Face and Japanese linguistic etiquette
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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to describe existing linguistic theories that attempt to explain Japanese linguistic etiquette; In particular the well-known politeness theory as described by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, the supposed universality of that theory and how it fails to adequately describe Japanese politeness. In addition to evaluating the theories and explaining where they fall short in their description, research will be presented to explain exactly what is missing from the respective theories. In addition to this it an explanation will be presented which borrows many themes from various different theories and uses them to provide a clearer and more accurate picture of Japanese politeness. While older and established theories certainly can explain various aspects of Japanese politeness none of them fully explain why it is used. A newer, more applicable theory will be presented that is better supported by research and gives a more reasonable explanation for Japanese politeness. This theory views Japanese honorifics and politeness as constructions of the interlocutors to enhance the flow of information and increase their chance of achieving their conversational goal. The historical and socioeconomic background of Japan will be discussed and the various factors which affect the way that the Japanese think and speak will be explained. This will not only give a good basis as to contrast the various theories but give a good perspective into the Japanese language and mind and allow the reader to evaluate existing theories and come to a conclusion.
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1. Theories on Linguistic Etiquette

This chapter introduces the various contending theories on politeness and etiquette. These theories contain very minute differences and can therefore be difficult to distinguish between. This chapter will introduce the concept of linguistic etiquette and the basic theories which aim to explain the framework of politeness. Then the politeness theories which contain the concept of face and that deal with Japanese politeness will be described.

1.1 Politeness concepts and politeness theory

When attempting to define politeness as a system the simplest method is to simply see what people believe to be polite. This is often closely connected to what people value in others and in their own society. For the most part the countries that can be said to have western culture have very similar values concerning politeness. These values can be described as the communication methods, words and behaviors that people use that are commonly agreed on to be socially correct and accepted in a given situation. For the most part this can be described simply by saying that people are friendly, open and use words such as please, thank you and you're welcome. While these practices can be viewed as polite in most western countries, some of them can be seen as impolite in some Asian cultures. A famous example of that is the handshake and the Japanese bow. Western politeness often entails friendliness and decreasing social distance while in Japan a certain level of distance and reverence conveys politeness (Wetzel, 2004). In linguistics and in the theories described in this essay the word politeness describes what is called linguistic etiquette. Under that definition all verbal or gestured etiquette, be it positive or negative, is polite if it is a socially accepted custom and practice While similar to politeness, linguistic etiquette is a broader concept and even encompasses things such as insult and rudeness rituals (Kasper, 1998).

Specific honorific strategies have existed in Japan since Confucian philosophical ideals started to influence the structure of Japanese society. Evidence suggests that the first
systematic study of politeness in Japan with linguistic method was done by foreigners. Various linguistic and scientific methodological studies were performed by missionaries and other emissaries as early as the 16th century (Kojima, 1998). It was not until the Meiji period that Japanese scholars chose to focus on Japanese polite language as a study in itself. Keigo has been classified in a myriad of ways from who the speaker is, what is being talked about and who is listening. For the purpose of this paper and the theories concerned with Japanese politeness, keigo and all its subcategories fall under the definition of polite language or honorifics. Keigo will be explained in more detail below but for now keigo will be used in its broadest sense; all speech and actions related to them which either respect the listener or the subject of the conversation directly or lowers the image of the speaker to respect the listener. (Wetzel, 2004)

### 1.2 Politeness Framework Theories

**Grice’s cooperative principle.** A few prevailing theories in the study of linguistic etiquette are based on the *cooperative principle* framework which was laid out by Grice. (1975) It describes rational principles that people follow to ensure proper and effective communication. He explains certain criteria or *maxims* that if adhered to allow for the most efficient communication. This framework was later expanded on to the field of politeness by Leech. (1983) He introduced *politeness maxims* which explained various parts of politeness and how it related to the cooperative principle.

It is concerning the cooperative principle and how it relates to politeness that we see the theories begin to diverge. Brown and Levinson see politeness as a direct cause of the cooperative principle. They built their theory upon this framework and proposed that politeness was not the actual guidelines or maxims which people followed to ensure positive interaction. Politeness arose from the breaking of those rules of behavior and the mitigation of that.

