
Politeness Strategies in British and Japanese Culture in an Eatery

This essay attempts to examine and reflect upon how politeness strategies are channelled in British and Japanese culture in an eatery. My linguistic fieldwork was a participant observation conducted at Starbucks.

The first distinction to be made in the way politeness is conveyed between British and Japanese culture is related to one of the roles of employees. It is expected for staff to greet all clients as they enter and leave a store as good hospitality is crucial in Japanese cultural etiquettes, though this practice is seldom seen in British culture. Generally, saying please and thank you to interlocutors is the most common politeness strategy in virtually all cultures. In a restaurant or café setting this is relevant when customers wish to place an order, as well as expressing gratitude for the service they have received from staff. From experience, customers tend to wait until a waiter or waitress passes their table in a busy restaurant- either for more food or beverage, to pass a query or complaint, or request the bill. I have also encountered customers calling out for a waiter or waitress by saying excuse me to draw their attention. Queuing is a significant non-verbal aspect of politeness in British culture as it signifies the value of patience and the desire for people to be served in an orderly manner.

Another common non-verbal politeness strategy in British culture is to hold the door open for someone behind or in front, especially if it seems that they are unable to do so themselves. The space of the café is divided into different seating areas to suit different customers. There are tables and stools at the front of the store near the windows for customers who have stopped by for a quick refreshment, and there is seating at the rear end of the store for customers who want a bit more privacy.

There is also a long table with several seats around it in the middle of the café where larger groups of people (such as families) often sat at. Due to the fact the tables are not noticeably far apart from one another, it is not very difficult to overhear what customers were saying which may create an impression of openness between customers. Overall, the ambience of the café is friendly and casual for customers to chat and relax. Perhaps the fact that there is no reservation policy at Starbucks emphasises this, making it non-exclusive for the public. My fieldwork was conducted at the front of the café. When placing an order for a beverage, the employee proceeded to ask for my name to write on the cup. This is where yet another contrast between Japanese and British politeness is revealed. The Japanese language makes use of several types of honorifics to address all speakers (with varying degrees of politeness and terms of

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usage). As well as this, Japanese has strict limitations as to who exactly can or cannot be on a first-name basis and consequently, most individuals are referred to by their family name. This greatly differs from most non-Japanese cultures where people are called by their first names without honorifics (except in formal contexts). As a result of these cultural conventions, Japanese Starbucks employees do not identify orders by the use of customer's names but instead by the item itself which was ordered. This is a way of maintaining social etiquettes and politeness codes between customer and employees and also has implications of preserving the privacy of each customer.

From my observations, the nature of interactions amongst some of the customers and the employees were primarily phatic exchanges, consisting of brief utterances about the weather (for example, it's cold, isn't it?) or their general wellbeing (for example, hi, how are you?). An interaction between a customer in front of me in the queue and the cashier is shown below: Cashier: (Counts change) 'It was snowing a lot last night, wasn't it?' Customer: 'Oh, yes, it's gotten really cold lately.' Cashier: (Gives change and beverage to customer) 'Thank you very much, take care' Customer: 'Thanks, you too.' Phatic talk plays a significant sociolinguistic role in maintaining bonds of sociability between interlocutors and as such, the interaction above reveals the intent for the cashier and the customer to simply converse without necessarily achieving a goal or exchanging information. Phatic expressions are a common part of Japanese conversations. These are termed 'aizuchi' and are frequent interjections in a conversation which are important indicators that listeners are understanding the speaker as well as paying attention to the speaker and showing interest in the topic of conversation.

