Universal politeness theory: application to the use of Japanese honorifics☆

Atsushi Fukada[a,*], Noriko Asato[b]

[a]*Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, 640 Oval Drive,*
Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2017, USA
[b]*Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, University of Nebraska-Lincoln,*
P.O. Box 880315, Lincoln, NE 68588-0315, USA

Abstract

One major objection to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory [Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction, Cambridge University Press, 1978, pp. 56–311; Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987] raised by Matsumoto [J. Pragmatics 12 (1988) 403; Multilingua 8 (1989) 207; Japanese/Korean Linguistics, vol. 2, Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford, pp. 55–67] and Ide [Multilingua 8 (1989) 223] is based on data involving Japanese honorifics. The issue is why honorifics, the use of which Brown and Levinson classifies as a negative politeness strategy ('Give deference'), should occur in non-FTA utterances. Having shown that Brown and Levinson's theory does not explain Japanese honorifics satisfactorily, Ide goes so far as to propose an account based on the concept of discernment. The purpose of this article is two-fold: (1) to show that by taking into consideration a salient feature of the Japanese society, namely, its vertical and hierarchical structure, it is possible to propose an account that is consistent with Brown and Levinson's theory; and (2) to argue against the discernment theory which seems to have gained some recognition. A series of arguments will be advanced to show that an account based on the politeness theory is superior to the discernment account.
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1. Introduction

Ever since Brown and Levinson's universal politeness theory (1978, 1987) was proposed, a number of theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted to challenge its universality (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Falbo and Peplau, 1980; Lustig and King, 1980; Cody et al., 1981; Scollon and Scollon, 1983; Baxter, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1985; Blum-Kulka and House, 1989; Holtgraves and Yang, 1990,1992; for more references see Brown and Levinson, 1987). Among these, there are several studies which argue that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is constructed on the basis of European Anglo-Saxon culture and does not leave any room for variability among individual cultures (Wierzbicka, 1985; Gu, 1990). The Japanese linguists Matsumoto (1988, 1989, 1993) and Ide (1989) are also advocates of this line of argument, contending that Brown and Levinson's theory cannot adequately explain Japanese use of honorifics. Matsumoto emphasized the uniqueness of the Japanese polite language system, while Ide proposed another kind of politeness that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory supposedly had overlooked, namely discernment politeness. We find it alarming that the notion of discernment politeness has gained acceptance among scholars without much critical examination (cf. Kasper, 1990, and more recently, Moreno, 2002; Spencer-Oatey, 2002; Koutlaki, 2002). The purpose of this paper, then, is to demonstrate that the use of honorifics is indeed in line with the politeness theory once we take into consideration a vertical aspect of Japanese society. If this conclusion is correct, it would follow that there is no need to set up a separate kind of politeness, such as discernment.

The paper is composed of four sections. First, we summarize a portion of Brown and Levinson's universal politeness theory relevant to Ide's and Matsumoto's arguments; we then go on first to examine Matsumoto's and then Ide's arguments. Finally, we will present our own analysis of honorifics.

2. Brown and Levinson's universal politeness theory

Brown and Levinson (1987: 59–60) argue that every member of a society has *face*, which is defined as one's public self-image, and when the speaker decides to commit an act which potentially causes the hearer (or the speaker) to lose face, the speaker will tend to use a politeness strategy in order to minimize the risk. According to Brown and Levinson (ibid.: 61), there are two types of face. One is *negative face*, which is related to the claim to one's territory, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction, such as freedom of action and freedom from imposition. The other is *positive face*, which is related to the desire to be appreciated or approved of by other members of a society. Brown and Levinson claim that the notion of face and one's social interaction oriented to it are universal.

In their universal politeness theory, Brown and Levinson suggest five possible strategies to alleviate a face-threatening act, henceforth called FTA: (1) without redressive action, baldly; (2) by positive politeness; (3) by negative politeness; (4) by going off record; and (5) by not doing the FTA. The riskier the speaker perceives the FTA to be, the higher the number of the strategy he/she will want to choose (ibid.: 60). Each of the above strategies

consists of several subordinate strategies; in particular, the use of honorifics is categorized as a negative politeness strategy.

