

Linguistic rituals for thanking in Japanese: Balancing obligations

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Abstract

The paper investigates what can be described as a Japanese cultural way of thanking, *o-rei* (御礼). The data of the investigation are naturally occurring telephone conversations which took place in the Japanese end-of-year gift-giving season, *seibo*. Sections of the conversations, which refer to favours or gifts that are given or received, are extracted and transcribed for a detailed investigation. This study reveals that conversational participants cooperate to achieve a mutual pragmatic goal of ‘debt–credit’ equilibrium. This is a symbolic settlement that is necessary to care for the conversational participants’ debt-sensitive face. The linguistic ritual of *o-rei* serves to achieve this temporary restoration of equilibrium, and thus *o-rei* does not free the debtor from debt. The data suggest that Japanese native speakers employ many means of indicating *o-rei* that are not predicted by most politeness and speech act theories. The prolongation of ‘acknowledging debt/benefit–denigrating credit’ between the beneficiary and the benefactor also suggests the importance of the mutual involvement of conversational participants in understanding the social meaning of *o-rei*. *O-rei* serves as a symbolic repayment of debt, and it is a common practice outside a family circle. In this paper I question the adequacy of the definition of thanking, ‘expressions of gratitude and appreciation’, which has been commonly used in cross-cultural and inter-language pragmatic research and suggest that the mutual and reciprocal aspects need to be taken into account.

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1. Introduction

In anthropology, there is a rich tradition of research on social exchange in terms of the norm of reciprocity (to name a few classics, Mauss, 1925 (in French), 1954 (English translation); Malinowski, 1922; Levi-Strauss, 1949 (in French), 1969 (English translation); Gouldner, 1960). The norm of reciprocity – the social obligation to reciprocate benefits to one another – is claimed to

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be universal (Gouldner, 1960), and reciprocity as an attempt to reduce indebtedness is supported generally in social psychology (Greenberg, 1980). However the norm of reciprocity has not been fully integrated into the theories of language use, such as speech acts and politeness. ‘Thanking’ in speech act theory is unrelated to the norm of reciprocity. This may be partly because, traditionally, reciprocity was only associated with so called ‘exotic’ and ‘archaic’ societies. Komter’s (1996) sociological study of gift-giving in Dutch communities involving 513 Dutch citizens proves that the norm of reciprocity is observed in Western societies. In her more recent in-depth study of gratitude, she emphasises the link between the norm of reciprocity and gratitude.

Gratitude is the in-between connecting gift and return gift. Together, the three elements of gift, gratitude, and counter-gift form the chain that constitutes the principle of reciprocity (Komter, 2004:210).

Befu (1980) claims that cultural frame of reference of a society in question must be taken into account when interpreting the meaning of its social exchange. This is because a specific cultural frame of reference in a given society provides rules and they “allow certain latitudes of interpretation by individual actors, actors are free to apply them in ways which they consider most advantageous” (Befu, 1980:214). Thus the norm of reciprocity, individual’s strategies and cultural frame of reference are all interwoven. Lebra (1976) describes *on* (恩) as a culture-bound notion of reciprocity for the Japanese. “An *on* relationship, once generated by giving and receiving a benefit, compels the receiver-debtor to repay *on* in order to restore balance.” (Lebra, 1976:91). The balance is in fact maintained in a long term, therefore, at any given points of the occurrence of giving or reciprocating, the state of imbalance in terms of debt and credit is common. The social goal of reciprocity is not debtless or creditless state in social relationship, but the continuation of the relationship. “The counterbalancing of debt – now in favour of one member, now in favour of the other – insures that the relationship between the two continue . . .” (Schwartz, 1967:8), and “keeping the reciprocal book in perfect balance means cancellation of social ties” (Lebra, 1976:100). If social meaning of reciprocity is a creation and maintenance of social bond, what are exchanged verbally at any events of giving and receiving gift and favour should hold a significant key in insuring social ties in a given society.

In this paper, by setting the scene in Japanese *seibo*, end of year gift-giving season, I will investigate how people manage social exchange linguistically. To be more specific, I will look into what conversational patterns are common between the beneficiary and the benefactor with various degrees of social distance and intimacy, and what is the role of such linguistic realisations in social exchange. I will also argue for the variability of speech acts and linguistic politeness depending on the language and its cultural frame of reference.

I wish first to explore notion of 礼 (*rei*), Chinese origin Japanese traditional value, and to what extent *rei* have shaped Japanese social exchange and its linguistic behaviours. Then I will briefly review thanking and notion of politeness before investigating natural conversations in Japanese institutionalised *seibo* gift-giving season.

礼. (*Rei*)

Rei is a Japanese version of the original Chinese *li* (禮) which has been described as expressions of self-denigration and respect to others (Gu, 1990), namely politeness. *Li* is strongly associated with the sayings of Confucius from around the 6th century B.C., and Gu describes it as the social hierarchy and order based on the social system of the Zhou Dynasty, that Confucius advocated should be restored (Gu, 1990). Therefore, *li* was, in one of its main meanings, the

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