**Leech’s politeness principle.** Leech (1983) proposes the politeness principle which
in turn contains six further maxims; tact, generosity, approbation, modesty and sympathy. These are connected to the various parts of the conversation but to put it simply; they all essentially try to please the listener and raise his importance in the conversation, while simultaneously lowering the importance of the speaker. He agrees with Grice but developed further sub-maxims that he stated constrain and dictate conversations between rational interlocutors. These maxims can be thought of as personal values that each person has. When people then take part in conversations or interact in some way these maxims affect how the conversation will be carried out. He states that the cooperative principle alone cannot explain why people choose to be indirect and often display very inefficient means of communication. He postulates the existence of the politeness principle on the same level of the cooperative principle to account for this phenomenon.

**Conversational contract theory.** Another closely related theory is by (Fraser, 1990). This theory incorporates face and the cooperative principle but with one major difference. He states that politeness is a conversational contract and that politeness is the most efficient way to communicate in a given situation. When people interact in various ways and exchange information they have create certain rights and obligations between parties in a conversation. Simply by being cooperative, respecting the rights and fulfilling the obligations, one is in a sense being polite and vice-verca.

1.3 Politeness theories on Japanese honorifics and politeness

Different theories exist because Japanese politeness and honorifics is a debated subject among linguists. From its classification and structure to exactly what it is, common agreement is lacking. (Wetzel, 2004) There are three popular contending theories on Japanese politeness. The theory that deals most with face and Japanese politeness is Brown and Levinsons politeness theory which describes Japanese honorifics and politeness as a manifestation of negative
politeness strategy under their face saving theory. The second theory is in response to Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory. Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1992) saw western politeness theory as not being able to sufficiently explain Japanese politeness and they theorize that it falls under the Japanese concept of discernment or *wakimae*. A third group of theories explain Japanese politeness as a conversational tool. Rather than being a rigid predecided system of what is wrong and right, impolite and polite, they view it as a flowing and interchangeable part of conversational tools and strategies.
2. Japanese Politeness as a Negative Politeness Strategy

Brown and Levinson state that politeness phenomena are a social tool that people use to negate or mitigate certain FTAs or face threatening acts. Their theory has been generally well received. One large exception is on the universality of the theory and how it pertains to Japanese honorific language. Brown and Levinson state that certain politeness processes called negative politeness are the reason for Japanese politeness. (Brown & Levinson, 1987) Their theory is based on the sociolinguistic concept of face.

2.1 Face

What linguists call face is a term that exists in many cultures, it represents a person’s prestige or honor. In broad terms one can describe face as the respectability or worth that people judge a person to have and the self-worth that one takes from that. It represents oneself in relation to others, an outer image that we and others are aware of. Face is something that strongly affects social interactions. When people interact they will behave in a way that is called a line. A line is a combination of verbal and non-verbal queue patterns that a person follows based on the value and meaning they place on the situation, the other parties and himself. (Goffman, 2005)

The cooperative principle mentioned before outlines the methods people adhere to as to achieve successful communication. When individuals do not follow the most direct and efficient line of communication it is because of their consideration of face. When this discrepancy between face and the rules of the cooperative principle occurs, people resort to politeness to address this discrepancy. (Kasper, 1998)

Positive and negative face. Further expanding upon the concept of face, Brown and Levinson described two distinct types of face. They described a positive face and negative face. Positive face is the one closest to the face introduced above. It is our self-image, the way we see ourselves, the behavior and actions we take to affirm that image and the need for that image to
be recognized and liked by others. On the other hand negative face is our freedom to act, freedom from imposition and our desire to do things unimpeded. (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

According to politeness theory, as there are two distinct types of face, there arise two distinct types of politeness. Positive politeness serves the purpose of positive face, actions that reinforce that are finding common ground, being direct and using slang or informal language etc. Similarly addressing negative face needs results in negative politeness or deference. This type of politeness manifests itself with individuals being indirect, keeping social distance and respecting others. (Kasper, 1998) The latter in particular was described (Brown & Levinson, 1987) as explaining Japanese honorifics.