The theory also offers a formula that is claimed to be used in computing the seriousness of an FTA. According to Brown and Levinson (ibid.: 74–76), the speaker evaluates the weightiness or seriousness of an FTA (x) on the basis of the following three factors; the social *distance* between the speaker (S), and the hearer (H), a measure of the *power* that the hearer has over the speaker, and the absolute *ranking of impositions* in the particular culture.

$$\text{Weightiness}\,(x) = \text{Distance}\,(\text{S}, \text{H}) + \text{Power}\,(\text{H}, \text{S}) + \text{Rank of imposition}\,(x)$$

Furthermore, Brown and Levinson argue that the speaker's evaluation of an FTA is the sum of the three factors, which in turn, contributes to his/her determination of the level of politeness.

3. Matsumoto's arguments

Matsumoto (1988) argues that although Brown and Levinson's politeness theory claims universality, its ability to explain the Japanese honorific phenomenon is questionable. Matsumoto (ibid.: 411) contends that the Japanese language is sensitive to social context, and honorifics are one of the "relation-acknowledging devices" that indicate the inter-locutors' status differences, but (contrary to Brown and Levinson's claim) they are not used as a redress for an FTA. She explains her point using this example.

(1)   Kyoo wa   doyoobi da.
        today TOPIC Saturday COPULA-PLAIN
        'Today is Saturday'

(2)   Kyoo wa   doyoobi desu.
        today TOPIC Saturday COPULA-POLITE
        'Today is Saturday'

<div align="right">(Matsumoto, 1988: 415)</div>

Sentences (1) and (2) have the exact same propositional content, namely stating the fact that "Today is Saturday." However, Matsumoto (ibid.: 415) claims that, while sentence (1) cannot be used with someone who is distant or higher in position, sentence (2) is acceptable because an addressee honorific form *desu* is used in its copula, which conveys the speaker's perception of the relative social position to the hearer. Since this example does not appear to involve any FTA, the argument goes, Brown and Levinson's theory would be hard pressed to account for it. Matsumoto's explanation is that the purpose of the use of honorifics like this one is to show the status difference between the interlocutors, not to serve the hearer's negative face wants (ibid.: 414).

Matsumoto also compared the following requests in English and Japanese, and claimed that these examples support her argument that the Japanese polite language system places emphasis on showing human relationships rather than minimizing imposition.

(3)   Mot-imasu   ka.
         hold-POLITE QUESTION
         'Will you hold this?'

(4)   Mot-e-masu   ka.
         hold-POTENTIAL-POLITE QUESTION
         'Can you hold this?'

<div align="right">(Matsumoto, 1988: 420–421)</div>

According to Matsumoto (ibid.: 421), the Japanese sentences do not carry the sense of politeness which exists in the English counterparts derived from its indirectness. Furthermore, the Japanese versions, which are modeled after the English versions, are not even interpreted as requests in ordinary circumstances.

We would like to point out, however, that Matsumoto's examples only show the lack of convertibility of these English request expressions into Japanese, and do not therefore count as evidence for Matsumoto's argument that reducing the imposition of the utterance by indirectness will not be recognized as politeness in Japanese. Furthermore, these examples do not contain elements of Japanese indirectness, and therefore we cannot see the effect of indirectness contributing to the politeness of the utterances. The following pair of examples demonstrate an effect of an indirect element.

(5)   Motte-kudasai-masu   ka.
         hold-give-IMPERATIVE-POLITE QUESTION
         'Will you hold this for me?'

(6)   Motte-kudasai-mas-en   ka.
         hold-give-IMPERATIVE-POLITE-NEG QUESTION
         'Won't you hold this for me?'

Generally, a sentence such as (6), containing an indirectness marker (in this case, a negative morpheme) will be perceived as having a higher degree of face-saving ability or politeness. In other words, indirectness can and does contribute to the politeness of an utterance in Japanese.

