

Politeness in Intercultural Encounters

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1. Introduction

This paper intends to give some insights into the functions and problems of politeness in intercultural encounters. As the topic extends into a variety of different fields it will be necessary to find definitions and explanations on the individual components before addressing the larger issue at hand. It is likely that each of the subtopics will provide enough material and data to fill a seminar paper of its own, for that reason in-depth analysis and discussion will be restricted in the theoretical part of this paper.

After the basic concepts necessary for examining intercultural politeness have been established, there will be an analysis of the Japanese system of politeness, in contrast to the English and German systems of politeness. This again will be limited to certain facets, as a comprehensive comparison of all the relevant factors is not possible.

As politeness is a social factor that changes relatively fast, it is also necessary to state that all the assumptions that are being made in this paper regarding the English and German system of politeness, are probably heavily influenced by personal views and experiences with the subject and should be regarded as such, namely as the views on politeness as it is experienced and applied now by the generations of below thirty year olds. The fact that in some respects the Japanese idea of politeness may radically differ from our own does of course not imply that this was always so. It is rather likely that one would find a lot more parallels when looking at the German/Austrian system of politeness of fifty or a hundred years ago.

2. Defining an Intercultural Encounter

To be able to look at the phenomenon of politeness in intercultural encounters with any degree of objectivity, one must get a clear view of what intercultural communication is. These concepts are quite basic, and might be viewed as logical and well known fact, but as this is a very sensitive topic that stretches further than one would assume, it is necessary to give detailed explanations to reveal all the dimensions of an intercultural encounter.

2.1 What is Communication?

Communication, in its most basic form is the transfer of information from a sender to a recipient. It also implies that both of the participants are somehow motivated to conduct this exchange of information.

2.1.2 Medium

When talking about communication one usually assumes spoken communication, but in order to get a complete picture of the levels communication takes place on, one must look at all the possible ways of getting information from one person to another.

2.1.2.1 Talking

First and probably the most immediate and natural medium to any speaker is spoken language. This however does not include only the acoustic dimension, but extends to facial expressions and body language as well. The acoustic dimension alone is much wider than what is usually used as a basis for analysis in linguistic studies. The most important factors are intonation and speed. By no other means is one able to provoke such varied and strong

responses than by the change of one's voice patterns. In English and German the tone of an utterance can outweigh the content, as there are no fixed grammatical markers to indicate politeness.

Facial expressions and gestures/body language fill in the details. There is no reliable way to measure this, but it is widely assumed that intonation and body language make up more than two thirds of the total information that is conveyed in face to face communication. Another form of talking has to be mentioned here is sign language. Sign language simply formalises some aspects of body language to make up for the missing acoustic options. It is not very likely however that this impairs the bandwidth of communication enough to make a significant difference regarding politeness.

2.1.2.2 Drawing

One of the most basic skills of human communication is drawing. It is a form of expression that all primates seem to share, as human infants and chimps alike produce images that are comparable in style. The drawback of drawing as a form of communication is its indirectness and high degree of interindividual variance. Drawings are pretty accurate and easy to read when it comes to concrete objects, but when a temporal dimension is added, one has to be familiar with the conventions the artist used. When it comes to abstracts, drawing is usually not sufficient anymore to express more complex concepts.

2.1.2.3 Writing

Writing is in essence no more than a subcategory of drawing, as a majority of written languages can still trace the pictorial origin of the symbols used with a high degree of accuracy. Most of these symbols have been formalised and specialised to a degree where their origin is not apparent anymore.

2.1.3 Feedback

Feedback is probably the most important factor in any communication. In order to communicate effectively, we need to tailor our style of communication, no matter if this is speaking or writing, to the recipients requirements and expectations.

There have been several studies that have shown that it is actually mainly the kind and amount of feedback a speaker receives that governs the topics he or she talks about.

It has been argued for quite a while that these mechanisms have been the main support of Freudian psychoanalysis, that in fact the patient does not have an increased need to talk about his childhood but that the interviewer stimulates talk of that particular topic by unconsciously giving positive reinforcements (a nod or an agreeing „hmm“-sound) at the right times.