2.2 Face threatening acts

Within Brown & Levinson’s (1987) framework of politeness theory they describe certain face-threatening acts. These acts build on the notion of speech acts, where something uttered is an action made of many distinct factors. An utterance or locutionary act is saying something out loud, it is also everything that utterance contains; i.e. syntactic, semantic and verbal factors. Speech acts are then further expanded into the illocutionary act of the utterance. This is the actual intended purpose of the utterance and the action it performs. The third and last part of an utterance is the perlocutionary act. This is the actual effect of the utterance, what actually happens once it is uttered. The perlocutionary effect can be in line with the illocutionary act so it follows what was said or it can have a result that was not within the intention of the utterance. (Austin, 1975)

To illustrate this with an example; a tourist lost in a foreign city. He asks a nearby person for directions. “Excuse me, I’m lost and I can’t find my hotel.” This is the locutionary act, it is specifically describes only what is said and how. The illocutionary act is the meaning, the speaker doesn’t specifically request for help but it is obvious to any speaker of English that he is
asking the listener for directions, i.e. to point it on a map or show him the way. The perlocutionary act or effect is what happens after he asks for help. Weather the listener helps him or not, doesn’t know the hotel or even if he doesn’t know English, the specific result of the utterance is the perlocutionary act. (Austin, 1975) It is important to explain the level of complexity of the things people say because when it comes to Japanese utterances what is said often is different from what is meant. (Matsumoto, 1988)

A face-threatening act can consist of verbal as well as nonverbal acts. These acts intrinsically threaten face; “Those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face needs of the addressee and/or of the speaker”. Face threatening acts occur often in daily life and one point of polite speech is to mitigate their effect. (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

**The different types of FTAs.** According to Brown and Levinson there are two types of faces and two categories of face-threatening acts which target the respective face types. These acts are divided into negative and positive face-threatening acts. A further distinction must be made as to whose face is threatened, the speakers or the listeners. With a negative FTA there is some imposition on an individual. This can be anything from a disruption of the freedom of action, as in a request to the speaker to something which indicates that the speaker does not care for the addressee’s feelings. They outline three main types of negative FTAs;

1. Any act that tries to influence the future actions of the hearer and put external pressure on him, this can be things such as requests and warnings.
2. Any offer or promise proposed by the speaker. As this forces the listener to then take a stand and voice his opinion and puts pressure on him to make a decision concerning what was offered or promised.
3. The act of the speaker expressing in some way his evaluation of the listener or something closely related to him. Strong feelings of desire or extremely
negative opinion would harm the listener's face.

The second types of FTAs are the ones that affect the positive face:

1. Any act that carries with it a negative assessment of the listener’s positive face. Simply stated this could be a statement of disapproval or insult of some kind.

2. Direct or indirect acts that express lack of concern or thought for the listener’s positive face. This can be things like mentioning inappropriate topics and being overly emotional toward the listener.

Although in the aforementioned examples the FTA was directed at the listener, the speaker can also undergo a FTA. A negative FTA for the speaker would be one where he succumbs to the power of the hearer. This can be by expressing gratitude or accepting an offer, thereby accepting some social debt. A positive FTA for the speaker can include acts such as apologizing and being unable to control what one is saying and doing. (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

2.3 Negative Politeness

Brown & Levinson (1987) suggest that the main FTA avoidance strategy in Japanese culture is negative politeness. This would mean that speakers distance themselves and show formality and respect. This is all true of Japanese honorific language yet much evidence suggests that Japanese honorifics are applied even in non-FTA utterances. (Ide, 1992) That is to say that in the absence of a threat to face from a speech act as defined above, honorifics are still used. This would mean that while negative politeness strategy is being used in some utterances, a large part of Japanese honorific usage is outside this usage boundary. Matsumoto (1989) explains that the reason for negative face not fully explaining Japanese honorific usage is that there is “no utterance in Japanese can be neutral with respect to the social context” (p.208). A speaker of Japanese in any setting cannot help but stating his position toward the listener or the
subject at hand. Phrases and persons in Japanese grammar convey politeness at such a basic grammatic level that even if the speaker has no intent or thought of FTAs on his mind he will speak in such a way that properly reflects relative positional relationships of everybody in the conversation.

While face under politeness theory certainly is applicable for certain cultures it does not fully apply to Japanese culture. (Mao, 1994) In some East-Asian cultures the individual’s sense of self and relative position in society is very different to the rest of the world. The importance of negative and positive face is also very different. The importance of society and one’s position within that community is often far more important in these cultures. Rather than the individual being valued the needs of the group as a whole is emphasized. The Chinese notion of face miănzi represents well the difference between the Asian face and Brown and Levinsons’ face. (Mao, 1994) On the other in many western cultures a sense of individual importance is emphasized. Ide (1992) and Matsumoto (1988) stress the importance of place, and discernment (wakimae) over face needs in Japanese society and see the negative politeness theory as lacking. While negative and positive politeness strategies may well describe politeness in many cultures it does not fully explain the complex nature of polite language in Japanese culture.