4. Ide's arguments

Ide (1989) claims that there are two types of linguistic politeness, the volitional type of politeness and the discernment type of politeness. According to her, the volitional type is governed by one's intention and realized by verbal strategies, and the discernment type is operated by one's discernment (or the socially prescribed norm) and is expressed by linguistic forms. Ide (ibid.: 225–226) argues that Brown and Levinson's model of politeness disregards the discernment type of politeness which, she claims, plays an important role in the Japanese linguistic politeness system.

Ide (ibid.: 232) explains the differences between these two politeness systems as follows. Volitional politeness is expressed through verbal strategies and reflects the speaker's

intention as to how polite he/she wants to be in the situation. The purpose of the use of volitional politeness is to save face. Brown and Levinson's theory tries to interpret various politeness phenomena only from this perspective of politeness.

On the other hand, the use of linguistic forms such as honorifics is operated by one's discernment. Linguistic forms systematically encode the speakers' perception of a communication situation, such as the status difference between the speaker and the referent, or the speaker's role in the situation. An appropriate linguistic form is selected on the basis of social convention and is ''independent of the speaker's rational intention'' (Ide, 1989: 242).

According to Ide, unlike verbal strategies, the purpose of the use of linguistic forms is not to save face. This is obvious, she states (ibid.: 229, referring to Matsumoto's examples (1) and (2)), since honorifics are used even in non-FTA situations. Ide (ibid.: 239) argues that Brown and Levinson categorized honorifics into one of the negative politeness strategies, 'give deference,' and that by doing so they mixed up linguistic forms and verbal strategies, which differ in both their motives and their means.

Ide gave two reasons why linguistic forms and verbal strategies should be treated separately. First, linguistic forms are socio-pragmatically obligatory. Ide used the following example to explain her argument.

(7)   Sensee-wa   kore-o   yon-da.
        professor-TOP this-ACC read-PAST
        'The professor read this.'

(8)   Sensee-wa   kore-o   **o**yomi-**ni-nat**-ta.
        professor-TOP this-ACC REF.HONO-read-PAST
        'The professor read this.'

(Ide, 1989: 227)

Ide (ibid: 227) argues that in Japanese society, sentence (8) is appropriate, but (7) is not. The reason, according to Ide, is that the choice between the use of honorific forms or non-honorific forms is obligatory, when saying anything in Japanese, and the social rules of Japanese society require one to use honorifics when one mentions a higher status person (such as a professor); and this use of an honorific verb form is the socio-pragmatic equivalent of grammatical concord, and it is determined by social rules.

The relevant linguistic facts are not as straightforward as Ide makes them out to be, however. The fact that sentences like (7) are not necessarily inappropriate can be used to argue against the discernment view. If, for example, the conversation is between students in the absence of the professor or a person who is closely related to the professor, sentence (7) would be an appropriate option.[1] A natural explanation for this would be to say that there is no chance of threatening anybody's face in this situation. To save the discernment account, one could add another social rule along the lines of ''One need not use honorifics if the

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[1] Even in this situation, one could use the honorific version. We believe that the speaker's motivation in this case would be to protect his/her own face (i.e. maintain one's ''class'').

referent who holds higher status is absent from the situation,'' but this would have to be an additional stipulation.

Ide's second reason why linguistic forms and verbal strategies should not be mixed is that strategies are oriented *only* to the hearer, whereas linguistic forms are used not only for the hearer, but also for the referent and the speaker (Ide, 1989: 229). Although Ide indicated these differences between the use of strategies and linguistic forms, she did not explain what these superficial differences have to do with her claim that the two types of politeness should not be mixed together. Perhaps, what Ide wanted to say was that unlike verbal strategies which are directed towards the hearers' face-wants, linguistic forms are not used for face-saving purposes, because they can be used for a referent who could be absent in the situation, or for the speaker himself/herself. If our interpretation of her argument above is correct, then the following two issues need to be addressed.

First, Ide (ibid.: 229) states that verbal strategies are oriented *only* toward the addressee, whereas Brown and Levinson (1987: 60) claimed that verbal strategies can be used for saving both the speaker's and the hearer's face.

