French examination were subsequently deemed to be inappropriate when used in conversation with the French teenagers. While the British students were content to describe their house, flat, or bedroom, when this line of questioning was attempted with the French teenagers the response was somewhat frosty:

> Asking for descriptions of their house, flat, or even bedroom, as it is current practice in British examinations, became difficult in the very first interviews. The interviewer felt that this was

not socially acceptable as she detected a strong element of surprise leading to very brief answers. There is clearly an invasion of privacy when examiners probe into details of candidates' home life. The only natural way of dealing with this matter occurred when interviewees had recently moved house, and could therefore make comparisons and give opinions (Chambers & Richards, 1995, p. 7).

The appropriateness of topic nomination is also a function of politeness strategies in different cultures. Of particular relevance to this situation is the employment of Grice's (1975) 'Maxim of Quantity,' which states that interlocutors generally say neither more nor less than is required. Brown and Levinson's (1978) argument that speakers tend to flout Grice's maxims when performing a face threatening act (FTA) is clearly also significant. Arguably, the Maxim of Quantity is hence flouted more commonly in English than in Japanese in transactional interactions. Tanaka (1986) discusses differences of acceptable topic nomination between English and Japanese, and recommends that such issues should be addressed when teaching Japanese to English speakers and vice-versa. One difference noted by Tanaka pertains to comments regarding physical appearance. Traditionally it is considered improper for Japanese men to comment on the physical appearance of others, whereas this is not typically the case in English. Tanaka consequently argues that topic nomination in Japanese is traditionally more limited and illustrates this with a list of appropriate comments used during a visit of a middle-aged man to his friend's home. The topics addressed to his friend's wife are restricted to comments on the flowers, vase, scroll and pillar in the alcove, the design of the teacup, the garden, the tea, and the sweets. Unacceptable topics include the woman's appearance, the price of objects, and size of the house. Although Tanaka's examples could be considered to belong to a bygone age, the boundaries of acceptable topic nomination in Japanese discourse are probably still confined to impersonal topics among interlocutors who are socially distant from each other. Furthermore, while English-speakers may talk more about physical appearance than Japanese speakers, similar topics appear to occur more frequently in Polish than in English. Wierzbicka (1985), for example, argues that personal remarks in English are typically regarded as taboo in general discourse, a situation which clearly contrasts with Polish discourse practices.

Method

All the dialogues used in this study occurred in natural discourse settings as spontaneous interactions that were not elicited in any way. The content of the dialogues was noted down from memory soon after the conversation took place, rather than being directly recorded at the time of the interaction. The presence of tape recorders often tends to render social interactions somewhat artificial, although the weakness of the current method is that the conversations have not been transcribed verbatim and could potentially reflect (to some extent) our own perceptions or biases rather than providing a precise record of the discourse as it originally occurred. However, we believe that this method of recording the conversations is appropriate to the purpose of the present study which is to describe examples of the broader range of topics which are typically nominated in brief exchanges occurring between strangers in English discourse.

English Discourse Samples

Conversation One

A young woman working at a supermarket checkout overheard a mother telling her daughter that she wouldn't buy her a 'Barbie' magazine unless she read her library books first. The sales assistant spoke to the mother and daughter and commented that she didn't like reading either but that she had to read at school. She said she didn't

like *Macbeth* much but she did like *Much Ado About Nothing*. When the mother said that she really liked the film version of Much *Ado About Nothing*, the sales assistant replied that she liked it too because of Keanu Reaves and the other actors who starred in the movie. This entire conversation spanned about three minutes and occurred while the assistant was scanning and packing the goods.

Analysis

The sales assistant employs a conversation strategy of positive politeness. She first claims common ground with the woman's daughter by agreeing that she didn't like being made to read something that she hadn't chosen herself either. Subsequently, by adding that she liked reading *Much Ado About Nothing*, she continues to claim common ground. Finally, after having provided support to both the mother and daughter's cases, she claims common ground yet again with the mother by discussing a movie that they both enjoyed. The effect of this politeness strategy is to demonstrate the kind of friendly attitude that is expected in service encounters as they typically occur in Australia.