Scholars such as Ide, (1992) and Matsumoto (1988) write that existing politeness theory does not adequately explain honorific language. Ide in particular argues that in many cases of honorific utterances the speaker has neither his own nor the listeners face needs in mind. She explains that these non-FTA utterances can be attributed to a Japanese social construct called wakimae or discernment. It comes from the verb wakimaeru (弁える) which can be said to mean to know right from wrong, a certain skill that can be said to be expected of every Japanese adult. (Ide, 1992)

3.1 Wakimae

In Japan there are various methods of politeness, from using formal language or acting in a specific way, i.e. bowing one’s head. One of the most important things in Japanese politeness is to Judge ones hierarchical position relative to the listener or the subject being discussed. This importance on various levels of social distance and hierarchy again makes Japan quite unique concerning linguistic etiquette. While social hierarchies exist all over the world the practice and concept of wakimae is a unique take on how an individual should act and behave in relation to society. (Ide, 1992)

In Japan the word wakimae in addition to wa illustrates very well how the Japanese think about politeness. Wa or harmony can be said to be the basic philosophy or framework on which Japanese polite interaction is largely based. Wakimae on the other hand can be said to be the actual phatic phrases, actions and behavior that society sees as correct and proper. In Japanese someone is said to observe or have wakimae when he performs in a way that is expected of him. Ide (1992) describes two main types of wakimae; micro level and macro level.

Micro level wakimae. How a person behaves in a situational context; this can be bowing or using polite language. It also includes certain Japanese stock phrases that are obligatory in specific situations such as yorosiku onegai itasimasu. This is phrase that means
look favorably upon me and has become a stock phrase that is said at the beginning of partnerships and new relationships. It is in some ways not related to the face of the speaker or listener but it is usually obligatory.

**Macro level wakimae.** The acceptance of the role and position the speaker has in society or a particular hierarchy. An individual expressing one’s social identity based on age, sex, position etc. An easy to understand example of this is the social image of the suit for Japanese business men. In Japan the suit is still very connected to the image and spirit of the white collar worker. An expression of one’s position as a businessman is wearing a suit. Another example is a person in a high ranking position using very respectful language when speaking in a public setting, not just for the sake of being respectful but also to reflect in language an image and expression worthy of his position. (Ide, 1992)

### 3.2 Kikuchi on discernment

Another modern perspective on Japanese discernment is laid out by Kikuchi. (1994) He explains that keigo should not be viewed as a tool to show respect per se but as the expression of having the intent to respect. When people know the social ramifications of not following the set rules of communication they are more likely show respect and speak politely to those whom society deems worthy. It is much less likely that they have any *heartfelt* respect for their listener or the subject of the conversation. He outlines a list of factors which determine how or if keigo will be used in any given situation or event. First and foremost he mentions the importance of social factors and interpersonal relationships. Social factors can be anything from what kind of environment a conversation is occurring in and the nature of the conversation itself and its topic. In addition to the social side of the equation, he talks about vertical relationships; he mentions that among interpersonal relationships the vertical connection is by far the most deciding factor in polite language use.
Kikuchi (1994) then goes into more depth concerning relationships and defines another dimension to them. The relationship created by position, that is where there is familiarity or a social construct which creates a connection between individuals such as one person owing money to the other. Finally he outlines the psychological factors in using polite language. Where people express various intentions of consideration, where they voice their thoughts through the language in various subtle ways. This can include the opposite side of politeness, where a person expresses their dissatisfaction or negative thought simply by using language or politeness that does not fit the situation or listener. (Kikuchi, 1994) This can for example entail using slightly plain language to a superior to imply disrespect. On the other hand in Japan with such a complex politeness structure people can subtly overuse politeness in a given situation for comedic effect or as an insult.

We can see from this information that social position is well ingrained into Japanese society and the mind of the Japanese people. Minami (1987) gives us an explanation as to why the Japanese focus so much on place and that relationship between the individual and society. He argues that during the Meiji restoration and the abolishment of the old class system the Japanese sense of self and face experienced a great blow. This rigid class system that had developed from Confucian principles had been in place for hundreds of years. As unjust as the system was toward some people, one aspect of it was that people knew exactly where they stood in society. As people knew their own position in society they knew others’ too. Social position was a public thing and was easily discernable by name or clothing etc. This made it easy to understand where one stood and how to communicate with those in a social position above and below oneself. When this system disappeared that certainty of knowing ones position in relation to others also disappeared. A social order that had been in place for hundreds of years had gone and many superior and inferior relationships got amalgamated into one single level.
This change made it harder for people to discern their place in society and relation to others. This uneasiness and uncertainty gave rise to wakimae. Wakimae and the active process of discernment of social position came to be because the rules that had governed those things before disappeared. So something that had always been a rule based process became an active process of always judging social position of others and then using the appropriate language and honorifics to affirm that social position and to keep within it.
4. Politeness as Dynamic Tool for Achieving Interactional Goals