It goes even further than that. By paying close attention and responding accurately and promptly to the indicators one gets through non-verbal communication one can manipulate and shape the partners views and attitudes regarding a certain topic, thereby being able to win an opponent over in an argument without ever having to contest anything. These insights have been used in NLP (neurolinguistic programming) for quite some time and, although somewhat limited in their insights into communication as a whole, are quite effective (Krech – Crutchfield 1992).

2.1.4 Rules

Any act of communication requires that the participants observe certain rules of conduct. On a superficial level these might be actual etiquette issues or rituals, but what this topic is mainly about is the need for a common ground. This basically means that when entering a conversation we rely on a large amount of assumptions which should guarantee that the recipient receives the same information that the speaker encoded in the speech act. These go

down to such basic things like a common lexicon, but also include a lot of cultural and group references.

2.2 What does *Intercultural* mean?

The term intercultural might seem self-explanatory at first, but it is obvious that it is misunderstood at least in some respects. Intercultural in reference to communication means that the two speakers' pools of cultural, referential and group background information are sufficiently different to call them two separate cultural identities. These identities do not only consist of references, explanations and backgrounds, but also of very important and profound aspects like perception of self, and even more important perception of self in relation to others.

While we seem to be exposed to many different cultures each day, especially with the omnipresence of mass media and the internet we don't really have a grasp what being truly of another culture means. This, and the resulting communication problems that occur, are mainly due to the fact, that what we may perceive as multicultural is merely multicoloured, not just regarding ethnicity, but also imagery and music. We are used to processing these inputs without much thought, and without much deeper understanding of the underlying concepts. One could say that we live in a pretty strict monocultural world that, being as colourful as it is easily fools the beholder into thinking that it is in fact multicultural. This might be blamed on the fact that the European media industry is largely dependant on the American media, which in turn gives us a lot of exposure to the Americans' cultural perception. In most of the films we see, truly different cultures are either portrayed in an Americanised version or simply reduced to stereotypes.

To oversimplify, when it comes to different cultures we are living the benetton ad, flashy and colourful, but easily digestible and thoroughly American in values and beliefs.

3. Politeness

3.1 *Functions of Politeness*

In this section the main reasons for the actual existence of politeness are discussed, and while there are some examples given that serve to illustrate the individual points the focus is on the functions of politeness. It is even argued, that only through the use of politeness strategies we have been able to evolve to the level of communication that we are now on.

3.1.1 Power and Solidarity

One of the most important uses of politeness is that of reflecting or showing power differences. Reflecting and showing might seem very similar at first, but the impacts they have on a conversation are quite different. Usually the politeness strategies that are used only mirror the actual power differences, this is in most cultures done without being aware of it, as especially in English and German the choice of the required politeness level is not a conscious one.

Especially when it comes to the „aggressive“ use of politeness strategies concerning power, i.e. a speaker of superior status showing the speaker of inferior status that the power gap exists, or is bigger than he had assumed, attention is immediately drawn to the fact that a „hostile“ act has occurred. The result will always be an increase in anxiety in the inferior, there are basically two different manifestations however. Either the inferior speaker accepts the new power balance imposed on him, and appeals in an increased way to the superiors negative face, or he responds with more or less open hostility, showing the superior that the new balance was not well received.

In the other direction this principle works basically the same way. If the superior reduces the level of formality, he assumes a more familiar position towards the inferior. This might then either result in a reduction of anxiety in the inferior, or again in a hostile reaction, if the superior has in his attempt to ease tension overstepped the bounds of familiarity.

The ability, or rather the privilege to adjust the level of distance between the two speakers resides almost exclusively with the superior, as the inferior will almost always elicit a negative reaction from the other, as he diminishes the superior's power, either by directly closing the distance by assuming that he himself is more powerful, or by lowering the superior's status. Which of the two the superior perceives is not really of importance, as both will provoke the same negative reaction.

