Some Observations on Face-Threatening Acts in Japanese Ordinary Conversation

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0. Introduction

Before explaining the face-threatening act (FTA), the concept of "politeness" should be described. In general, the term "politeness" is translated into "civility" or "courtesy" in Japanese. Therefore, some people understand the term as indicating just an honorific expression when it is translated into Japanese. However, "politeness" in pragmatics is studied from the viewpoint of the purpose of a language form used by a speaker, and the effect on an addressee.

There are pioneering theories in which "politeness" is understood as a kind of strategy in communication (R. Lakoff, 1979; Leech 1983). Lakoff considered the essence of "politeness" as "avoidance of conflicts" and specified three principles to establish it. They are (1) "don't impose", (2) "give options" and (3) "make A feel good". In the meantime, Leech proposed a "principle of politeness" and its subsets, "six maxims".

Brown and Levinson (1989) introduced the concept of "face" into "politeness" and tried to renovate the theoretical system. As is well known, "face" consists of "negative face" and "positive face". "Negative face" is a desire ('face-want') for freedom of action to protect one's turf or privacy, or evade disturbance from others. In the meantime, "positive face" is a desire to be recognized or appreciated by others. We have these two different desires in our social life. It is desirable that these desires are also fulfilled in the speech behavior. However, our speech contains within itself a possibility of potentially damaging another's "face". If the face is damaged, such a behavior is called a face-threatening act.

Speech behavior has a tendency to threaten the face in various ways. Therefore, a speaker tries to evade the threat to the face of an addressee or reduce the degree of the effect by using some measures except when urgency or efficiency has priority. Brown and Levinson have classified the strategies to be applied when executing FTAs into five categories (Fig. 1).

In recent years, also in Japan, the politeness theory has gathered attention and FTAs are being studied. Honda (1998, 1999) analyzed the rule to modify conflicts in television discussion programs. Kato (2002) analyzed the metalinguistic expressions when providing

FTAs, also by using data from television discussion programs. Interesting results were obtained in both these studies. However, there are two problems. Both of the problems are caused due to analyzing data collected from the mass media.

First, the ratio of the FTA categorized into "1: without redressive action, baldly" in Table 1 is too high. From the characteristics of the programs, it seems that people stick to their convictions and foment a controversy with others in strong terms to win the approval of audiences in many cases. In Japanese daily life, FTAs occur less frequently, in the absence of relaxation actions, or in a tone of belligerence (without redressive action, baldly). Second, "5: Don't do the FTA" among the strategies applied to do FTAs is scarcely analyzed. As far as researchers observe the speech of others, they can't know when an FTA was stopped. However, remembering scenes of our daily existence, we sometimes determine that we should get off someone's back because it is rude, or hold our tongue mardy to perform an unnecessary favor. Furthermore, we sometimes expect others to read our minds from our nonverbal behaviors. In this manner, the results obtained from the analysis of conversations in the mass media include some points different from daily life. Therefore, it is supposed that they do not sufficiently reflect the actual state of ordinary conversation.

This study attempts to reveal the actual way in which strategies are applied to evade FTAs. To achieve this objective, the investigative approach was devised as follows for observing daily conversations.

Figure 1   Possible strategies for doing FTAs

(Brown & Levinson. 1987:69)
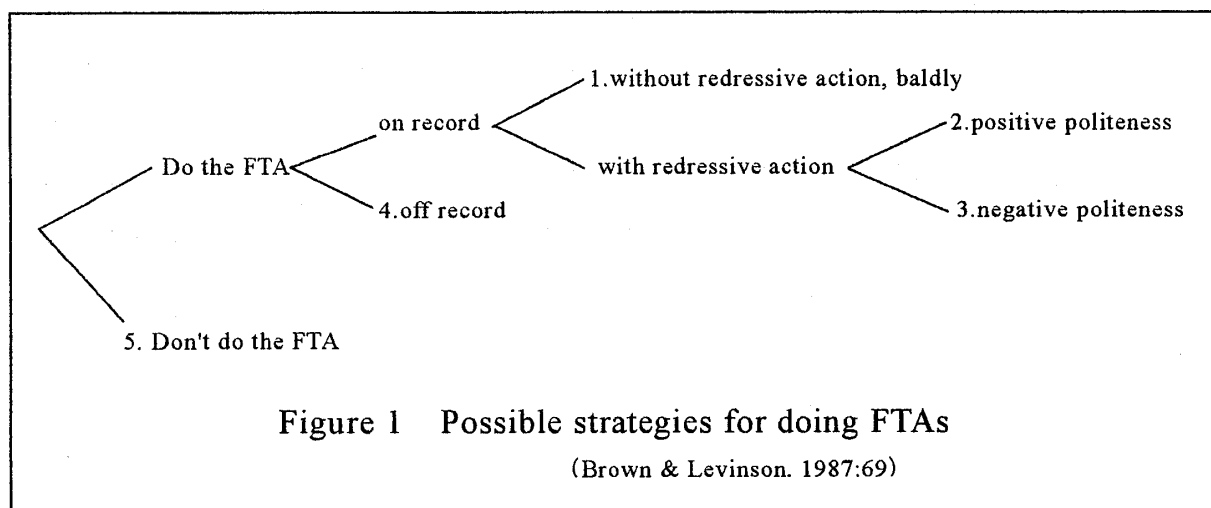
1. Method of research