This is different in British culture which typically considers interrupting someone while they speak as impolite. The opposite is true of Japanese culture, however. The complete absence or even minimal usage of aizuchi terms generally shows that one is an incompetent listener. Phatic communication across many cultures is a way of breaking the silence, expressing respect as well as politeness. In the interaction above, the cashier fills in the silence between himself and the customer while she waits for her change with a phatic expression about the weather. This exhibits one way to maintain a positive customer-employee relationship as it expresses solidarity and empathy. The ability to appropriately initiate phatic communication is underlying evidence of a speaker's communicative, sociolinguistic, cultural and pragmatic competence as there are certain linguistic norms regarding when, where, how and with whom phatic exchanges can occur.

One of the features I noted from my observation was the act of holding the door open for others. I observed a man holding the door open for a woman with a pram, to which she used a verbal politeness strategy by saying thank you. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, this exemplifies how the woman's negative face has been threatened as it violates her desire to have her actions unhindered by the man. Moreover, a snippet of a

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conversation between two customers at Starbucks can be seen below: Speaker A Speaker B
Standard orthography You going down to West Ham this weekend? Yeah. Dave told me he's coming with his mates. Phonemic transcription /ju g??n da?n tu w?st ham ð?s wik?nd/ /j? de?v t??ld mi hiz k?m?n w?v h?z me?ts/ The prominent features are:

- use of an informal register, or an L variety (low variety) of English
- use of the British colloquial noun 'mates' as a variant for the linguistic variable 'friends'
- omission of copular verb 'are'
- TH-fronting
- the alveolar nasal [n] verb ending as a marker variable.

These set of features implies that there is a close and familiar relationship between the interlocutors as they are not recognised as elements of an H variety (high variety) of English. In addition, both speakers were of the same sex and appeared to be adolescents about the same age and ethnic background as each other. The similarities across these social factors creates the impression that the social distance between them is narrow as the familiarity of the speaker and addressee is high. Thus, the cruciality for mitigation and politeness mechanisms is reduced. Furthermore, the following interaction takes place between two employees who were on their lunch break: Staff A: 'Mr Millard, I understand this is short notice but would it be okay to finish my shift an hour earlier. I just received a call now and it seems kind of urgent. I apologize for the inconvenience, I hope it's not too much trouble' Staff B: 'Not at all. Luckily, Ethan will be coming in later on for his shift so he'll be covering for you' It is inferred that A has less power than B, whom we can assume is the manager or the boss of A. This is shown by the fact that the speaker refers to the addressee with the title 'Mr,' denoting respect and politeness. In addition, the speaker is apologetic towards the addressee which threatens the former's positive face as it demonstrates the desire to have their request fulfilled. Another notable feature is the speaker's frequent use of hedge constructions (see italicized portions) which shift the tone and impact of an utterance to minimise imposition. In this case, they are used due to social and stylistic constraints between the speaker and addressee. Considering this carefully, the initial sentence uttered by the speaker would appear more direct and assertive if the italicized portion were omitted. In interactions such as this one where the power balance between the speaker and addressee is asymmetrical, the individual with less status aims to use more mitigation in their speech. It is deduced that the distance between the speaker and addressee in this interaction is wide, and this inevitably means that the size of A's social imposition (i.e. asking for a favour from Staff B) is quiet large. Following Milroy's (1987) social network theory, the multiplexity of the social tie between A and B is simplex as it is likely to be the case that they have no relationship outside of work. Therefore, there is a higher probability that overt mitigation of face threatening acts will be utilised.

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To summarise, all speakers possess multiple varieties of speaking, known as a linguistic repertoire. The variety used depends on sociolinguistic factors. One such factor is the overall closeness or distance between a speaker and an addressee, which in turn can influence which politeness strategies are used. Politeness is a major aspect of sociolinguistics and pragmatics which members of a speech community learn over time. It is not strictly the case that politeness mechanisms are universally understood, as briefly explored in this essay. Nonetheless, they are fundamental for restoring and maintaining social networks (the structure of a web of ties in a particular speech community) between interlocutors.

References

1. Brown, P., Levinson, S. (1987) Politeness, Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
2. Milroy, L. (1987) Language and Social Networks. New York: Blackwell.

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