

## Positive Politeness Strategies in Japanese

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### Introduction

In this paper, I point out that the younger Japanese are beginning to speak more directly than the older ones who prefer to speak indirectly and politely. This change itself is favorable, because the Japanese are often criticized for not stating their likes and dislikes, or expressing their opinions. The younger Japanese presumably have adopted 'the western communication style' according to the way they understood it in order to correct the old way. They started to say things directly, but sometimes they seem to do so regardless of the content of the message.

This change is explained as a shift of politeness strategies from the negative politeness strategy from the positive strategy if I use Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. In order to illustrate my point, I will take some examples of traditional Japanese politeness strategy from Kuniko Mukooda's novel *A-Un* (1980). I will then compare these with some typical examples of American politeness strategies from Eric Segal's *Love Story* (1970).

After this comparison, the recent changes in the politeness strategies of the Japanese will be illustrated by some examples taken from Shizuka Ooishi's *Futarikko*, a TV drama which was broadcast in the spring of 1997. Eric Segal's *Prizes* (1995) will also be used to show various positive politeness strategies of the Americans.

### Understanding Without Saying: The World of *A-Un*

Deborah Tannen (1986) points out that people in different cultures have different communication styles. Kuniko Mukooda describes a traditional Japanese communication style very illuminatingly in her novel *A-Un* (1980).

The story is about a friendship between two middle aged men Senkichi Mizuta and Shuzo Kadota just before World War II, and Shuzo's unspoken love toward Senkichi's wife, Tami. Senkichi's father who lives with Senkichi's family knows that Shuzo adores Tami, but would not say a word about it. Satoko, Senkichi's 18 year old daughter gradually becomes aware of Shuzo's yearning toward Tami, but she learns at the same time that the grown-ups never speak about very important matters. The characters in the story understand what others are trying to say without saying all. Especially when they expect the presence of some confrontation to others, they try to avoid it by not saying much about it, which is an example of negative politeness strategy. The following is some of the examples of their indirect communication style.

Senkichi is an ordinary salaried worker. One day, he is promoted by his company to come back to work in an office in Tokyo. His friend Shuzo, a wealthy corporate owner, welcomes back Senkichi and his family by preparing 'sake' (Japanese rice wine), festive meal, hot bath, and the big wooden name plate on the gate post of the house, which he had rented for them. When Senkichi finds out what Shuzo has done for him, Senkichi comments as follows:

"I am not a big shot. The huge name plate is ridiculous," it is customary that Senkichi demonstrates anger when he is pleased.(12)

(All of the quotations from this book are translated by Tsuda.)

He also adds a comment on Shuzo's writing on a white sheet of paper wrapped around a sake bottle to celebrate the promotion.

"His writing is as bad as before. I am superior to him at least in writing." Senkichi laughed with a stuffed voice as if his nose was stuffed. (13)

Senkichi does not express his joy or appreciation straightforwardly, and criticizes the size of the name plate or the writing by his friend. The reader, however, understands his feelings by reading between the lines that he is almost in tears with what his friend had done for him.

Right after Senkichi and Tami moved back to Tokyo, they find out that Tami is expecting a baby. Shuzo does not have any children with his wife Kimiko, and he wants to adopt their baby if it is a daughter. Although Tami is against the idea, Senkichi thinks it is not a bad idea. Shuzo has a mistress named Reiko, and he makes up his mind to break up with her in order to be eligible for adopting his best friend's baby. He gives a sum of money to Reiko to leave her. Reiko misunderstands Shuzo's decision as Tami's suggestion, and visits Tami to tell her not to interfere with her affair with Shuzo, and throws the money back at her. Tami

does not understand Reiko's behavior, but tries to pick up the bills which are scattered on the ground. She falls and hits herself against a big washing basin, which leads to a miscarriage of her baby. Senkichi and Shuzo express their sadness contrastively. Hatsutarō, Senkichi's father describes them as a pair of Koma inu (Chinese dogs).

Senkichi went back into the house. Suddenly he heard a loud cry with a male voice. It was Kadokura. He was sitting on the wooden verandah outside the shoji screens overlooking the garden. Senkichi sat a little apart from him. He sat in the same posture as Kadokura, holding his knees, watching the dark garden. Tears hurriedly ran down from the ends of Tami's eyes.

Hatsutarō uttered.

