

Politeness as a Cultural Aspect in Japanese and Turkish Languages

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Abstract

Various studies have been made on different aspects of the Turkish and Japanese languages, but comparative studies between the two languages are still limited. The aim of this study is to describe the politeness strategy of these two languages from a cultural perspective within the paradigm of cognitive linguistics. Both Turkish and Japanese are agglutinative languages, and speakers of both languages prefer the subjective construal. So, if the typology of a language might be related to its perception, the conceptualization of ‘polite’ and the perception of politeness in that language may be alike.

Keywords

Politeness, honorifics, intersubjectivity, *koto*-type expressions

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Both Turkish and Japanese are agglutinative languages. Their words are constructed through the use of suffixes, which are used to make verbs from nouns, nouns from verbs, adjectives from nouns, and so on. In the following example, the Turkish “-mak/-ma” and the Japanese “*koto*” change the verb into a noun:

TR: Oku-**mak** / oku-**ma** (to read)

JP: よむ-こと (*Yomu- koto*)

Another example of Turkish and Japanese as agglutinative languages is as follows:

TR: Oku-n-a-**gel**-mek (?)

JP: 話-され-て-くる-こと (*Hana-sare-te-kuru-koto*)

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In both languages, the verb “read” is the main word and a passive suffix is used. The verb “come” (Turkish: *gel*; Japanese: *kuru* くる) is used as an auxiliary verb. We can translate it into English as ‘It has been read and it is still being read’: one can feel the process in the timeline.

On the other hand, Ikegami (1981, 1991) calls these kind of languages “be languages (*naru gengo* なる言語)”¹. It is well known that both Turkish and Japanese language speakers prefer subjective construals² (Ikegami et al. 2010). Furthermore, agglutinative languages often prefer subjective construals, rather than objective construals, in actual linguistic usage.

Honorifics in the language

Although each language enables its speakers to express regard or respect to other people in different ways, some languages have special linguistic forms called ‘honorifics’. Japanese is known for the importance it assigns to honorifics, yet Turkish also has honorific forms similar to Japanese (Tekmen, 2000, Tekmen, 2005b). Both languages include humbling words (*kenjōgo* 謙讓語), exalting words (*sonkeigo* 尊敬語), and honorific forms of nouns.

For example, in Turkish when the word “âli” is used after a nominal, it assigns a degree of highness and greatness to the meaning. In Japanese, prefixes like *o* or *go* add an exalting meaning to the word. In addition, in both languages the verb “to do” (Turkish: *yap-/ et-*; Japanese: *suru* する) is used to derive a verb from a noun. In order to give these forms an exalting meaning, the verbs “*buyur-*” in Turkish and “*nasaru*” in Japanese are used instead of the “do” term as shown in Figure 1.

Furthermore, in addition to the exalting forms, both languages also have humbling forms in common (e.g., “*arz etmek*” in Turkish and “*mōsu/mōshiageru*” in Japanese are humbling forms of “say”, “tell”). In either language, though, honorifics and humble forms are not the only forms to express politeness.

Politeness Theory and Honorifics

In Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory (1987), Japanese honorifics are classified as “negative politeness” as they create a distance between the speaker (the subject) and the one spoken to (the hearer). In the graphic below (Figure 2), the differences between Politeness Theory and honorifics are highlighted.

Kikuchi (1997) classifies Japanese honorifics as either subject-based (*sonkeigo* 尊敬語, *kenjōgo A* 謙讓語 A) or hearer-based (*kenjōgo B* 謙讓語 B, *teineigo* 丁寧語). While the aim of using honorific forms is to show respect or to soften relations among individuals, according to Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory, being polite is either to become closer or to keep one’s distance from the hearer. The concept of ‘being polite’ in both Politeness Theory and Japanese honorifics should

	Nominal + “do”-verb	Nominal + exalting word
Turkish	Emretme (emir etmek)	Emir buyurmak
Japanese	Meirei suru	Meirei nasaru
English	Order	Command

Fig. 1. Do-verbs and exalting words.