Conversation Two

A customer was having some photographs developed at a local photography shop. The sales assistant looked at the customer's film and asked where it was from. The customer replied that she got it in Japan. He said that it was peculiar that the same brand was called Superia [sic] in Australia and Venus in Japan. He then asked how long the customer would be in Australia, when she would be going back to Japan, and which country she preferred. The customer replied that she liked the two countries equally. The sales assistant responded that he had a customer from Sicily who preferred living there because Australians worked too hard and were overly preoccupied with their homes. He then also mentioned a Japanese customer who had married an Australian serviceman after the war and lived in Australia ever since, and who liked living in Australia. He commented that she enjoyed the inexpensive melons in Australia. The customer agreed and said she was also particularly enjoying the Australian fruit, and the sales assistant responded that he often noticed Japanese stocking up on goods that they probably couldn't acquire in Japan.

Analysis

This conversation demonstrates the range of topics typically occurring in English discourse between a sales assistant and a customer. The sales assistant shows interest in the customer's experience by relating some of his own experiences which he believes may interest her. The initial comments by the assistant again demonstrate the use of positive politeness by claiming common ground with the customer pertaining to using the same films, despite their production in different countries with different brand names. The subsequent references to the Sicilian and Japanese customers represent both lifestyle preferences and run in parallel with the ambivalence expressed by the customer about the comparative advantages of living in Australia or abroad. The customer subsequently responds with a similar politeness strategy by positively agreeing about the quality of the fruit in Australia.

Conversation Three

A student was looking for the Reference Section in a university library. She walked through a door marked 'Reference' which unexpectedly lead into an office area. When the student asked at the circulation desk where the Reference Section was located, the librarian replied "We've hidden it." She was indirectly referring to the building work that was going on in the library and the subsequent relocation of the reference books to a different location.

Analysis

This is an example of a potential loss of face being addressed through the usage of an indirect

politeness strategy. The librarian was aware that the student had been misled by an erroneous sign, so she used a strategy of claiming common ground in the form of an empathic (albeit somewhat ironic) response, which tacitly acknowledges the difficulty of anybody finding one's way in the library during the reconstruction process. However, this type of response contrasts markedly with what would most likely have occurred in Japan, where a direct politeness strategy featuring an apology (and possibly an accompanying explanation) would be expected. Most notably, the usage of a direct politeness strategy in this situation would involve the staff member acknowledging a degree of responsibility (on behalf of her employer) for the inconvenience caused to the customer, while the Australian librarian's use of an indirect and somewhat ironic politeness strategy displays less professional responsibility as well as less concern for the customer's experience.

Conversation Four

A customer at a bank was explaining that she had a Japanese address. The bank clerk politely asked if she was teaching young children there because her son's friend was also teaching young children in Japan. She subsequently explained that her son's friend was Sri Lankan and her appearance had caused some surprise from the students in her position as an English teacher.

Analysis

The bank clerk expresses positive politeness by showing interest in the customer's experiences and enquiring about her occupation. She subsequently relates a story about an acquaintance who is possibly having a similar experience in Japan, thereby claiming common ground with the customer. She also shares what she knows about the acquaintance's experience, in the expectation that it would be of interest to the customer because of similar experiences she may have had in Japan.

Conversation Five

A salesperson was delivering a new car to a customer and was invited inside the customer's home to explain about the new car's functions. Inside the house, the salesperson observed the large dining room table and commented that his own grandfather had passed away a year ago, also leaving him the large dining room table as a family inheritance, since all the relatives would visit him on family occasions.

Analysis

The car salesperson demonstrates a positive politeness strategy by claiming common ground with a personal aspect of the customer's life. The salesperson and the customer share large dining tables in their homes, so possibly they have similar family situations and may also share the experience of their extended families coming over to visit and to use the large dining tables they each have in their homes.