"They are Komainu"

He described them as stone dogs which have same postures at the Torii entrance of the Shrine. They look the same, but the shape of their mouths are different. One is Ah. The other is Un. (41)

The phrase "Komainu-san Ah, Komainu-san Un" is taken from a Japanese elementary school reader which was uniform over the country. Thinking about the phrase, Satoko, Senkichi's daughter, suddenly, thinks of a phrase in the Imperial Rescript on Education, which every Japanese student had to memorize by heart.

"The husband and wife help each other."

"The comrades believe each other."

A school principal read aloud the passage with his white gloves on, and everyone listened to it with his head down, but in case of her father, her mother and Mr. Kadokura, their relationship was more than those.

She felt there was a dark hole which captivates her in these lines.(41)

After Senkichi's father Hatsutarō dies, Shuzo entertains him to cheer him up at a Japanese geisha house, where Senkichi is enchanted by a geisha Mariyakko. He is so attracted by her that he starts visiting her every night and spends money on her beyond the economic capacity of his family. He would not listen to Tami's complaint. In order to stop him, Shuzo pays a large amount of money to own Mariyakko by himself, in spite of the fact that he has a mistress Reiko already. Shuzo and Senkichi quarrel over Mariyakko at a bar, and Shuzo finally says that he cannot stand to look at Tami in the miserable situation. Senkichi asks Shuzo:

"Then, did you do this for my wife? Did you spend tens of thousand yen to own Mariyakko just for Tami?"

They sighed deeply, realizing the awkwardness produced by the fact that they have brought up the subject that they had not allowed themselves to talk about.(148-9)

One day after the quarrel, Shuzo happens to visits Senkichi's house and finds Tami wearing a male suit jacket on top of kimono underwear and posing before a mirror. He hurriedly leaves Senkichi's house and bursts into laugh.

"Adorable, really."

He murmured to himself, "This is it." What he has been yearning for was this, such seriousness, funniness, cuteness.

"It is dangerous, dangerous," he also murmured.(181)

After this incident, Shuzo intentionally quarrels with Senkichi to terminate their friendship while they are drinking together. For a while, they lead their own lives separately, but Senkichi and Tami gradually realize the importance of Shuzo's presence in their family and they decide to retrieve their relationship as before.

The characters in this story would not talk about very important matters, but they succeed in reading between the lines to understand the intentions of others. This is an esthetically satisfying, intimate way of understanding each other in the traditional Japanese culture, and to a certain degree, it may be universally true in other cultures.

On the other hand, it is also true that this is not the only way to understand each other. In Eric Segal's *Love Story*, we can see a completely different, but intimate communication.

### **Jennifer's attractiveness in *Love Story***

In contrast to the indirect communication style illustrated in the preceding section, people in different cultures or of a different generation prefer to express what they believe more directly in words so that their intentions will not be misunderstood.

*Love Story* is a story of love between Oliver and Jennifer. Oliver is a Harvard star football player and the son of a wealthy family which has a name on one of the buildings at Harvard. Jennifer is the daughter of an Italian immigrant who lost his wife in a traffic accident. Oliver marries Jennifer in spite of his parents' objection, but he loses her by leukemia.

They first meet in the library at Radcliffe University where Jennifer studies

music. From the start, Jennifer calls him preppie, which annoys Oliver.

"What makes you so sure I went to prep school?"  
 "You look stupid and rich," she said, removing her glasses.  
 "You're wrong," I protested. "I'm actually smart and poor."  
 "Oh, no, Preppie. I'm smart and poor."(2-3)

After they meet for the second time, Oliver kisses her on the forehead.

"Did I say you could?" she said.  
 "What?"  
 "Did I say you could kiss me?"  
 "Sorry. I was carried away."  
 "I wasn't."(14)

Jennifer seems to be trying to keep her position even with or higher than Oliver by mentioning things which might hurt Oliver's pride, but Oliver is attracted by her intelligence to see things clearly. He says:

What I loved so much about Jenny was her ability to see inside me, to understand things I never needed to carve out in words. She was still doing it. (54)

Characters in *A-Un* and *Love Story* understand each other's feelings very deeply. What Jennifer differs from those of *A-Un* is that she tries to express this understanding in words. When she graduates, she is offered a scholarship to go to Paris to study music. However, she accepts Oliver's marriage proposal and they get married. His parents stop financial support for Oliver and Jennifer starts to work so that he will be able to continue his law school.