	Honorifics		Politeness Theory	
Type	Subject-based	Hearer-based	Positive	Negative
Target person	Subject	Hearer (Participants)	Hearer	Hearer
Function	Respect	Smooth relations	To become close	To keep distance
Factor	Place, relations, personal decisions		Face (public self-image) ¹	

Fig. 2. Honorifics and Politeness Theory.¹

¹According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 61), the notion of face is emotionally invested; it can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended in interaction. A positive face expresses the hearers' will to be praised and recognized, while a negative face expresses the hearers' desire to not be disturbed. Accordingly, positive or negative politeness would occur: in the first case, the speaker would show friendliness, in the second deference.

therefore be elaborated a little further. Matsumoto (2003) emphasizes that Brown and Levinson postulated an ideal person who is a “willful fluent speaker of a natural language” endowed with two qualities, i.e., “rationality” and “face”. On the other hand, Ikegami (2006) highlighted that Japanese is an ego-centric language, while Obana (2000) considers Japanese a speaker-oriented language. In an ego-centric or speaker-oriented language, ‘being polite’ does not mean being closer or keeping a distance from the hearer according to their will; in addition, it might include a sense of avoiding potential trouble in relationships, including with a speaker. Similar arguments are also valid for Turkish (Tekmen, 2009).

The equally valid point for both languages is the fact that honorifics are not the only communicational strategy for being polite to the hearer. There are other grammatical ways to express ‘politeness’ in these two languages.

Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity (*Kyōdōshukansei* 共同主観性)³ plays a significant role in the ways politeness is expressed in Turkish and Japanese. Consider the following sentences, which invite the hearer to write a reply to a given document:

Bu yazıya hemen cevap yaz-**alım**.

この書類にすぐに返事を書きましょう。 [*Kono shorui-ni sugu henji-o kaki-mashō*]

Let's reply to this document.

(Tekmen, 2007)

In this example, the Turkish suffix ‘-alım’ and the Japanese suffix ‘-*mashō*’ (ましよう) are used in such a way that neither Japanese nor Turkish hearers in an office would actually expect the speaker to reply to the document with them. The hearer will know that they should reply to the document

but will not take the example sentence as a command or a directive. Another example of intersubjectivity is as follows:

ワールドカップ決勝戦のチケットは売切れてしまいました。 [*Warudokappu kesshosen-no chiketto-wa urekire-te-shimai-mashita*]

Maalesef, dünya kupas-ı bilet-ler-i sat-ıl-dı.

Unfortunately, tickets for the World Cup have been sold out.
(Tekmen, 2007)

In this example, ‘*shimau* しまう’⁴ is used as an auxiliary verb. By using this verb, the speaker codes the message as if they were on the same side as the hearer. The hearer of course will not think that the speaker is actually feeling that way, but would feel it as a polite expression; in Turkish, the adverb ‘*maalesef*’ provides the same connotation to the sentence. In both languages, building up intersubjectivity between the hearer and speaker is a strategy to soften the expression.

Politeness through Shared Events

Ikegami (1991) contends that Japanese has a predilection for the *koto*-type expressions. He describes *koto* (こと)⁵ as an “existence in time” (Ikegami, 2007: 155). “Be-expressions”, which include the verb “to be” along with passive and intransitive verbs, are “*koto*-type expressions” since they express ‘acts’ as ‘events or happenings’ in language. The speaker and the hearer share a common space of communication. Although there are obviously different views for a speaker and a hearer, by using *koto*-type expressions a situation is linguistically coded as a shared event, so that the hearer perceives the act as a “phenomenon”, which they will decode through their cultural evidential background.

In the following sentence, the speaker points at the hearer’s bath: “Here is your bath”.

こちらはお風呂になります。 [*Kochira-wa o-furo-ni nari-masu*]

Burası banyo **ol-u-yor**.