3.1.2 Face

The term face is best described as the positive self-image every individual wishes to claim for himself (Goffman 1967, in Watts 1992: 27). This concept, and subsequently the need to claim and maintain such a positive self-image is universal and transcends all cultural, social and historical boundaries. It could be said that the need to maintain face is a basic component of human interaction, that is rooted far more deeply than any other conversational component. It is probable that the concept of face is not limited to human interaction, as it is the underlying drive behind all communicative situations where some form of status or rank is involved, as without a need to maintain face, there would not be any reason to react negatively to being treated of lower status than one is. In basically the same fashion all primate interactions occur. This might even be extended further, as other animals feature highly complex social interactions as well. In the animal kingdom the need to maintain face is a basic element for survival, as, if one regards the example of a wolf pack, face reflects the power within the

group, which in turn equals the probability of reproduction. This, although purely Darwinian, is probably the best explanation towards why there is such a thing as face.

Every Speaker has two „faces“, an interpersonal face (sometimes referred to as positive face) and a personal one (sometimes referred to as negative face).

3.1.2.1 Interpersonal Face (Positive face)

The need of a speaker to feel accepted, appreciated and respected. The need or desire of a speaker to bring his own goal into accord with those of the person he is addressing. This can also be seen (in one dimension) as basically nothing other than the wish to persuade the other person of one's own views or goals (Brown and Levinson 1978, in Haase 1994: 91). This is usually established through small concessions, that allow the partner to see, that there are some ideas that are in accord.

These strategies of addressing someone's positive face can be subsumed under the term familiarity, as they all have the aim of reducing the distance between the two speakers.

3.1.2.2 Personal Face (Negative Face)

The need of a speaker to have absolute freedom in his actions, to feel unimpeded and self-determining. If in a situation a speaker's negative face is addressed, this is usually done by the use of honorific, many of which are more or less directly derived from terms for someone in command („Master/Mister, Herr).

When it comes to interactions, these two faces conflict each other, as sometimes a gain in personal autonomy can only be achieved or maintained by giving up some amount of interpersonal acceptance and vice versa (Arndt 1985, in Watts 1992: 29).

These can also be seen as drives towards more or less the same goal, but by dramatically different ways.

3.1.2.3 Face threatening acts/Face saving strategies

As face is something that conflicts even on an interpersonal level, it is pretty obvious that conflict situations on an interpersonal level are extremely common. Awareness and care when talking are not sufficient to avoid face threatening situations, as every request, suggestion or different opinion of any kind can be interpreted as an implicit threat to face (Bradac 1979, in Watts 1992: 29). That's why it is necessary for every culture and form of communication to have strategies for disarming such conflict situations, namely by a variety of complex face-saving strategies. These basically allow both participants to maintain their respective face without damaging the other one's face.

There are no universal strategies of dealing with such situations. In many cultures this is done by becoming less self-assertive (less explicit, less direct) and by signalling acceptance of the partner (wording negative messages in positive ways, positive tone of voice, smiling). While these techniques may be valid in a large number of cultures it is not probable that these strategies are universal (Brown 1978, in Haase 1994: 89-92).

3.1.3 Communicative Aspects

When going back to Bühler's (1934, in Haase 1994: 96) model of language, there are three basic functions of verbal communication. The first is that language is a simple medium to convey information about objects or actions. The second is to influence the thoughts and actions of the listener and the third is to use language as a medium for self-representation, to express one's own feelings and opinions.

Jacobson (1985, in Haase 1994: 96-97) extended these functions by pointing out that language is also used to maintain and keep the contact between the two participants of a conversation active. The second function pointed out was that language is used to encode the message to some extent, he called this the 'poetic' function. The third important component was that language can also be used to discuss itself, i.e. that language is capable of being its own metalanguage.

These six dimensions are in short:

- Information about the addresser – emotive function
- Conveying information to the addressee – conative function
- Information about the context - referential function
- Information about the message - poetic function
- Maintaining contact - phatic function
- Information about the code itself – metalingual function

Depending on the type of communication that is needed, a conversation can be focused on any of these functions. Of those mentioned two are especially important when it comes to the use of politeness strategies. The first is the conative function, as it is very important to present one's aims and goals in the right way to enable the recipient to accept them.

The second, and maybe more important one is the phatic function, as most little politeness rituals serve the function of somehow drawing attention to the communication process. Examples for this would be the various formulae of address, like the German „Mein Herr“, or the English „madam“ (Haase 1994: 97).

3.2 Factors that determine the necessary degree of politeness

There are a number of different variables that influence the actual choice of the level of politeness appropriate for a situation. These factors might differ from culture to culture, or even significantly within a society, but in general, most of them are present in every culture, some of course in a weakened form.