While both the aforementioned theories do give good insight into the origin and reason for Japanese linguistic etiquette they do not give a complete explanation. More recently linguistic researchers have found that in naturally occurring data a large number of the supposed usage rules norms are frequently broken and diverged from. Cook (2011) argues that because data shows that the range of Brown and Levinsons face theory and Ide’s wakimae theory does not cover all real world usage, a different approach must be taken in defining Japanese politeness.

4.1 Real World Research

Recently new studies and theories have discussed Japanese honorifics independently of previous theories. While containing elements of both negative politeness and discernment or wakimae, studies based on naturally occurring data have found that honorifics in normal conversation tend to become a very fluid and easily changeable conversational tool. (Cook, 2006) When used in conversation the use of specific politeness forms is to facilitate some purpose and achieve certain goals in the conversation. Duranti (1992) proposes that not only do honorifics reflect some level of social circumstances of interaction but are used as a tool to create and modify circumstances during communication. We can think of it simply as a trigger to elicit different responses or to convey one’s own thinking and opinion.

Modern research states that previous theories have failed in their universal Japanese politeness because linguists have changed their general view on politeness in recent years. Recent opinion has gone from assigning politeness and meaning simple and universal words, phrases and strategies. Dunn (2011) suggests that research has shifted from theories of behaviour to a view of politeness as an ideological process. In simple terms this means that a system that explains politeness can not exist. The sheer complexity of the different usage and different situations that can elicit Japanese honorifics is far too large to assign a behavioural
Okamoto (1998) and Dunn (2005) found that people in different situations used honorifics and general polite language not in a systematic way that was always expected of them but changed it depending on factors such as mood and personality of the listener. Not only that, but even changing politeness level in the same conversation with the same people. What this means is people used polite language in such a way as to elicit the most positive response, or communicate. Okamoto (1998) in particular states in her study on Japanese sales talk in department stores that honorifics are “the speaker’s strategy vis-à-vis their evaluation of multiple social aspects of the context” (p.154).

We can see with this theory and the data provided that similarity is seen with Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle. Participants in a discussion will seek to maximize the efficiency of the communication of information. In this case it can be the effective communication of a request or a persuasion. This is what Okamoto (2011) mentions as a good example language ideologies. They are defined by Silverstein (1979) as “any sets of belief about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (p.193). This with the theory of discernment indicates that the actual usage of politeness is connected and even based on the simple ideology of it that exists in society (Okamoto, 2011).

According to this we must look carefully at how the society as a whole views communication and interaction between individuals. The values that society expects people to possess would seem to provide the best guideline of what politeness is. In the case of Japan politeness certainly has a strong connections to the values society expects. If one expects to understand and describe Japanese politeness, a thorough understanding of Japanese culture and its history is paramount.
5. Confucianism and Japanese ideals

To understand why Japanese and East-Asian linguistic etiquette is so different than its western counterparts one must examine the history and the historical cultural influences. In Japan there exists a social order called vertical society. In a vertical society people are categorized in hierarchical lines of gradation. Most societies in the world have some sort of hierarchy. The sociologist Max Weber (Bendix, 1978) describes social distinction that is determined by three main factors; class, status and power. He came to this conclusion while observing social structure in Germany so it can be said to be descriptive of western society. While East-Asia as a whole follows the same basic principles some important cultural differences can be seen.

5.1 Confucianism

Japan was for a long time greatly influenced by Chinese ideals, especially Confucianism. Confucianism is an ethical and philosophical system created by the Chinese scholar Confucius in the 5th century BCE. With China’s growing expansion into the Korean peninsula, Chinese culture and influence started to flow into Japan. Confucianism as a whole never developed into a state ideology during that time as it did in China but it never the less had a tremendous influence on Japanese culture. (Yao, 2000) The importance of filial piety and harmonious relationships in Confucianism can be seen even in Japanese society today. Japanese children are taught from an early age the importance of the community or group and the duty and debt an individual has toward that group. An individual must also above all uphold moral values and behave in a way that society sees as appropriate. These underlying principles and values are the basis of Japanese societal structure today.