Second, regarding Ide's argument of linguistic forms being oriented to the referent or the speaker, we claim that those linguistic forms, such as referent honorifics referring to the referent, or humble forms referring to the speaker, are actually directed ultimately to the hearer. When humble forms are used, the hearer has to be one's superior or a distant person, and when referent honorifics are used, the object or the person referred to by the referent honorific forms has to be related to the hearer. In other words, those linguistics forms are ultimately directed to the hearer, and used for the purpose of face-saving.

We suspect that both Ide and Matsumoto were misled by the superficial correspondences between linguistic forms and social rules. The rigid Japanese social rules require precise control on polite language use, depending on a person's social status, occupation, familiarity, sex, formality of the situation, etc. The well-developed system of Japanese honorifics enables the Japanese to express subtle differences in the degree of deference, making it appear that these social rules dictate the use of honorifics.

5. Alternative analysis of Japanese honorifics use

We will now present our own analysis of Japanese honorifics. This analysis is based on Brown and Levinson's theory, and it will be argued that it accounts for the Japanese honorific phenomenon better than does the theory based on discernment.

Since Japanologists generally agree that Japan is a 'vertical' society[2] where relative status difference, even very small, counts as significant, it would be reasonable to hypothesize the following culture-specific valuation procedure for the two variables, power and distance.

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[2] See Reischauer (1995: 126).

In Japanese society, when situations involve an addressee of higher status (or a referent of higher status who is present in the situation), power and/or distance are assigned markedly high values.[3]

This hypothesis accounts for use of honorifics in non-FTA situations as follows: When a person of higher status is involved, distance and power are given markedly high values, which in turn, elevates the value of $W(x)$, the weightiness of the FTA. Thus, any act, whether intrinsically face-threatening or not (meaning, regardless of the value of imposition), will be counted as face-threatening in Brown and Levinson's model. This would explain the appropriateness of sentence (2) over (1) with a person of higher status in Matsumoto's examples. Situations like (2), involving a high social status person, increase the values of power and distance. Hence, even though the degree of imposition is not high in this situation, the assessment of $W(x)$ will become high. This high $W(x)$ value calls for some sort of mitigation, and that accounts for the occurrence of honorifics, which we claim to be a negative politeness strategy. Moreover, the proposed analysis accounts for the usage of sentence (7) cited by Ide in the situation of the professor's absence. When the speaker talks about his/her professor to his/her friend in the absence of the professor, he/she sees no risk of damaging anyone's face; power, distance and imposition involved in the situation are low. Since the proposed analysis accounts for this phenomenon in a principled way without any additional rules, it is to be preferred over the discernment account.

We will now present five arguments against the account based on discernment in favor of ours.

Argument one. Recall that Ide and Matsumoto claimed that face preservation in the sense of Brown and Levinson does not figure in the use of honorifics. However, if people do not use honorifics when they are expected to do so, they could sound presumptuous and rude, and in effect, threaten the hearer's face.[4] They could also end up embarrassing themselves; i.e., lose their own face (e.g., when they are speaking in front of an audience and make errors on honorifics). Therefore, proper use of honorifics does appear to have much to do with face preservation contrary to Ide and Matsumoto.

Argument two. Ide's claim (1989: 227) that use of honorifics is socio-pragmatically obligatory can be shown to be false with the following examples, where the use of honorific forms, when the acts involved are generally considered dishonorable, sounds bizarre.

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[3] One anonymous journal reviewer commented that because this valuation procedure is automatic (i.e. independent of the speaker's volition), it may just be what Ide means by discernment. We disagree with this interpretation. The mere fact that it is automatic does not make it discernment. Many mental processes involved in not just ''polite'' acts but linguistic acts in general occur without the speaker's conscious thoughts. Another thing to bear in mind is that Ide states unmistakably clearly that discernment politeness is separate from Brown and Levinson's politeness. Since our procedure is proposed as part of Brown and Levinson's universal politeness theory, it cannot be identical to Ide's discernment. On another level, however, if the reviewer thought that the proposed valuation procedure accounts for the same range of facts discernment was proposed to account for (hence the identification), then, we would say yes, that is our intention. The main thrust of the article is that the range of honorific facts can be accommodated in a universal framework and therefore, are not separate (uniquely Japanese, etc.) phenomena.