3.2.1 Status

The status of the participants of a communication is usually the most important factor when it comes to determining the appropriate level of politeness. It is important to note however, that status is never absolute, and can vary from situation to situation. It is not only a relative variable, i.e. the difference between the two speakers' status levels, but also a dynamic one, as it can shift even within one conversation.

Agnes Niyekawa (1991) gives an example from her own experiences in Japan: When she was travelling by train she had a conversation with a man who travelled in the same compartment. About ten minutes into the conversation she revealed that she was a university lecturer. Immediately the man apologised elaborately for “talking down on her”, which he had naturally done as she was a woman.

The variables that determine status vary from culture to culture, however it is common in most cultures that age and occupation have a direct influence on status.

3.2.2 Situation

The actual level of politeness we use is strongly dependant of the situation we are in. This mostly refers to whether there is a power relationship actively going on or not. In situation where there are distinct power differences to be observed, the use of polite forms will usually

occur much more consciously than in situations, where the two partners are approximately on equal ground.

3.2.3 Group

In any case, the group memberships of all the participants of a conversation play a large role in the selection of the appropriate level of politeness. When talking to out-group persons, the usual approach is to use a higher degree of formality, i.e. being more polite. When talking to someone within the same group as oneself, no matter if this is the family, work or a tennis club, one will always assume that a higher level of intimacy is present (even if the two members do not know each other) and use a less formal and less polite form accordingly.

3.2.4 Audience (3rd parties)

Another determinant for the actual level of politeness that is used is the presence of 3rd parties to the conversation. This might be only a very vague variable in English or German, but in the instance of Japanese this factor is very important, as one can choose to include a third party into a conversation by using more formal forms than would be necessary for the two main speakers. By using the lowest common denominator of politeness (i.e. a more formal form that is also suitable for talking to strangers), one can actively choose to allow third parties to join the conversation. On the other hand an exclusion is just as easily possible, as the use of a less formal style will actively deter people of lower familiarity to join (Haase 1994: 98).

4. The Intercultural conversation

Casse (1981) defines intercultural communication as follows:

Intercultural communication is the process by which two individuals who do not belong to the same culture “try“ to exchange a set of meanings. The mere fact that the two individuals do not belong to the same culture implies that they do not share the same assumptions, beliefs, values, or, to put it differently, the same ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. This phenomenon makes the communication process much more difficult and challenging than we think. (Casse 1981, in Jin 1994:10)

This definition can be considered valid, as it includes all the necessary criteria for defining intercultural. In this context „intercultural“ means true difference in all the determining factors of self-perception and world perception. It also relates the fact that the communication process between two people of significantly different cultures or groups is often and easily underestimated.

4.1 *The Stranger*

William Gudykunst (in Wiseman 1995: 10) uses the term stranger for dealing with these phenomena, and uses Simmel’s definition of a stranger to illustrate the concept:

The unity of nearness and remoteness in every human relation is organised, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him [or her], distance means that he [or she], who is also far, is actually near. (Simmel 1908 [1950], p.104)

The main point of this definition is the combination of nearness and farness in one encounter.

The person who is characterised as being a stranger, i.e. from a sufficiently different cultural background, is near in terms of physical distance. This does not refer to any special instance,

but merely to the fact that the person is immediate to the other participant, not excluding of course various other media which allow for instant and direct communication. The farness is the cultural distance, which the person in question „brings with him“. To be able to communicate with him directly, one must be aware of these culturally determined factors, which, as the speaker may be aware of their presence but not their function, create a perception of distance.

4.2 Dealing with Strangeness – Uncertainty and Anxiety Management

When one finds oneself in such a situation, one has to deal with the fact that some facets of the partner are unknown. As almost every encounter we have confronts us with potential strangers, that's why these theories are applicable not only to intercultural contact, but basically to every communication, assuming that the two participants do not intimately know each other.

As every human is a control-freak by nature, uncertainty about any given situation causes us some degree of anxiety.