Conversation Six

A customer went to collect some photographs that had been developed. The shop assistant glanced at the printing machine, gave her a quizzical look, and said that it was frightening what pictures some people were developing. Then he made some comments on the customer's photos, which had been taken in Japan, noticing that the people were making the V-sign with their fingers. He said that some people thought it was the peace sign but he didn't think so, because he had seen visiting Japanese students do it when they were having their photos taken near the shop. Then he commented on the fact that many pictures were underexposed and said that he would have a look at her camera the next time to check that the speed setting was properly adjusted. He also commented on the weather, saying it was unseasonably cool and that he thought the summers were gradually getting more humid. He also wondered why anybody would want to go to Queensland where it was much more humid than Adelaide. Then he said that

because the weather was so variable here, with temperatures ranging from 10 degrees at night to 35 degrees in the day in one week, you didn't need to travel to experience variation.

Analysis

In this interaction, four different topics were discussed, just one of which was related to the business at hand. The sales assistant is polite and friendly to the customer, discussing general topics such as his business and the weather conditions. He also shows interest in the customer's situation by talking about the V-sign and even offers to help her change her camera's settings. These conversation strategies appear to again involve the customer in friendly conversation so she will have a pleasant experience and (possibly) return to the store on another occasion.

Japanese Discourse Samples

Over the course of routine visits to supermarkets during a period of six years residence in Japan, we have observed that there is usually very limited interaction between cashier and customer beyond the standard formulaic utterances. Customers and sales staff do not generally discuss topics which may be personal in nature, or any other topics that are unrelated to the transaction at hand. However, we have observed some very occasional exceptions to this pattern during our period of residence here and it is important to recognize that free exchanges of information between customers and sales assistants do occur in Japan, albeit (in our experience) with considerably lower frequency than in Australia. It could be that we experience fewer such interactions because of our foreign appearance, and the accompanying assumption that we don't speak the language fluently. However, we have certainly also not noticed lengthy exchanges occurring between Japanese customers and sales assistants, as is commonplace in Australia. We will consequently present the few such exchanges that we have experienced as "exceptions to the general case" in the following data.

Exception One

In the course of a brief sales transaction at a supermarket the cashier (who recognised the customer as a 'regular' shopper) commented on how hot it was and the recent changes in the weather. She asked if the customer had finished her work, and the customer responded that her child was at ballet (because she was usually accompanied by her child to the supermarket). The sales assistant commented that the customer must be very busy and she subsequently noticed that she had inadvertently provided her with shopping bags although she had previously given the card indicating that she didn't want any. The customer said that it didn't matter but the sales assistant insisted on reclaiming the bags. The assistant then commented again on how hot it was, and said goodbye.

Analysis

The conversation provided by the Japanese sales assistant in this example appears to be consistent with the type of conversation that happens so frequently in Australia at supermarket checkouts. The sales assistant shows a polite interest in the customer's welfare and discusses a range of general topics including the weather conditions, the customer's work, and the shopping bags. Overall, she appears to be friendly and open to sharing a pleasant social exchange with the customer, much as occurred in each of the English discourse samples.

Exception Two

A Japanese greengrocer offered some interesting personal information to a new customer, stating that he had been to China to fight during the War, that he was now eighty years old, and that he kept his shop as a hobby rather than as a means of making money. He then showed the sales receipt to indicate that he was not charging consumption tax, and also gave some additional fruit after the sales transaction as a present for the woman's children.

Analysis

This example is somewhat different to the previous situations since the initial comments by the greengrocer cannot be interpreted in terms of expressing positive politeness because of the lack of any common ground with the customer. Rather, the greengrocer appears to wish to share something of his own personal experience with the stranger. Perhaps in this case the difference in age and nationality meant that the greengrocer's experience as a war veteran was very different to his customer's situation. His advanced age may also have leant to a reduced level of formality being necessary with a customer, especially when also considered with the fact that he was not trading for profit. The greengrocer's comments may also have been an attempt to indicate the extent of reconciliation that has occurred since the Second World War; particularly given the overt friendliness he displayed which is not common between strangers in Japan. The subsequent comments, however, are consistent with a positive politeness strategy since in stressing that he conducted his business as a hobby, the greengrocer was indirectly alluding to the fact that he was on the side of the customer rather than attempting to profit through the customer's business. Furthermore, his gift of fruit to the woman's family was an example of the use of another form of positive politeness (as discussed by Brown & Levinson, 1978) involving giving physical gifts as a means of expressing goodwill.