In both examples, it is hard to translate the sentence literally into English as we would have to use odd turns such as “This becomes your bath” or “This happens to be your bath”. Japanese and Turkish adopt a similar strategy. By using ‘be’-verbs, such as ‘*naruru* なる’ in Japanese and ‘*ol-*’ in Turkish, the act is phrased through a *koto*-type expression. The situation is described as if it was just a ‘happening’ and in this way it is perceived as much more polite than just saying ‘this is the bath’ as ‘*burası banyo*’ in Turkish or ‘*koko wa ofuro desu/de gozaimasu* 这里是お風呂です/でございます’ in Japanese.

In the sentence “*Kendisi okuldan arkadaşım ol-ur*” (s/he happens to become my friend from school), the person referred to is not becoming a friend at the time the Turkish speaker uses ‘*ol-*’. They have known each other since school years. By using a *koto*-type expression, though, the speaker phrases the situation as if it was just happening. The hearer senses it as a polite act since it softens the expression, which is characteristic of Turkish understanding of politeness.

結婚することになりました。 [*Kekkon-suru-koto-ni nari-mashita*]

“It had become such that we are to marry” or “Marriage has happened to us”.

This sentence means that a couple is going to get married. It is an interesting example of phrasing an act as a shared event. When a couple decides to marry in Japan, they don’t usually say ‘We

are going to marry’: rather, by using the ‘be’ verb ‘*naru* なる’, Japanese speakers would softly phrase the situation as a happening, a common phenomenon.

Intransitive verbs

Intransitive verbs are also considered as ‘be-expressions’. Since they are often used to soften the expression, they are perceived as a mark of politeness. Consider a simple train station announcement as “The doors are closing”:

Kapı kapa-**n**-iyor.
ドアが閉まります。 [*Doa-ga shimari-masu*]

In both languages, the expression is softened by using an intransitive verb because, although the speaker is the one performing an act, the hearer will perceive it as an event, as something just “happening” on its own. And even if someone sees the speaker closing the door, they would probably not object. This particular wording is describing the action as something that is just happening to the hearer(s) and the speaker together, something that is taking place naturally.

Usage of Passive

“We are going to organize a meeting at school”:

Okul-da toplantı düzenle-**n**-ecek.
学校で会議が開かれます。 [*Gakkō-de kaigi-ga hirakare-masu*]

In both cases, the passive form prompts a polite expression: “a meeting is going to be organized at school”. Passive forms impersonalize the act and present it as something that just occurs.

Whether the expression below is peculiar to Turkish or not, it is hard to translate it to either Japanese or English:

Adaya gid-**il**-di.

It means that we went to the island, but the sentence literally says that “the island has been gone to”. Although the verb ‘*git*’ (go) is intransitive, by suddenly turning it into passive form, the sentence acquires a subtle sense that transforms a personal experience into a common phenomenon, into something that just happened. This kind of passive form is used frequently in daily language, even when the speaker is clearly the one who performed the act. It is considered more polite than simply saying ‘we went to the island’ (Tekmen, 2009, 2012).

Passive form also serves the purpose of ‘politeness’ for prohibitions, and in general, for imperative mode:

Sigara İç-**il**-mez!
Park ed-**il**-mez!

In the first sentence, the somewhat sharp sounding “no smoking” is softened by the use of passive form as “cigarettes are not to be smoked”; and, in the latter sentence, “no parking” becomes “it is not parked”. In prohibitions, the passive form is achieved through the use of simple present tense which is yet another way of phrasing an act as a shared event in Turkish. This kind of prohibition

does not reflect back to the speaker in the sentence: it just makes the hearer perceive that smoking and parking are events that simply do not occur. In Japanese ‘*kin’en* 禁煙’ (no smoking) and ‘*chūsha kinshi* 駐車禁止’ (no parking) are used in a similar context. ‘*Kin’en*’ and ‘*Kinshi*’ are rooted in Chinese *kango* 漢語 and are both nouns. Unlike in Turkish, where prohibitions are phrased through passive forms, in Japanese they are often expressed with a noun.

Simple Present Tense as Politeness in Turkish

“We would like someone to read something for us”.

Oku-r mu-su-n-uz?