There have been a variety of articles and studies on this topic, but what is important and interesting for this topic is that the level of uncertainty (and through that anxiety) increases in proportion to the information about the other that is not available. For this reason intercultural encounters hold a special place in AUM theories (Anxiety and Uncertainty Management) , as an intercultural encounter has the potential to produce strong anxiety, as only very little is actually known about the other.

The most important part of these theories is the level of anxiety one experiences when in such an encounter. As long as the uncertainty (anxiety) is below a certain threshold one does not experience any negative effects. When the lack of information is so extensive however, that it is felt that it is not possible to predict or explain the other's behaviour, a number of things might happen.

One possibility to escape this emotionally unpleasant situation is to end the conversation as soon as possible. Another possibility is that, as there is no reliable first-hand information the person falls back on stereotypes to help explain the other's behaviour. As these stereotypes are likely to be disappointed however, the situation will only get worse, as the disappointed stereotype will only result in more anxiety. The third and probably most positive reaction is to try and gather as much information from the context of the conversation in order to reduce the amount of uncertainty to a level, where the anxiety is no longer perceived as threatening (Gudykunst in Wiseman 1995: 17-43).

5. Case study – The Japanese Politeness system: Keigo

The Japanese system of politeness is ideal for a comparison with German and English systems of politeness, as the whole field of language and culture is vastly different from what we are used to, and as there was not too much contact between the languages in question before more than fifty years ago. This may allow for some careful generalisations, although this should not be about historical roots or differences, as the reference languages English and German are only viewed from a present-day point of view.

5.1 Society

The Japanese society is different from ours in many important respects. What will probably catch the eye of the tourist first, is that there are far more distinctive layers of status. In English and German, there are only vague categorisations of „higher“ and „lower“, which we use more or less instinctively. For us (assuming that „we“ are native Austrians without significant other cultural influences), there is a very large area which could be labelled

„equal“. This is what we think we use for most of our everyday conversations, for dealing with co-workers, etc. There might be different levels of formality involved, but that usually does not stop us from perceiving everyone else as equal to ourselves in rank.

In Japan, this is vastly different. There is no area for „equals“, the relative distance in rank is always present, and has much finer variations. Even the most minute difference may make a difference and will most definitely be perceived, ...

Also, the Japanese society is much more group-oriented than the average European society. While we are aware of group status and membership, this is something that changes rather dynamically. In some, more formalised situations we might perceive ourselves as group members, but usually our self-perception is a profoundly individualistic. Being an „individual“ has, probably also heightened by clever advertisement, gained a level of importance for us, that we rarely perceive anymore, as we see the right to express ourselves and our ideas as something natural. This view is probably heavily influenced by the American concept of self, as Europe and America are very close, both in society and ideology, „The American dream “ comes to mind.

In Japan group is more important than self. This might at first sound like a cliché, (in world war two only men without family were allowed to become Kamikaze pilots, there are numerous reports of wives committing suicide in order to allow their husbands to carry out their mission, in order not to bring shame to the family name) but is still extremely relevant. This group-awareness starts at a very early age. Children learn to identify themselves first with their family, then their school. Later, upon entering the workforce, the group of reference is the company one works for, it is for instance not unusual that if one asks about someone's occupation that they respond with something along the lines of „I work for company X“, instead of „I am a marketing assistant“, which is much more common in Europe where one would expect the occupation to be mentioned first, the place of work second.

5.2 Grammar

It is important to know that the Japanese system of politeness differs from the English system not only in form and complexity, but also in grammar. In English, politeness has only very little to do with grammatical or lexical differences whereas in Japanese there are distinctly different grammatical categories for the different levels of politeness.

What is also interesting is that the Keigo system is not something that a child learns „on the go“, as children are exclusively spoken to in the N-form. Upon entering the workforce a young Japanese has to be familiar with the usage of Keigo, this means that it is not a naturally acquired skill even for native speakers. Due to the fact that the Keigo system is difficult to master and that the standards are declining (similar tendencies are observed by language preservationists in almost every language) many large companies have established special courses to instruct their employees in the proper use of Keigo.

5.3 Levels

There are four distinctly different levels of politeness, which differ not only in vocabulary, but also in grammar. One of the general assumptions about politeness, namely that the length of the forms increases with increased formality, holds absolutely true for the Japanese system. These levels all have distinctly different functions and must never be confused, as a strong emotional reaction would be the most likely result.