Discussion of Fundamental Issues

Significant Factors in Politeness Strategies

Useful insight into the employment of politeness strategies has been provided by Brown and Levinson (1987), who identified the variables of Distance, Power, and Rank as significant in explaining strategies used to address *Face Threatening Acts* as they commonly occur in social interactions. While the relative effects of these factors would tend to vary according to the conditions of each specific situation, it is also necessary to recognize that the relation of these factors is likely to be fundamentally different when compared across cultural settings. Tsuda (1988), for example, observes that interactions between sales staff and customers in America are typically egalitarian because there is no acknowledgement of status differences between the two roles. Tsuda subsequently contrasts this situation with the level of deference typically expressed by sales assistants to customers in Japan on the basis of their higher status as customers who are entitled to expect certain privileges when shopping in that store. By extending Tsuda's observations, we believe that the same principle applies to the relationship between customer and salespersons in many other English-speaking countries, including Australia. Hence the effect of the Power factor appears to be much greater in Japan, where the customer is typically granted higher status and consequently expects to be treated with greater deference from sales staff. It also appears likely that the Distance factor between strangers is greater in Japanese culture than in most English-speaking cultures, an observation that is consistent with the greater formality typically accorded to strangers in Japan. The frequent usage of the politeness strategy of adding extra information evident in sales transactions in Australia can be effectively interpreted as a form of positive politeness involving the sales assistant seeking to claim common ground with the customer. The usage of this politeness strategy typically involves seeking to share common points of view, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, and empathy, and is usually exhibited through discourse functions such as seeking agreement, avoiding disagreement, presupposing common ground, and sharing a joke (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Indeed, the usage of this form of positive politeness appears to be significantly more evident in interactions between strangers in English-speaking cultures than in Japan, where alternative politeness strategies are employed and higher levels of status and distance are typically attributed to customers. Exception Two in the Japanese Discourse Samples

(provided in the preceding section of this paper) is also interesting in the variation of having an elderly sales assistant. In Japan age confers power, and to some extent the sales assistant's openness to conversation evident in this discourse sample can be interpreted in terms of the difference in status factors including his age and the non-profit basis of his store, which also tends to reduce the status of the customer. The Age factor could also be significant in many of the other interactions, since younger people in Japan do not typically offer opinions to their elders, even if the difference in age is as little as one year. Since many service encounters in Japan involve young people working as sales assistants, the direct but formulaic politeness typically exhibited by sales assistants could largely be in relation to the higher power of the customer on account of their combined age and customer status. Indeed, given the significance of these variables in Japan, it could seem impolite for a young sales assistant to engage customers in friendly but unrelated social discourse characteristic of the forms of politeness strategies commonly employed in Australia.

Level of Formality in Sales Encounters

Associated with the significance of Status is the differing cultural requirement to express formality to customers during sales encounters. Since the status of customers and sales assistants in Australia is somewhat equivalent, there is no requirement for sales staff to use excessively formal linguistic expressions during the processing of sales transactions. In contrast, Japanese distinctions between formal and informal interactions are made very clear through the employment of specific linguistic expressions and accompanying politeness strategies. Formal interactions in Japan are typically characterised by the usage of specific verb endings and body language (particularly bowing), and a defined range of possible topics:

> There are abundant conventionalized patterns of greetings, apologies, and expressions of gratitude for salespersons which are more ornate and ritualistic than those used in the American speech community. Each conventional pattern is self-contained and nonreciprocal (Tsuda, 1988, p. 345).