Three years later, Oliver finishes school and obtains a job as a lawyer. Just when they are ready to start a new affluent life, it was found that Jennifer will not live long because of leukemia. At her death bed, she still expresses what she thinks very clearly.

"Screw Paris," she said suddenly.  
 "Huh?"  
 "Screw Paris and all the crap you think you stole from me. I don't care, you sonovabitch. Can't you believe that?"(127)

She tells Oliver to leave beside her, when he tells her that he has taken her opportunity of studying abroad in Paris to marry him. Although he still feels guilty about it, Oliver tells Jennifer that he is sure that she made the happiest choice. She then dies in Oliver's arms, thanking him.

Jennifer is attractive because she is brilliant and positive about her life. She tries to change other people, if it bothers her. For instance, she tries to improve cold relationship between Oliver and his father, by advising him to visit his father for the celebration of the sixtieth birthday. It results in a quarrel between Jennifer and Oliver, but she never stops pointing out what seems wrong and needs to be corrected. It is a very different communication style from the characters in *A-Un*, where people value unspoken understanding.

Kuniko Mukoda chose the setting of *A-Un* in the pre World War II in Japan. Probably, she had to choose it to make the story very plausible. In the eighties, Western influence became stronger and the Japanese values changed after the War. In order to see some of the changes in the Japanese communication style, I would like to look at a TV drama *Futarikko*. I will use Eric Segal's *Prizes* for comparison. The reason I chose these two stories is that these stories involve various situations where the characters compete and confront each other. In other words, the stories involve many scenes with face threatening acts in Brown and Levinson's sense.

### **Directness without Tact: The World of *Futarikko***

*Futarikko* is a TV drama, which was broadcast every weekday morning in 1997 in Japan. I use its novel version for the ease of citation.

Reiko and Kyoko Noda are twin sisters. They are the daughters of Koichi and Chiaki Noda, who own a tofu shop. Koichi is very proud of his home made tofu. His wife Chiaki was born in a wealthy family, but she fell in love with Koichi and left her parents who objected to their marriage. One of the twin sisters Reiko is always successful in her school work and is admired by everybody. On the other hand, Kyoko is an underachiever and always a trouble maker in class. Every time she makes trouble and gets reprimanded in school, her mother Chiaki compares Kyoko with Reiko, who is excellent in everything.

One day, when the sisters are talking each other, however, Reiko mentions that she envies Kyoko, because everybody pays attention to Kyoko, whether she gets up on time, whether she has washed her face before she eats, or whether she has everything for school with her. Kyoko says she envies Reiko because she is good at everything. One day they decide to change their roles in school. Behaving free like Kyoko, she heard one of the boys in her class tell that he likes Kyoko better than Reiko because he hates the coquettish look she makes to her male class mates. Feeling hurt, Reiko puts a piece of chalk in her sister's soup bowl. Kyoko

find a piece of chalk in her soup bowl, and pours the hot soup over the boy, thinking that he put the chalk. The classmates find out that they changed their roles, and their parents were notified about the incidents.

Their mother, Chiaki was so mad about Kyoko that she criticizes her daughter severely:

"You are the meanest person! You are the lowest of human kinds!"....

"Don't look down. Look straight into my eyes."

Kyoko, however, stubbornly kept her head down and her mouth tightly shut, which made Chiaki even angrier.

"Don't you hear me?"

"Take it easy."

Koichi tries to interrupt them, but he was pushed back by Chiaki.

"You, just be quiet. You spoil Kyoko so much that she had done such a terrible thing. Kyoko! You did what you should have never done to other people. Even if Abe-kun made fun of you, you are not allowed to pour hot soup over him. I am sorry to have given birth to a daughter like you. I regret the fact that I could not bring you up properly."(43-44, translation by Tsuda)

Chiaki demands Kyoko to apologize to her, but Kyoko would not say a word. Reiko feels very guilty of not defending Kyoko by explaining what she had done, but she could not say that it was she that put chalk in Kyoko's soup bowl.

As Kyoko stands up and is ready to leave her house, her mother hurled another criticism on her.

You should not have born to this world!(45)

Hearing his wife's cruel words, Koichi could not bear this situation and starts arguing with his wife.

One thing which is very different in the characters of *Futarikko* from the characters in *A-Un* is the way they communicate each other. Reiko and Kyoko state what they want to do in their lives very clearly. Reiko is a good girl on the surface, but she despises the humble life of her parents and yearn to live with her grand parents in the luxurious house in an affluent residential area of the city. On admission to Kyoto University, very prestigious National University, she decides to live with her grand parents without any permission from her parents.