[4] It is possible to, and native speakers routinely do, manipulate levels of honorifics to generate conversational implicatures of various kinds. See Fukada (1987) for details.

(9)   Senseega   dookyuusei o   koroshi-ta.
         teacher NOM classmate ACC kill-PAST
         'My teacher killed my classmate.'

(10)   ?Senseega dookyuusei o o-koroshi-ninat-ta.
                                   kill-HONO-PAST

(11)   Senseega   dookyuusei o   gookanshi-ta.
         teacher NOM classmate ACC rape-PAST
         'My teacher raped my classmate.'

(12)   ?Senseega dookyuusei o gookannasat-ta.
                                  rape-HONO-PAST

(13)   Sensee   ga ginkoogootoo o hatarai-ta.
         teacher NOM bank robbery ACC commit-PAST
         'My teacher committed a bank robbery.'

(14)   ?Sensee ga ginkoogootoo o o-hataraki-ninat-ta.
                                     commit-HONO-PAST

Therefore, the honorific phenomenon is not sufficiently automatic to be called "the socio-pragmatic equivalent of grammatical concord."

Argument three. Since the discernment analysis does not involve a social rule concerning the use of honorifics by a socially superior person to his/her subordinate, it makes no predictions for such situations. A teacher generally uses plain verb forms with a student in Japanese, but when he/she has a favor to ask, for example, honorifics can or do occur, as in the following conversation (naturally recorded by one of the authors). In this situation,[5] a lecturer asks a student intern to grade the homework, which is known to take five to six hours and is clearly outside the scope of the intern's work.

Tomoko-chan,   hontooni <u>mooshiwake nain desu</u> kedo, konkai wa
[name, f.] diminutive really   no excuse- HONO   but this time TOP

shukudai no marutsuke   mo <u>shite morae masen   ka.</u>
homework   GEN grading   also do   receive-POLITE-NEG QUESTION
'Tomoko,   I'm really sorry, but would you also grade homework for this lesson?'

(After a couple of exchanges between them)

Jaa, isogasete   sumimasen kedo <u>yoroshiku onegai shimasu.</u>
Well, having you hurry I am sorry, but   please beg-POLITE
'Well, I'm sorry to rush you, but thank you very much for taking care of this.'

Although she uses plain forms to the intern on most occasions, the lecturer here, utilizing the underlined honorific expressions, formally expresses her hesitation to ask for such a big

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[5] Both the lecturer and the intern are female; the former is in her late thirties, the latter in her early twenties.

favor, as well as her gratitude to the intern. An account based on the formula above has no problem explaining this use of honorifics. In this case, the rank of imposition would be given a sufficiently high value to trigger the use of honorifics.

Argument four. The following excerpts form Imamura's film *The Ballad of Narayama*[6] illustrate another case of a socially superior speaker using honorific expressions with a person of lower status. But this time, it is the formality of the situation, creating a temporary distance between the two speakers, that triggers the honorifics. In the film, the protagonist, Tatsuhei, is preparing to follow a traditional village rule to abandon his aged mother on the mountain, Narayama, to die. In the scene of the ritual wake before their departure for Narayama, the village elders who were invited to the ritual recited the rules and manners to be followed by both the son and mother. The following lines were uttered by the village chief to Tatsuhei before and after the ritual.

Oyamamairi wa   tsuroo gozansu ga, gokuroosan de gozansu.
Mountain Pilgrimage-TOP hard-HONO   but,   good work-HONO
'It's a hard task to go to   Narayama.'   'Good luck.'

(After the ritual wake, the village chief secretly gave Tatsuhei a tip to ease the task.)

Oi, iyanara   Oyama   made ikandemo   Umanose kara
Look, if you don't like the Mountain till without going Umanose from
keettekite mo ii-da   zo.
come back also good-PLAIN PARTICLE
'Look, if you don't want to go to the top of the mountain, you could come back from Umanose valley.'

During the ritual, the chief used the super-honorific expression *gozansu*, an indigenous version of *gozaimasu*. However, soon afterwards, speaking privately with Tatsuhei without formality, the chief switched to the plain form ii-da (underlined).