Tsuda's observation that the Japanese expressions are "non-reciprocal" is also of particular interest to this discussion. The non-reciprocal nature of the Japanese linguistic formulations, which are required to be provided from the lower-status speaker to the higher-status speaker, exists in clear contrast to similar transactions in Australia, where even formulaic expressions used in English adjacency pairs demonstrate the necessity of reciprocity. Indeed, the customer's "duty of reciprocity" in Australian sales encounters contrasts markedly with the acceptability of a lack of response from customers in Japan. English speakers' distinctions between formal and informal interactions are typically characterised by tone of voice, lexical choice, and body language. However, in English there is a less rigidly prescribed register for indicating levels of formality and there is also a range of possible interpretations of the politeness registers. Although the choice of topic clearly also ranges according to the level of formality in English, the range of acceptable topics is markedly less restricted than in equivalent Japanese situations.

Sales interactions are hence typically categorized as formal situations in Japan which require the display of appropriate linguistic forms and politeness strategies. Extended conversations between strangers on personal (or other) topics are also atypical, since the necessary level of formality tends to establish a level of distance rather than proximity between speakers. Indeed, Tsuda (1988) also comments that in America the salesperson's individuality is not subordinated to his role as a salesperson, while in Japan the professional capacity of the salesperson is more highly valued than their individuality. Sales encounters in Australia also have a level of formality because they are between strangers and involve financial transactions, but the

inclusion of topics of personal interest and the expression of opinions by the sales staff is not inconsistent with either the required level of formality or the necessary forms of politeness. By contrast, the impersonal nature of sales interactions in Japan is evidenced by the repeated use of conventionalised expressions and behaviours and the inappropriateness of expressing opinions. Formality and restraint are examples of "negative politeness" according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, since impersonal interactions are a means of displaying deference by not unduly impinging on the customer.

Topic Discrimination and Preamble in English

Topic discrimination involves the acceptability of choosing certain discourse topics, and is clearly practised to varying extents in different cultures. Sensitivity to cultural norms is always important when choosing topics, although the significance of various cultural expectations is frequently unclear and open to interpretation. Some questions of a personal nature may even be appropriate in Japan but inappropriate in a western context (e. g., the question "How old are you?" when used to a stranger; see Ogasawara, 1995; Stephens & Blight, 2001). In fact the cultural presumptions underlying topic sensitivity are frequently complex, as was discovered by the French language oral examiners who were asking inappropriate questions in order to elicit particular language structures (see Chambers & Richards, 1995). While the questions being asked by the examiners were appropriate in their own culture, they were interpreted as being overly personal in real life interactions with French teenagers. As a consequence, since the questions were culturally inappropriate, they were subsequently dropped from the examination. The examples of English discourse that we have used in this paper also reveal considerable variation so it is difficult to draw generalisations about the acceptability of various topics, beyond stating that a broad range of topics, both personal and general in nature, appear to be acceptable. Even ironic responses between strangers appear to occur with some frequency and to not involve an inappropriate display of formality or politeness.

Conlan (2000) also highlights the importance of using conversational preamble in politeness norms employed in Australian English. Speakers typically share a friendly exchange on unrelated topics prior to engaging in the business at hand. Indeed, the range of topics displayed in the present English discourse samples can be regarded as a form of preamble being initiated by the sales assistant and which occurs during the processing of the sales transaction. Perhaps in a similar way in which the preamble is an essential element of politeness norms in Australia, the inclusion of topics unrelated to the transaction in sales discourse proffers an impression of friendliness by establishing an interpersonal (rather than solely transactional) dimension to the discourse (see Conlan, 2000, p. 74).