Another noticeable effect on Japanese politeness principles by Confucianism was during the Edo period when Neo-Confucianism became the philosophy of the Japanese state and
ruling classes. Neo-Confucianism differs from traditional Confucianism in that it ignores the more religious and spiritual elements and attempts to serve only as an ethical philosophy. Some scholars argue that during that time the four class system in Japanese society; samurai, peasants, merchants and artisans was not only promoted and defended by the ruling class with the help of Confucianism values but had also evolved through those teachings. (Kádár & Mills, 2011)

The second large scale social effect on Japanese polite language was during the Meiji period. During the late 19th century with the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate very many drastic changes occurred in Japan. Japan experienced large scale technical and social modernization during this period and saw increasing influence from the west.

One of the better known Japanese cultural principles is the concept of *wa*. Wa or harmony is a Confucian philosophical term that is an important standard in Japanese society. As with many Confucian values, wa is not in any way an official rule that is taught or enforced yet its influence is easy to see. Wa is the importance of maintaining harmony, avoiding conflict and the effort of member in a group not to stick out excessively. (Yao, 2000) While esoteric philosophical concepts can be complex to put into perspective it does give a good reference into why the Japanese are as polite as they are and why they take such great care to appease others and fit into the group.

To describe polite language usage in Japan one must explain a few key concepts of the underlying social structure. A number of social phenomena exist in Japan that dictates how interaction between people should be. Two very important of these phenomena are unique to Japan are *tatamæ, honne* and *uchi, soto*. These social protocols offer a good view into interaction in Japanese culture.

5.2 Tatamæ and honne.

The notion of tatamæ and honne is a very important theme in Japanese social
interaction. Honne represents what an individual really feels and desires. It is his true and unfiltered opinion that in Japanese culture should be kept private. Tatemae on the other hand is the correct opinions and behavior that one should display in front of other people. It is how one adapts one’s opinions, thoughts and actions to fit popular convention. The relationship between the two and the desire to respect this balance is very strong in Japan. It can be construed that this is a process of protecting the face of oneself and others. (Doi, 2001)

According to Doi these skills of balancing the tatemae and honne are very important in daily Japanese life. The ability to correctly balance one’s self-awareness with our social projection of that self is paramount to being a successful member in Japanese society. Communication in Japanese society will almost always contain some form of tatemae and honne. Maintaining a sense of politeness and harmony is important in keeping good social relationships and is also about avoiding FTAs. One example of tatemae is when a family has a visitor at their house, they will be dining soon and wish for the guest to leave. Instead of asking the guest to leave they ask him if he would like have dinner with them, the guest politely declines and informs the family that he must get going (Ikeno & Davies, 2002). This is a good example of two parties who have proper knowledge of Japanese politeness strategies and therefore manage to avoid a FTA. The guest knows that the family might not want him to stay at their table and the family also knows that maybe the guest would like to stay for dinner but both followed the protocol of tatemae and behaved in a way that was expected of them.

These concepts of what the individual wants and what society wants ties in with other Confucian concepts of avoiding conflict. If everyone follows their line and adheres to their place in society conflict and disagreement is minimized. In Japanese etiquette practice you are not supposed to express your true opinion most of the time, you are to state what the group or others want you to say. (Wetzel, 2004) This is one practice of Japanese politeness that
individuals from other countries, especially western, find not only hard to grasp and use but also often dislike. Westerners are often taught that it is correct to state one’s opinion, being upfront with others is respectful. While it is not polite to be upfront about everything, treating someone in a way that does not reflect one’s feelings would be considered a type of dishonesty, while in Japan it is very standard. (Mao, 1994) These differences display not only contrasts in how to express politeness but also in a basic sense what politeness is to the respective cultures. One can see here that a universal theory is hardly feasible when such immense differences exist on the basic level.