5.3.1 N-Level

The most „informal“ level of politeness. Used when addressing children and for some other family matters. Sometimes it is also utilised to address persons of significantly lower status, which in the correct context is not seen as inappropriate.

Here it is important to point out that there are two different forms of the N-level, namely the male and the female form, i.e. forms used only by one gender. Women generally use more polite forms of address, there is also quite a large amount of vocabulary that is restricted to male speakers.

5.3.2 P0

A „neutral“ level of politeness, used exclusively in written texts. As it is grammatically and lexically much closer to the N-level than to P1, a foreign speaker has to be extremely careful not to rely too much on textbook forms and phrases.

5.3.3 P1

The standard level of polite speech. It expresses respect to the addressee and is suitable for most circumstances.

5.3.4 P2

In some sources this level is also referred to as „ultra-polite“. This is because the literal translations of the additional forms used seem strange to a speaker of any language of western Europe. In actual usage it is not „ultra-polite“, it is simply a more formal mode of address.

It is also necessary to note that there are sharp distinctions between the N-level and the P levels, whereas the boundary between P1 and P2 is more of a gradual nature. There are several in-between groups which cannot be clearly assigned to either of the two spoken P-levels.

A feature that is notable in the example below is that there is no 2nd person pronoun for the P1 and P2 levels, the addressee is usually referred to by last name (LN) + san, which is a general honorific. On the P2 levels this can be replaced by sensei, which literally means someone who is older, but is extended to teachers and honourable persons in general.

5.3.5 Example

In the following example about 14 gradations of politeness are observable, some have been omitted from the P2 levels. The basic meaning of the sentence is „Will you also come tomorrow?“.

N-Levels:

M: Kimi mo asu kuru ka?

F: Anta mo ashita kuru?

F: Anata mo ashita kuru?

P-0:

Anata mo ashita irassharu?

P-1:

LN-san mo ashita koraremasu ka?

LN-san mo ashita irasshaimasu ka?

LN-san /Sensei mo ashita irasshaimasen ka?

LN-san /Sensei mo ashita oide ni narimasu ka?

LN-san /Sensei mo ashita oide ni narimasen ka?

P-2:

LN-san /Sensei mo ashita oide kudasaimasen ka?

[...]

LN-san /Sensei ni mo myoonichi oide itadakemasen deshoo ka?

(Niyekawa 1991)

5.4 Selection of the appropriate Level

There are a number of pretty strict rules when it comes to the selection of the appropriate level of polite speech. The most important factor is status of course, which is determined by a variety of variables. Some of the most important factors are:

Gender. Women traditionally use more polite forms than men, there are also a number of words associated with the male N-level that are considered inappropriate for women.

Seniority. This does not only refer to the workplace, but also to schools and universities. Even the smallest differences in seniority have an impact on the usage of politeness.

Position. Within a company the position is everything, but it is also not unusual to

Age. This frequently causes problems, as it is also a very strong factor. If age and seniority or position are not in accord, serious problems can arise, as one of the markers is ignored. This is a constant cause of problems, especially in larger companies where it is not unusual for young employees to get promoted ahead of seniors. This is a situation that is very hard to resolve, and frequently leads to suicides.

Group. The most important factor is whether one is addressing a member of the same group or someone out-group. Group is a broad term that covers everything from family to company, but also clubs and schools.

Race. From our point of view this might seem outrageous, but this is actually an important issue. In business matters Caucasians can expect preferred treatment, in all other matters the Japanese are on top of the social food chain. A group that is usually faced with problems in Japan are ethnic Japanese from other countries, especially the Americas. As they are Japanese by heritage it is expected from them to uphold the highest moral and social standards, which they, as Japanese is usually their second language can never live up to. For this reason they are sometimes looked upon as “degenerate“.

In the situation of a first meeting each of the speakers assumes that the other is superior in rank and uses a high level of politeness. The only exception is when there is an obvious difference in age, or if one of the speakers is a woman.

Another important thing is that the degree of formality does not change with the duration or intimacy of a relationship. As long as the determining factors are still the same, it does not matter if someone is a new acquaintance or has been a friend for years.

6. Conclusion

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