

The role of emic understandings in theorizing im/politeness: The metapragmatics of attentiveness, empathy and anticipatory inference in Japanese and Chinese



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Abstract

While the notion of face has continued to play a key role in many accounts of im/politeness, there have increasingly been calls for im/politeness to be theorized in its own right, drawing from the emic understandings of members in relation to im/politeness. In this paper, we make a contribution to this latter agenda by comparing emic understandings of attentiveness, and the related notions of empathy and anticipatory inference in Japanese and Taiwanese Mandarin Chinese. Drawing from metapragmatic interviews with Japanese and Taiwanese participants from two different generations, we suggest that there are both similarities and differences in the ways in which these notions are conceptualized among speakers of Japanese and Mandarin Chinese spoken in Taiwan. It was found that while the participants evaluated these practices positively, and in some cases linked them to politeness concerns, in other instances they evaluated them negatively. Intracultural variability also emerged in the course of our cross-generational-cultural comparison. We conclude that further work investigating the metapragmatics of interpersonal notions such as attentiveness, empathy and anticipatory inference is necessary if we are to better understand the moral grounds on which evaluations of im/politeness are made across different languages and cultures.

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1. Introduction

It is now widely accepted that politeness and impoliteness arise through evaluations by participants in situated discourse or interactional contexts. A central role has thus been afforded to the understandings of participants in analyzing im/politeness (Eelen, 2001; Haugh, 2007c; Mills, 2003; Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Watts, 2003). However, to treat participants' perspective as important does not simply entail the analyst identifying the evaluations of those particular participants as they arise in interaction, but also examining the assumed or tacit values that are invoked by participants in making such evaluations. To make an evaluation necessarily involves an (implicit) appeal to some kind of yardstick against which the use of particular language and the conduct more generally of self and others is judged (Haugh, 2013a:64–65). This has often been couched in terms of “norms”, although Eelen (2001:135) argues against approaches that reify such norms as pre-existing or static sets of values in a particular culture. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in

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mind that when evaluating something as polite, impolite and so on, participants are implicitly claiming their evaluations are not idiosyncratic, but rather are grounded in the “seen but unnoticed” sets of expectancies that constitute what Garfinkel (1967:35–36) termed “the moral order”. In other words, when evaluating something as im/polite, one is invoking, and thereby further co-constituting, moral aspects of that social action or meaning (Haugh, 2013b:56–60; Kádár and Haugh, 2013:65–73). Given the moral order itself, and thus the inherently moral nature of evaluations of im/politeness is sustained through the way in which members are “responsive to this background” (Garfinkel, 1967:36), the question thus arises as to what constitutes the “‘seen but unnoticed’ expected, background features” (Garfinkel, 1967:35–36) in which such evaluations are grounded. This necessitates, in turn, a focus on *emic* understandings of aspects of the moral order that relate to evaluations of im/politeness (Haugh, 2007b:659, 2013a:61–64; Kádár and Haugh, 2013:181–205). In other words, we need to analyze the understandings of those members who claim an insider perspective on these background, and more often than not, unnoticed expectancies.

In much of the work to date, researchers have appealed to face as underpinning evaluations of im/politeness (e.g., Brown and Levinson, 1987; Bousfield, 2008; Locher and Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2005). However, understandings of face as a kind of publically endorsed social image, including interactional claims for approval from others (i.e. positive face) or freedom from imposition (i.e. negative face), have been found severely wanting in analyses of im/politeness in many languages and cultures, including in Chinese and Japanese (e.g., Haugh, 2004, 2005; Ide, 1989; Mao, 1994; Matsumoto, 1989; Pan and Kádár, 2011). Intachakra (2012) has thus recently renewed calls for a search for alternative metaphors for analysing and theorizing im/politeness that draw from other cultural perspectives. Intachakra (2012:632) argues that we should “treat politeness as an interface where indigenous politeness concepts are brought in from as wide-ranging languages (including English) as possible, in order to establish a concoction of modalities of expression shared by those (if not all) languages”. However, tapping into *emic* understandings *vis-à-vis* im/politeness inevitably involves some form of metapragmatic analysis, given we are moving into an examination of reflexive awareness on the part of ordinary or lay observers about the ways in which they use language to interact and communicate with others (Haugh, 2010a; Kádár and Haugh, 2013:184). Metapragmatic analysis of im/politeness involves the study of linguistic evidence that language users are aware of (potential) evaluations of im/politeness¹ including (1) the metalanguage of im/politeness (i.e. metalinguistic awareness), (2) metapragmatic commentary (i.e. metacommunicative awareness), (3) social discourse(s) on im/politeness (i.e. metadiscursive awareness), and (4) pragmatic markers that are interpretable as displaying metapragmatic awareness on the part of users (i.e. metacognitive awareness) (Kádár and Haugh, 2013:186–187). It thus goes beyond the treatment of metapragmatics of politeness¹ as simply encompassing instances of talk about politeness as a concept (see, e.g., Eelen, 2001; Terkourafi, 2011).

One of the challenges facing a metapragmatic approach to im/politeness, then, is how to deal with differences in lay or first-order conceptualizations of im/politeness (or what is commonly termed im/politeness¹), across languages and cultures at various levels of social groupings. In this exploratory paper, we take up this theme in relation to *emic* conceptualizations of “attentiveness” (*kikubari*), “empathy” (*omoiyari*) and “anticipatory inference” (*sasshi*) in Japanese and Mandarin Chinese spoken in Taiwan, and how the values inherent to these notions can scaffold evaluations of (im) politeness¹. We propose that the *emic* understandings of such notions underpin the “seen but unnoticed” sets of expectations that ground evaluations of (im) politeness¹ by participants, at least in some instances. These three notions are interlinked, that is, empathy and anticipatory inference are needed in order to demonstrate attentiveness. A demonstrator of attentiveness may empathize with a potential beneficiary and demonstrate attentiveness as a result (Fukushima, 2013a:26); and a definite prerequisite for attentiveness to arise is inference by a potential demonstrator of attentiveness (Fukushima, 2013a:28) (see a detailed explanation of these concepts in section 2). We undertake a cross-cultural and cross-generational comparison of *emic* understandings of these notions among speakers of Japanese and Taiwanese speakers of Mandarin Chinese, using the metapragmatic interview data (see section 3). Although notions such as attentiveness, empathy and anticipatory inference have been claimed to form an important cornerstone of im/politeness¹ from an *emic* perspective in Japanese (see, e.g., Clancy, 1986; Fukushima, 2000, 2004, 2009, 2011, 2013b; Ishii, 1984; Marui et al., 1996; Miike, 2003; Miyake, 2011; Travis, 1998), there has been little systematic investigation of analogous notions in Chinese, and indeed very few studies undertaking comparisons of politeness in Japanese and Chinese. Thus, we not only address the considerable gap in relation to studies investigating cross-generational differences in understandings of im/politeness¹ (although see Fukushima, 2011, 2013b), we further suggest that comparing *emic* understandings of analogous notions in Japanese and Chinese is also arguably useful in that it allows us to better characterize specific nuances that might not appear salient in a straightforward comparison with related notions in English, for instance.

In the next section, we introduce the *emic* notions of attentiveness, empathy and anticipatory inference that arguably frame evaluations of im/politeness on some occasions in Japanese and Taiwanese Mandarin Chinese. We subsequently describe the procedure and the participants of our interview, and then analyze how their responses indicate both possible similarities and differences in the ways these notions are conceptualized among lay speakers of Japanese and Mandarin Chinese spoken in Taiwan. We then briefly consider the implications of this study for theorizing im/politeness more broadly.

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