Conclusions

The examples provided in this paper have served to identify the significant differences in politeness strategies used in similar sales contexts in Australia and Japan. In Australia and other English-speaking countries, sales assistants typically demonstrate positive politeness by showing interest in the customer and engaging with them in social discourse unrelated to the transaction at hand. The principal effect of this politeness strategy is to demonstrate the kind of friendly attitude that is expected by customers in service encounters. Indeed, if the sales assistant did not provide a friendly interaction, it is possible that the customer might regard the staff as unfriendly or unhelpful, and be disinclined to shop at the same store in the future. There may hence be an underlying commercial motive to the use of this politeness strategy, since if the customer remembers having a pleasant experience they are likely to return to the same store on future visits. It is also likely, however, that on other occasions the sales assistants simply exhibit a friendly desire for social discourse, which is often enough justification

for the discourse to occur, without the presence of an underlying commercial motive.

The situation evident in similar sales encounters is quite different in Japan, where it could be regarded as unprofessional to discuss anything other than the matter at hand. Since the customer has higher status than the sales assistant, it could also be considered impolite and overly familiar for the staff to engage in discourse on topics unrelated to the transaction. The purpose of the language used during the interaction is hence usually to express deference through the use of negative politeness strategies that demonstrate respect for the customer's position and do not inconvenience or impose upon him in any way. There is no similar expectation that the staff will display a friendly interest in the customers, since the situation instead requires formality and the frequent use of polite linguistic forms (such as a reminder to check the change and an expression of gratitude). The effect of this different politeness strategy is to individually acknowledge the customer's importance each time they shop in the store, although the pattern of deference also has the effect of introducing distance into the social interaction. The combination of the underlying factors of Power, Status, Distance, and Formality in Japanese sales contexts usually results simply in repeated formulaic expressions from the sales assistant and a minimal level of engagement in social discourse unrelated in nature to the transaction.

However, it is also noteworthy that the contrast in conversation strategies in Japanese and Australian sales transactions illustrates a general tendency, rather than a rule which is always adhered to in the respective countries. There are indeed examples which run counter to the pattern outlined above, and two exceptions to the Japanese pattern have been provided in the current data. Indeed, these experiences were similar in nature to the types of conversation frequently heard in Australia, where the shop assistants routinely engaged in unrelated discourse. In addition, shop assistants in Australia do not always interact with customers further than providing the basic eye-contact and greeting which is a requirement of their job. Hence the major difference in these interactions in the two countries was in the higher frequency of these conversations occurring in Australia. While in Australia discussions about unrelated topics appear to be a standard mode of interaction, similar behaviour in Japan appears somewhat remarkable and serves to instead illustrate exceptions to the general pattern.

Gumperz and Roberts (1991) argue that one important factor in intercultural communication is "mismatched expectations as to how personal or fact-orientated an account is to be" (p. 78). Indeed, in the situations discussed in this paper, the range of topics that could be legitimately discussed between strangers in an Australian supermarket appears be in marked contrast to that occurring in similar Japanese settings. Languages which are linguistically distant (such as Japanese and English) do not simply differ in terms of structure and forms but also in terms of the underlying pragmatic norms which relate to and determine usage tendencies. One common pragmatic difference between cultures is the appropriateness of the choice of topic in a given situation. Transactional interactions in Japan are usually characterised by their restriction of the topic to the business at hand. In similar English settings, the same limitation is evident but to a lesser extent, so that it is not unusual for personal topics to also be introduced into even brief commercial transactions.

The current focus on teaching conversational strategies in EFL hence appears to be a useful way to improve the conversational flow when interacting in English, but should be supplemented by the teacher also providing the students with relevant cross-cultural knowledge. Japanese EFL students should be taught, for example, that the range of topics that may be encountered in English service encounters is likely to be significantly broader than usually occurs in Japan. The difference in the interpretation of factors such as the age and status of a customer should also be explained, and it would

be particularly beneficial for students to study and practice the strategy of Adding Extra Information, used as a form of positive politeness in English service encounters. Similarly, native English-speakers studying Japanese will need to understand that topic choice is likely to be more restricted in commercial interactions in Japanese, and also understand the effect of status differences and the accompanying expectations for social discourse. Hopefully, this type of knowledge will help to prevent the learners from making the common pragmatic error of inadvertently transferring L 1 discourse strategies.

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