“Answer me! When did you start to contact them (i.e. Chiaki’s parents)?”

“Last fall. I visited them and told that I am going to take an entrance examination to Kyoto University.”.....

“I will not allow you to live with them. You belong to Noda family”...

“Father, what does Noda family mean? Time has changed and an individual is free from her family.”

“You say that again!”

“I hate you exactly who you are! I despise this house and this town!”

Reiko does not seem to care whether she hurts her parents by what she says. In other word, she is using bald on record strategy in Brown and Levinson’s terminology. This conversation is arbitrarily taken from one drama and it may not reflect reality of present Japanese society, but it suggests, at the same time, impolite and straightforward expressions are preferred in present day Japan. We can watch TV commercials in which pretty young Japanese teenagers express what they believe very clearly and confidently using very colloquial expressions. It seems that this is a kind of fashionable way of speaking.

A similar type of conversation is observed in American novels, too. I will take Erick Segal’s *Prizes* as an example.

### **Positive Politeness Strategy in *Prizes***

*Prizes* (1995) is a story of three scholars who aspire for a Nobel prize in different fields. One of them is Isabel da Costa, a genius in physics who is admitted to UC Berkeley at the age of fourteen. Her parents have had a big argument about her future whether it is better for her to leave her home in the East and enter university at such an early age. Her mother Muriel is against the idea and decides to stay in Boston with her son. Her father has devoted himself to bring up his daughter as a world class scientist and naturally takes every good opportunity that is offered. One day Isabel and her father are invited to a barbecue party at the house of Professor Karl Pracht, her academic adviser. Jerry Pracht, the professor’s son greets them:

"Mind if I join you?" clearly, Jerry regarded the question as rhetorical, because he sat down before either of them could answer...

“I’ve seen your picture on Karl’s desk,” Isabel remarked.

“For use as a dartboard, no doubt.” Jerry retorted. “I suppose he told you I’m



not exactly a microchip off the old block.”

“Actually, he told me you were rebelling at the moment,” Isabel responded.

“But that you’re very brilliant.”

“No, I used to be. But I gave it up when I quit school to take up tennis full-time.”

“Why are you so anxious to be thought of as stupid?” she asked with genuine interest. (Segal, 159)

Jerry’s positive politeness strategies are very successful in socializing with Isabel. At first, he sits with Isabel and her father without waiting for their reply. Then, he jokes that his father must be using his photograph as a dartboard, because he knows that his father is not happy about his decision to leave school and to concentrate on tennis. Because of Jerry’s very informal conversation, Isabel starts to feel at ease with him and asks him a blatant question, “Why are you so anxious to be thought of as stupid?” Joking, however, as a positive politeness strategy has a risky aspect. In the above conversation, Isabel regards Jerry to be very bright and attractive. Her father, on the contrary, thinks he is ill mannered and unsuitable as her daughter’s friend.

As I have illustrated, positive politeness strategies are often more than saying what the speakers want to say. For instance, teasing takes the form of Face Threatening expressions, but the way it is spoken and the relationship between the speaker and the hearer helps the speakers to understand what it is as in the conversation between Abe and Kyoko in *Futarikko*. It may sometimes take the form of blatant expressions, it is different from really Face Threatening expression as in the case of Chiaki’s harsh expression toward Kyoko. The metamessage of teasing and joking is different from the literal surface expression of the message if I use Deborah Tannen’s terminology.

## Conclusion

The westerners generally have a longer tradition of verbal expression and seem to be better at separating the content of argument and the speaker. Rhetoric, humor, or witty expressions seem to be good ways to make the listeners to pay as much attention and get involved in the verbal expressions as well as the speaker himself. It is, therefore, very important for the Japanese to learn to be able to use positive politeness strategies as well as negative politeness strategies. If they only use negative politeness strategies, they will never be able to talk about important issues, since negative politeness strategies avoid confrontations.

On the other hand, if they misunderstand that expressing their opinion is equal to blatantly expressing their opinions of feelings without positive politeness, they

will never be able to talk about conflicting ideas with others successfully. As pointed out in this paper, however, the westerners often use positive politeness strategies, such as teasing, joking, or witty expressions, to redress the face-threatening content of the message. It is important for the Japanese to pay attention to how we send the message and to be able to make good use of positive politeness strategies as well as traditional negative politeness strategies.

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