The informants included four graduate students in their twenties (male: 2, female: 2). They are students who lead a normal campus life. However, they are well grounded in linguistics.

The four students observed the situations in which they had conversations with others in their regular life, for six hours a day. Specific days were not fixed for the research. They were asked to choose any one day in the first two weeks of November, 2003, and observe and record their language use on that day. The record includes two essential points. One is the frequency and actual states of FTAs. The frequency is the number of times of committing FTAs that damaged "face" in the six hours. The other is the type of strategy applied in committing an FTA. At the same time, they described the circumstances of committing an FTA.

By using this method, the "observer's paradox" (Labov, 1972) can be evaded. In other words, an observer wants to observe the natural conversations held by an informant when the observer does not observe. However, the existence of the observer before the informant changes the environment of the conversation. To resolve this contradiction, in this study, the language behavior of an informant was observed and recorded by him/herself.

However, there were problems in carrying out this method. One is that observation of one's own language behavior may affect the language use of a speaker. With regard to this point, it is considered that there was no profound effect because the four students were accustomed to examine their language use on a regular basis. The other problem was that the observation was impossible without a knowledge of the politeness theory. The FTA is a concept that no one who has not learned the politeness theory can easily understand. Therefore, the range of informants is limited. This is why the students were used as informants.

2. Results

2.1 Frequency and contents of FTA

The results are shown below.

As shown in Table 1, the numbers of FTAs committed in six hours were 13, 9,   16 and 16 for A, B, C and D respectively. Table 2 shows the outline descriptions of FTAs.

Table 1 Number of FTAs committed			(count)
Speaker* A	B	C	D
13	9	16	16

* A and B: male, C and D: female

Table 2   Contents and conditions of FTAs committed

Contents of FTA	Threatened Face	Conditions of speech
• Declined an offer from a person.	positive	To offer of a gas station attendant.
• Told a person about his error.	positive	To a cram school student who wrote a wrong answer.
• Contradicted an opinion of a person.	positive	Differences of opinion occurred between a professor and a student.
• Asked persons to clear the way.	negative	Several people talked and blocked the road
• Asked a person to come towards him.	negative	To a supermarket employee.
• Interrupted his own speech when giving a person an answer.	negative	A professor asked whether he attended the society.
• Asked a person to offer information.	negative	To a teacher who was doing office work at school.
• Asked a person to do work.	negative	To an office worker at school.
• Ordered a person to do work.	negative	Gave a cram school student an assignment.
• Called a person.	negative	Called a person who was writing a report.

Table 3   Cases in which FTAs were not committed

• The student contradicted a neighborhood man when he complained about the student.

• The student walked around a clerk who blocked a passage, because he seemed to be busy.

• The student wanted to ask three questions about a person's presentation. He asked only two of them, not the third one.

• The student silently waited her turn behind a senior student who was using a copy machine.

The FTA includes behaviors to challenge the negative and positive faces. The behaviors of a speaker to challenge the positive face of an addressee include arguments against a person's points and refusal of an opponent's proposals. In the meantime, the behaviors of a speaker to intrude the negative face of an addressee included requests for certain behaviors to an addressee and interruption of an addressee's behaviors.

The following discourses were observed in this research:

(1) A filling-station attendant suggested a car inspection for A.

Attendant : Did you have the car inspection explained?

A : Yes, I had an explanation the other day.

As a matter of fact, A had not had an explanation about a car inspection. However, he did not refuse in express terms. He answered that he had no need for explanation at that time because he had the explanation the other day. This speech of A to the attendant was issued because A gave consideration to the positive face of the attendant.

(2) C talked to X who was producing the documents with a word processor.

X : (writing a paper)

C : Have you got a minute to spare, Mr. X ?