よみますか (*読んでいただけますか。)[*Yomimasu ka (Yon-de-itadake-masu ka)*]

If we translate these sentences into English, we should render them as “Do you read?”. A Turkish hearer would decode the sentence in two alternative ways: ‘Do you have the habit of reading?’ or ‘Could you please read?’. In this example, simple present tense, or as it is called in Turkish, ‘broad tense (*geniş zaman*)’ is used. The usage of the ‘broad tense’ provides the sentence with a sense of unlimited time. This particular tense has no specific time span, and it covers the entirety of a timeline. By using the “broad tense”, the pressure on the requested act is eliminated, and the expression becomes more ‘polite’. In this case, Japanese speakers prefer to use verbs of “giving and receiving” (*yarimorai dōshi* やりもらい動詞)⁶ in the form of possibility with the main verb: this would give the sentence a shade of “gratitude” to the hearer.

Oku- y-(a)bil-ir mi-sin-iz?

よめますか (=読んでいただけますか [*Yome-masu ka (Yon-de-itadake-masu ka)*])

In the Turkish sentence, the possibility suffix and present tense are used together. During a conversation, the hearer will perceive this combination as more polite. Not only does it erase the sense of time and dismisses the pressure on the requested act: by using possibility and question forms together, it also embeds the meaning of “is the situation going to occur?” in the sentence, thus leaving room for an autonomous decision of the hearer. Here, the Japanese *yarimori dōshi* would also be used in a possibility form.

Conclusions

Both Japanese and Turkish have honorific forms in the language. But rather than honorifics, the use of some grammatical items are perceived as ‘politeness’ by the hearer.

- Both in Japanese and in Turkish, “Politeness” means softening the words in an ego-centric way.
- Intersubjectivity and expressing acts as a happening or a phenomenon, which can be evaluated as cultural codes of these languages, are perceived as ‘polite’ expressions by the hearer.

For some speakers, especially for speakers of ‘objectively construed’ languages which are largely focused on details, this kind of ‘politeness’ might be perceived as a mark of ‘vagueness’ or even ‘carelessness’. But speakers and hearers of ego-centric, speaker-oriented languages would decode them according to their shared cultural patterns. As Whorf (1954) argued, this is a ‘fashion of speaking’.

After the year 2000, scholarship in politeness studies has proliferated in various languages. While politeness was traditionally seen as a social phenomenon, researchers have also regarded politeness as a cultural phenomenon and suggested considering it from the viewpoints of East and West. Leech (2005) concluded that “there is no East-West divide in politeness” and that “the Grand Strategy of Politeness (GSP) provides a very general explanation for communicative politeness phenomena” in both Eastern and Western languages. However, the cognitive features of each language should not be discarded. As we have seen, Turkish and Japanese are agglutinative languages which present some similarities in their politeness strategies. Politeness studies may find a fruitful focus in the relation between the type of a language and its expression of politeness.

Notes

1. Speakers of some languages are more readily inclined towards subjective construal than the speakers of other languages (Ikegami, 2008). Languages that prefer subjective construal are called “be languages (*narū genō* なる言語)” or “subjective languages”.
2. Langacker (2019) defines *construal* as “our ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways. And an array of conceptual factors shown to be relevant for lexical and semantic description as a term in cognitive linguistics”.
3. Also called *sōgoshukansei* (相互主観性) and *kanshukansei* (間主観性). Here, it refers to a shared worldview established by the speakers’ words.
4. *Shimau* (しまう) means “end”, “come to the end”, “finish”, “put away”, “close”.
5. The kanji sign for *koto* is 事. It simply means ‘things’: things that appear in our lives and that we do. It is also used as suffix when a content relates to existence.
6. Give-verbs *ageru* あげる, *yarū* やる, *kureru* くれる, and receive-verb *morau* もらう are the basic verbs of *yarimorai dōshi* (やりもらい動詞). Give-verbs *sashiageru* 差し上げる and *kudasaru* くださる, and receive-verb *itadaku* いただく are the honorific type of the basic verbs of giving and receiving. These verbs are frequently used in Japanese daily conversation as auxiliary verbs to express the direction of favour (Tekmen, 2005a).

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