5.3 Uchi and soto

The existence of in-groups and out-groups is not unique to Japan. Although it appears throughout the world its degree of importance and effect on social situation could be said to be unique to Japan. Uchi is described as the group or circle where a person describes himself as part of the “we”. These groups vary greatly and can be anything as small as a family but as large as a nation. These groups share a certain sense of amae or emotional dependency. In contrast there exists the soto or the outside of our group. This can be the neighboring family, the rival firm or even someone of different ethnicity. The aforementioned tatemae and honne are closely connected to this concept. One’s uchi overlaps greatly with one’s honne in that a person is honest to people in his in-group and will often not hesitate to speak his mind. On the other hand a person should use careful language when talking to soto members and should always be mindful of when to use tatemae. (Doi, 2001)

All these social processes explain how history and tradition have influenced how the Japanese treat each other. A long history of hierarchical society and then the sudden abolishment of that hierarchy gave rise to these systematic politeness and affirmation cues that are a part of wakimae. These special social circumstances have given a rise to a system of linguistic etiquette
that western politeness theory has been unable to fully explain. How politeness is viewed and used is simply too radically different for a one universal politeness system to explain or even a simple comparison between Japanese and Western politeness. While many western countries share a history of rigid social hierarchy and the subsequent undoing of those systems. The basic difference in how people view the individual, society and the relationship that exits between them is undeniable.

These unique historical and socioeconomic factors have given rise to a unique politeness system. This politeness system is very hard to classify and study in a scientific way because, as with many things in communication, a large portion of what goes on is passive. Japanese people do not think about politeness or honorifics as an active process, it can often be said to be so connected to the language that it is a part of the standard grammar. This means that linguists and other people who would like to give examine keigo in any serious way must first understand the basic difference between it and politeness in other cultures.
6. Keigo

Describing keigo as a single linguistic device for the purpose of politeness does not adequately explain what it encompasses. Keigo is a Japanese word that is often translated into honorifics or polite language; it refers to honorific language as a whole and a subcategory within that group that honors the listener or the subject matter. It is made up of the of two symbols 敬 and 語. The first symbol is used in the verb to honor and in other words meaning respect or reverence. The second symbol is a very general term for language and words. The lack of a clear definition of keigo could stem from the fact that experts have very different ideas to exactly how to classify keigo and what actions and words fall under the keigo umbrella. (Wetzel, 2004)

It is impossible to argue the special position of keigo within the different linguistic etiquettes in the world without fully explaining what keigo is how it is used and what exactly it is made up of. For the majority of people who live in the western part of the world explaining keigo simply as politeness is an oversimplification to say the least. Keigo is politeness but to the Japanese, politeness is a very complex phenomenon and one of the key tools to be successful in Japanese society.

6.1 Understanding Keigo

Although keigo is strongly associated with a sense of traditional Japanese values such as respect and harmony the word itself and the keigo system are not so old. The first proper study of polite Japanese language by Japanese scholars began in the Meiji period. During that period western intellectual and academic tradition flowed into Japan and caused a surge in Japanese academics. In addition to that the need for universal education in Japan drove scholars to categorize and properly study Japanese language. While western linguistic study worked well for the general study of the Japanese language at the time, there was nothing that helped explain
or classify keigo. Japanese scholars would then start to make new words and create new systems of classification and explanation that became the origins of the keigo paradigm. The amount of different works written on keigo and the lack of rigor created a very chaotic and diverse classification. This coupled with some scholars painting a very romantic picture of keigo and using it in a way to create a traditional and positive image of Japan made early writing on keigo convoluted. (Wetzel, 2004)

6.2Keigo Classification.

Modern Japanese polite language is often divided into three main categories; there is general polite language, humble language, and respectful language. The other two minor categories which are often included are courteous language and beautification language. The major difference between these groups is merely who or what the subject is. This is important to note because one would respect one’s superior but humble oneself. The other verb form that is not included is often called the plain form. The plain form is simply the basic dictionary form of the verb which is often used in writing and texts but not in conversation except with one’s friends and family because it carries no nuance of politeness or respect.

**Polite Language.** This is the simplest and most used of all the keigo groups. Beautification language is very general and is usually categorized with this group. Polite language in Japanese is the usage of the *desu* copula form and the *masu* verb ending. It is also the beautification of things or objects that either are connected to the speaker or historically are respected at some level. This form can be used to refer either to oneself or the listener so it does not inherently convey ranking except its use in conversation to convey general politeness. Therefore the listener will often be a person that the speaker does not know or simply above the speaker in some system or hierarchy such as a school or a business, though not in such a high position that would warrant the use of respectful language.
**Humble Language.** When talking to someone who in society or in a particular group is in a position much higher than oneself one must use humble language. Humble language is used in conversation with superiors but used only when referencing oneself or something that is connected to oneself. In addition to a list of verbs and nouns to use humble language is a certain way to speak and behave which emphasizes ones inferiority in the given situation. For example instead of using the verb to go *iku*, one uses the more humble *ukagau*. With nouns it is very similar, instead of using *tousha* to describe one’s own company one would say *heisha* which carries a very negative connotation to imply that it is in some way beneath the listener.