This example occurred in a ritual practice usually creating a very high degree of formality. However, we can also observe the switch from honorific to plain or vice versa in much more everyday situations. When one of the authors was working at a Japanese university, he often witnessed faculty members making small talk using plain forms. But in a faculty meeting, however, the same people addressed and referred to each other by their titles (i.e., ''Professor so-and-so'') and used honorifics when referring to each other's actions. The proposed analysis can account for this phenomenon by giving a high value to the distance variable in the formula. The discernment analysis, again, would have to stipulate another social rule to account for this ''irregularity.''[7]

Argument five. The proposed analysis naturally explains why the quality of being reserved and not speaking too much in front of one's seniors and superiors is considered to

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[6] *Narayama Bushi-ko* (The Ballad of *Narayama*) (1984) directed by Shohei Imamura.
[7] Ide (1982: 371) dealt with formality as ''an overriding rule'' that any conversation participants would be required to use polite language regardless the power, distance and other factors of participants.

be a good quality for young people and women to have in Japan. Although this reserved posture appears to be a representative instance of *wakimae* (recognizing and acknowledging one's place in a group), Ide's rules of *wakimae* do not predict the resulting behavior. Ide (1989: 230) mentions *Be polite to a person of a higher social position*, but being polite and not speaking are not exactly the same thing. Ide's rule incorrectly predicts that a junior employee can speak as much as seniors and superiors in a meeting as long as he uses proper honorific forms. According to the proposed account, when a junior person faces his/her boss, power and distance are set to markedly high values, making the total face-threat high regardless of the intrinsic face-threat of whatever act. In this context, anything one says is going to count as an FTA; in other words, the very act of taking a conversational turn itself will be considered an FTA. If we identify not speaking too much with Brown and Levinson's fifth strategy 'Don't do the FTA,' we have an explanation for why juniors tend to speak less and why the quality of being reserved is valued.

Other observations that could be used against the applicability of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to the Japanese situations, may be derived from large-scale survey studies conducted by Japanese researchers (National Language Research Institute, 1957, 1983, 1990, 1992; Ogino, 1980, 1983; Hori, 1986; Ide et al., 1986a,b). These studies have found that sex, age, education, and regional origin of the speaker are related to the use of honorifics. These phenomena can also be explained by the fact that the politeness strategies defined by Brown and Levinson's theory would be used not only for the hearer's face, but also for the speaker's. Women, the well-educated, the aged, and urbanites like to speak a refined, elegant language and use elaborate honorifics to serve their own face wants, such as being perceived as having had a good upbringing, and being intelligent, decent or sophisticated persons.

We hope we have made it clear that use of honorifics is closely tied to face preservation and that an account based on the notion of face is much more promising than one based on the notion of discernment. We believe that these arguments, taken together, seriously undermine the notion of discernment/normative politeness as well as the notions of social deixis and social indexing.[8]

6. Conclusion

This article has examined two prominent examples of politeness research that question the universality of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. These studies pointed out the use of honorifics as a phenomenon that could not be explained by politeness theory. Interestingly, the field of politeness seems to have recognized this line of research (known as 'discernment politeness') as valid, judging from Kasper's (1990) survey article. In this paper, we hope to have made a strong case for not recognizing discernment politeness as a separate phenomenon, and to have presented sufficient evidence to treat the examples presented in support of that theory as cases of negative politeness, to be explained within the politeness framework.

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[8] For arguments against the notion of social deixis, see Fukada (1987).

Acknowledgements

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Atsushi Fukada holds a PhD in linguistics from the University of Illinois and is currently an Associate Professor of Japanese and Linguistics at Purdue University. His research interests include pragmatics, syntax, computational linguistics, and computer-based language learning. He is also the director of the Center for Technology-Enhanced Language Learning and Instruction.

Noriko Asato, PhD is an assistant professor of Japanese at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research focuses on the history of Japanese language education in the USA. Her most recent essay includes, ''Mandating Americanization: Japanese Language Schools and the Federal Survey of Education in Hawaii, 1916–1920'' in the *History of Education Quarterly* (March 2003).