Emoticons as a medium for channeling politeness within American and Japanese online blogging communities

Barry Kavanagh[*]

Institute for Excellence in Higher Education, Tohoku University, 41 Kawauchi, Aoba ku, Sendai 980-8576, Japan

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine how Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies are channeled through the medium of emoticons in American and Japanese online personal weblog comments. Results showed that although American and Japanese blog comment writers both utilized emoticons that helped to convey positive politeness strategies Japanese used them significantly more than Americans. It is argued that this challenges the notion of Japanese as being a negative orientated culture within this online blog community.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework defines politeness as the use of verbal strategies that show a concern for the addresses' feelings by showing deference to their face. This notion of face involves the desire or need to be liked as in positive politeness or the desire or need not to be imposed on as reflected in negative politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) devised strategies that address these two faces. Positive politeness strategies are defined as strategies that seek to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face. They are used to make the hearer feel good about themselves. Some strategies of positive politeness can include expressing gratitude, compliments, and agreement (Holmes, 1995; Brown, 1998). In contrast negative politeness strategies are described as 'softening devices' such as when expressing opinion through hedges or requests (Brown, 1998).

Although some research suggests that Japanese honorifics do not simply emphasize negative politeness and depending on context can also underline positive politeness such as camaraderie (Yoshida and Sakurai, 2005), Japanese is considered to be a negative politeness culture because of the intricate system of honorifics it employs (Shigemitsu et al., 2006; Ide, 2006). In addition Japanese speakers do not often use positive politeness strategies within their interactions unless the interlocutors are psychologically very close (Akutsu, 2009). The United States, in contrast, is described as being a positive politeness culture. Brown and Levinson (1987) state "impositions are thought of as small, social distance as no insuperable boundary to easy-going interaction, and relative power as never very great" (p.245).

These positive politeness strategies have been suggested to play an important role in forming and maintaining good interpersonal relationships. These theories were originally applied to face-to-face communication where visual and auditory cues such as paralinguistic information and facial expressions are readily available. In text based Computer Mediated

---

* Tel.: +81 22 795 7779.
  E-mail address: kavanagh.barry.e7@tohoku.ac.jp.

Communication, these cues are not accessible which has led to creative language use and the use of extra-linguistic signs such as emoticons to convey the perceived missing semantic and pragmatic intention.

This leads to the question as to how these politeness strategies are reflected in emoticon usage and are the negative politeness assumptions about Japanese culture held true in an online environment? In addition how is relational communication achieved in these blogging communities in a text-based medium that lacks a social visible presence?

This paper aims to examine how Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies are channeled through the medium of emoticons in American and Japanese online personal weblog comments.

2. The Brown and Levinson politeness framework

Brown and Levinson (1987) state that positive politeness strategies are used as a kind of 'metaphorical extension of intimacy' that imply a common ground or when the speaker, in using them, indicates that he wants to 'come closer' to hearer as in the formation or building of rapport. This positive politeness may include an element of exaggeration with the objective of wanting the hearer's positive face to be enhanced and satisfied. They outline 15 strategies that aid in the promotion of positive politeness that includes the conveyance that 'X' is admirable and interesting which is achieved by:

1. Noticing and attending to the hearer's interests, wants and needs.
2. Exaggerating interest, approval and sympathy with the hearer.
3. Intensifying interest to hearer.

They also suggest that the claiming of common ground between interlocutors can be achieved by:

1. Seeking agreement.
2. Avoiding disagreement.
3. Presupposing, raising or asserting common ground.
4. Joking.

These strategies can be achieved through linguistic acts that enhance the face of the hearer and attend to a person's positive face needs. Negative politeness is a redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face, that is, to have their freedom of action unhindered and according to Brown and Levinson (1987) it is the 'heart of respect behavior' just as positive politeness emphasizes familiar and joking behavior. Being indirect, hedging, minimizing the imposition, giving deference and apologizing are given as some of the 10 strategies that promote negative politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987).

2.1. The universality of Brown & Levinson and criticism

The Brown and Levinson (1987) claim of the universality of face has been criticized by Ide (1989) and Matsumoto (1988, 1989) who consider Japanese honorifics as arising not from a consideration of face but out of 'discernment' or *wakimae* the use of polite expressions by speakers that conform to social convention. *Wakimae*, Ide (1989) states, "is the choice of linguistic form or expression in which the distinction between the ranks or the roles of the speaker, the referent and the addressee are systematically encoded" (p. 230). This is because linguistic behavior is orientated towards roles and situations, rather than face wants she explains. She divides politeness into volition (*hatarakikake houshiki)* and discernment (*wakimae*). Positive and negative politeness strategies can be found within volition such as the verbal strategies of seeking agreement, joking and being pessimistic. The Brown and Levinson (1987) framework disregards *wakimae* which Ide claims acts out an important role within the Japanese linguistic politeness system. Discernment can take the form of address terms, speech levels and formal forms such as honorifics.

In Japanese society, *wakimae* is considered more important than *hatarakikake houshiki* for the maintenance of good interpersonal relations. Gagné (2010) suggests that the arguments put forth by Matsumoto (1988) accept that an

> "acknowledgment of deference with honorific, polite and modest language forms is indispensible in the Japanese language, such 'polite' language forms do not create distance between interactants as a negative face strategy would assume but rather enhance the interdependence between speakers and hearers. Thus, Japanese deference functions more as a positive politeness strategy to enhance positive self image and mutual interdependence" (p.125).

American English in contrast, is lacking in or has the need for *wakimae* so Ide (1989) suggests the attention is therefore turned to a more positive politeness focus. Within American English the speaker can show respect and politeness by closing the distance with the listener through the use of volition or *hatarakikake houshiki*. Hill et al. (1986) suggest that there is a "relative prominence of discernment over volition in the polite use of language by speakers of Japanese. Conversely, volition appears to predominate in the polite use of American English" (p. 348).

Ide (2006) writes that within the English language 'politeness' and 'friendliness' are two inseparable concepts on the same level. In contrast, within Japanese these concepts are separated. Japanese *keigo* or honorifics is a system to express politeness and not friendliness. As positive politeness strategies have the intention of treating the addressee as someone who is liked or