**Respectful Language.** When referencing someone who is in a relatively higher position to oneself, whether he is the listener or conversation subject, a speaker is supposed to use respectful language. Similar to humble language one can change nouns by putting the polite *o* or *go* in front. One can also change verbs but there are also a few exclusive verbs that are only used in a respectful language situation. The word eat, *taberu* becomes the very respectful *meshiagaru*.

** Beautification and Courteous Language.** Some Japanese scholars distinguish these two groups as a standalone. Beautification is where the polite *o* or *go* is placed in front of words to soften ones speaking style. It can be used in respectful language when talking about a superior’s house, family or something connected to them. In other cases it can simply be used as a polite speaking style when talking about a certain set of words with some inherit cultural importance or to soften uncouth sounding words; *kane*, gold and *ryoushin*, someone else’s’ parents become *Okane* and *GOryoushin* respectively. Courteous language uses the same politeness as respectful language but occurs only during special circumstances where the speaker has no direct hierarchical connection with the listener, he is merely being courteous and considerate in his language use.
What we see through these categories and usage examples is that honorific language is multisided and somewhat complex. It is not simply a question of whether the speaker is above or below the listener in social position. To accurately judge whether one's conversational partner has such a distance that the conversation calls for respectful language is very important. If he is only slightly above you, simple polite language will suffice. Using respectful or humble language to someone who is not in a position that would call for it can turn out to have a negative effect. It indicates a certain lack of knowledge that Japanese adults are supposed to have proper knowledge of, sometimes it can even go so far as to be insulting if excessive politeness levels are used. (Wetzel, 2004) So rather than focusing solely on the face needs of the listener when using keigo, the speaker is making sure to use language that reflects the position of the listener. Kasper (1998) calls this the strong place before face view of Japanese honorifics held mainly by Matsumoto.

Matsumoto argues that Japanese honorifics serve as *relationship-acknowledging devices* in which the speaker is simply affirming or acknowledging the status difference that exists, not in any way connected to threat to face. She uses as an example the polite and plain version of the Japanese *copula*, which is *desu* and *da* respectively. A copula is a linguistic device which connects the subject of the sentence to its other parts. In Japanese you have various levels of politeness of the copula. Matsumoto argues that in some cases using the desu, which is more polite instead da in daily conversation, is necessary. Not because the speaker is thinking about the listeners face but because he recognizes a difference in position or relationship. That can be vertical as a subordinate-manager relationship or as a horizontal closeness one, i.e. individuals who do not know each other well. By using the desu he is merely acknowledging the distance that exists between them. (Matsumoto, 1988)
7. Conclusion

By looking at everything presented, the research suggests that neither Brown & Levinsons politeness theory nor Ide and Matsumoto’s discernment or wakimae argument explains Japanese honorifics completely. The broad scope and the myriad of potential usage situations of keigo makes it important to understand, how it functions and how different it is from western politeness makes it hard to create one category for Japanese politeness and politeness in other countries. So instead of a single system which can be explained by a single theory we should look at Japanese politeness and honorifics as an ever changing phenomenon.

Recent studies that provide actual conversational data (Cook, 2011; Geyer, 2008; Okamoto, 1998), show that negative politeness strategies and place affirming discernment are not used exclusively in Japanese polite speech. They are both used with a combination of other motives and strategies. While this gives us a good systematic explanation of many parts of Japanese honorifics, many things are left unexplained. No single theory has yet succeeded in systematically describing the many complex parts of Japanese linguistic etiquette. Even before an agreement can be reached by linguists on what Japanese politeness truly is, consensus must be achieved on a basic theory of linguistic etiquette. While much research and data has been presented. (Kasper, 1998) The lack of consistency in the interpretation of results makes it hard for scholars to decide on the accuracy of the theories. But it is clear that many believe that present theories can be seen to lack research support and little if any correlations with real world results (Dunn, 2011; Duranti, 1992; Okamoto, 2011). By looking at existing research and studies it is easy to see that keigo and Japanese honorifics is at the present not full explained or understood. But the amount of new research is increasing and linguists are starting to gather behind a framework of politeness as a conversational tool that people use to achieve goals.
Bibliography