The question, "Have you got a minute to spare?" is called a pre-request. C asks whether X has time to have a conversation with C. Normally, a speech, "I don't understand this. Would you mind letting me know" follows. This pre-request of C is made considering the negative face (X does not want to be disturbed) of X who is studying.

1.2   Applied strategies

Table 4 shows the type and count of strategies applied in committing FTAs. The symbols

Table 4   Types of applied strategies   (count)

Speaker	s1	s2	s3	s4	s5
A	2	2	6	0	3
B	1	2	3	1	2
C	3	1	7	1	4
D	0	2	5	2	7

s1 to s5 in the table correspond to "Strategy 1: without redressive action, baldly" to "Strategy 5: Don't do the FTA" in Fig. 1 respectively.

Table 4 shows the following tendency: (1) there are many negative forms of "politeness" in Strategy 3; (2) there are many cases of Strategy 5; and (3) there is a comparatively small number of FTAs involving a severe tone without using relaxation behaviors as in Strategy 1 (without redressive action, baldly).

3. Analysis

It has been often pointed out that Strategy 3 is often used when FTAs are committed in daily life. The Japanese language has a sophisticated honorification system. Linguistic behaviors considering the addressee's prestige (face) are generated through the use of honorific expressions. The linguistic behaviors are strongly rooted in the culture. In particular, polite expressions have the characteristics of creating a certain social distance between a speaker and an addressee. Therefore, they can be easily combined with the negative politeness.

In the meantime, as in Strategy 5, people sometimes make a choice not to do an FTA. In half of all cases observed in this research, students did not contradict or make excuses, but kept silent and smiled at seniors who gave advice to them. From an analysis of the information reported by the observers, these cases were the scenes in which a speaker considered that he/she had a cause to be given opinions or warned. In Japanese culture, people frankly admit their error. Gracefulness is considered to be a virtue in Japanese culture. In the meantime, giving excuses in one way or another sometimes gives the partner a more unfavorable impression. It is supposed that this awareness in Japanese culture contributes to the choice of Strategy 5. In the study of politeness theory, discussions tend to be focused on performing FTAs.   However, in the Japanese language, "Don't do the FTA" also functions as an important strategy.

Finally, let us discuss the fact that Strategy 1 is rarely chosen in daily life, and the difference from studies about television discussion programs. In the discussion programs, Strategy 1 is carried out more frequently than in daily life. This difference is caused by the specificity of the data of the television programs.

In media research, it is well known that the choice of media affects the contents of messages. Here, the propositional contents of messages are not directly affected. It is the higher-level explicature that is affected.

The higher-level explicature will now be presented.

It is supposed that the answer by Mary to the following question (3) by Bill has the explicatures (4). Explicature (4a) is called "base-level explicature"; and (4b), (4c) and (4d) are called "higher-level explicature". In the case of example (3), the base-level explicature of (4a) is a proposition expressed by the logical form obtained by the linguistic interpretation of the utterance through the pragmatic process. In the higher-level explicature (4b), the base-level explicature is embedded in the assumed scheme expressing the speech act "Mary says that _____". In (4c) and (4d), the base-level explicature is embedded in assumed schemes expressing propositional attitude, "Mary believes that _____" and "Mary is happy that _____".

(3) Bill: Did your son visit you at the weekend?

     Mary (happily): He did.

(4)   a.   Mary's son visited her at the weekend.

      b.   Mary says that her son visited her at the weekend.

      c.   Mary believes that her son visited her at the weekend.

      d.   Mary is happy that her son visited her at the weekend.

(Carston 2002: 119)

The higher-level explicature is also generated when messages are conveyed by mass media. One of the higher-level explicatures in television discussion programs is "The utterance _____ by me is largely a performance". Stage directions are indispensable to make a program attractive even if it is a television discussion program. This is understood among all performers (literally a 'script' is used) and it supports the construction of a program in the background. This preliminary understanding is shared by audiences as well as the staff and performers of the program. Thus, even if a speech is made with a severe tone without using relaxation behavior as in Strategy 1, the level of challenge to a partner's face is reduced by the higher-level explication.

4. Conclusion

This study revealed the following:

(1) Negative politeness is often applied when FTAs are committed in daily life. Though this has been pointed out, it was supported by the results of this research.

(2) In some cases, "Don't do the FTA" is chosen. One reason for this is considered to be that there is a culture in Japan in which gracefulness without excuse is considered to be a virtue.

(3) There were differences between the results obtained from this research and those from the studies of television discussion programs. It is considered that the differences were caused by the change of higher-level explicature through the intervention of the mass media.

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