Reconsidering the Concept of Negative Politeness '*Enryo*' in Japan

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines what can be described as a Japanese cultural way of showing a desire to avoid imposing on others, *enryo* (遠慮). The examination reveals that Japanese conversational participants cooperate to achieve a mutual pragmatic goal of avoiding imposing on each other, or showing a desire to be unimpeded. The enactment of *enryo* can be crucial for conversational participants in Japan, where face sensitivity is considered to be high. The ritual of *enryo* serves to achieve the desire to show respect for the hearers' personal space or can be used at the same time to protect the speaker from being impeded.

The paper suggests that Japanese native speakers employ some means of indicating *enryo* that are not predicted by previous conceptions of politeness theory. Acknowledging one of the functions of *enryo* which can serve the desire to be unimposing, I argue that the social meaning of *enryo* shares a common practice with the concept of negative face suggested by Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. In this paper, I question the adequacy of criticism and arguments made by some scholars who have claimed that negative face cannot be applied to Asian culture since the definition of negative face puts extreme emphasis on individualism. The goal of this paper is to propose a new perspective for observing Japanese communication behaviors of *enryo* that will be meaningful and useful to explain polite behavior in Japan and attempt to relate it to politeness theory, particularly the concept of negative face.

Brown and Levinson's concept of 'face'

Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory is based on the concept of 'face'. They proposed that 'face' is the key motivating force for politeness. Their notion of face consists of positive and negative face wants. Positive face is a person's desire to be appreciated and approved of by others in terms of personality, desires, behavior, values and so on. On the other hand, negative face is a person's desire not to be impeded by others, the desire to be free to act as he/she chooses and not be imposed upon. In other words, "negative face represents a desire for autonomy, and positive face represents a desire for approval" (Spencer-Oatey, 1998: 104). While most if not all scholars agree that the positive face in their model is relatively universal, Brown and Levinson's conception of negative face has been criticized as inadequate in cross-cultural studies.

Criticism by Asian and other scholars

The notion of 'face' suggested first by Goffman (1963, 1986) is useful to explain politeness theory as a means of avoiding threats to a person's basic social need. However, several Asian scholars including, Ide (1989), Matsumoto (1988), Gu (1990) and Mao (1994) have argued that Brown and Levinson's (1978; 1987) politeness theory, which is based on two kinds of 'face', exhibits limited applicability in many Asian cultures. For instance, Matsumoto's (1988) criticism of Brown and Levinson (1987) states that "they have ignored the interpersonal and social perspective on face, and they have overemphasized the notion of individual freedom and autonomy" (Matsumoto, 1988: 248). Bargiela-Chiappini argues that Brown and Levinson misrepresent Goffman's original concept of face, stating that "individual emphasis has been picked up and elaborated by B & L" (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003: 1454). Thus, many scholars agree that the notion of face which Brown and Levinson adopted from Goffman (1967) is useful; however, they argue against the adequacy of the positive-negative model and its extreme individualistic emphasis in cross-cultural research. In light of such arguments, this paper seeks to explore the conceptual significance of *enryo* for Japanese communication and reconsiders the interrelationship of *enryo* and negative politeness theory in relation to the past literature.

Traditional (classic) concept of communication styles in Japan

Doi (1973) addressed the concept of *amae* nearly forty years ago to elucidate Japanese patterns of communication. Although the concept of *amae* remains important in understanding Japanese ways of communication, there is little reference to the concept of *enryo* in the literature on Japanese interpersonal and intercultural communication, and to the best of my knowledge it has not been explored in relation to politeness theory. However, Doi (1973) attempted to explain *enryo* as "nonverbal empathic orientation, a fondness for unanimous agreement, ambiguity and hesitation of self-expression, *honne* (true mind) and *tatemae* (principle) in Japanese communication from the perspective of *amae*" (1973: 95). Moreover, because Doi's explanation suggests that *amae* generally suppresses verbalization and activates *enryo*, *amae* could be considered to be a facilitator of *enryo*, which can be used to minimize frank self-expression.

Similarly, Okabe (1983) stresses that *amae* underlies the Japanese emphasis on the group over the individual. He states that "a group player is more liked than a solo player……the Japanese, therefore, display great cautiousness in expressing personal opinions and in modifying their opinions to be consistent with those of others around them" (1983: 26).

Concept of *Enryo*

As explained above, *enryo* is "unanimous agreement, ambiguity and hesitation of self-expression in Japanese communication from the perspective of *amae*" (Doi, 1982: 36).
In order to express empathic orientation called *omoiyari* (思いやり), conversational participants in Japan work together in managing linguistic social exchanges. For example, a participant's denial or refusal such as "*Ie, ie*" ("*No, no*") or "*Tondemonai*" ("*Not at all*") in response to an invitation or a favor serves as a polite response to show hesitation of self-expression in order to

show care for the other speaker's face. Since a group player tends to better liked than an individualist, both participants mutually attempt to display caution in expressing personal opinions and modify their opinions to be consistent with those of others.

Common expressions used to show *enryo* and saving the other's face includes "*Sumimasen*" ("I am sorry") and "*Moshiwakenai*" ("I am troubling you"). Both expressions are used to serve as polite responses to show consideration for the other speaker's face as well as showing a desire to be unimposing. In Japanese relationships, a person who does not know how to show consideration for the others' face or show a desire to be unimposing is considered to be impolite and imposing or *zuzushii* (greedy) or even *katte* (selfish). As much as interdependence or *amae* (甘え) is accepted in Japanese society in many contexts, initial polite rejection of offers or invitations such as *tondemonai* (definitely no) or *moushiwakenai* (I am troubling you) are socially expected and considered desirable in the right amount. Nevertheless, when a Japanese person holds back initially, politely rejecting offer of favor or declining an invitation to show reluctance to trouble the other person, the person who extended the offer responds by saying something like *mizukusai* (overly reserved) or *yosoyososhii* (acting like a stranger). The challenge for many people is to understand the balance between being *mizukusai* (overly reserved) and *zuzushii* (imposing or greedy).

Reconsidering the concept of *enryo*

I have thus far provided an overview of the classic sense of *enryo*. In this section, I will argue that *enryo* has an additional function to the empathic orientation or ambiguity and hesitation of self-expression in Japanese communication. In fact, contrary to many communication researchers, Maynard (1997) regarded *amae* as a basis for Japanese direct and confrontational communication. According to Maynard, "*amae* can be seen as that part of the social contract that allows emotions to be freely expressed with approval" (1997: 35)", while Doi and others believed that "*amae* is often considered to be a facilitator of *enryo*, which can be used to minimize frank expression" (Doi 1982: 186). For example, Tokunaga's (1994) empirical findings showed that Japanese university students who participated in her survey have less *enryo* when they are communicating with their family members, close friends, and boyfriends/girlfriends to whom they can show *amae* than when they are communicating with acquaintances, *sempai* (seniors), *kohai* (juniors), and teachers to whom they can not show *amae*" (1994: 156).

Just as Maynard's view differed from many researchers, in relation to the concept of *enryo*, I would also suggest that the concept of *enryo* has an additional function other than the traditional sense of the concept of *enryo*. In addition to the traditional sense, which was discussed in the previous section, it can be regarded as a basis for an indirect and non-confrontational way of expressing one's desire to be unimpeded (or unimposed upon). For instance, "many non-Japanese speakers may find that directness is logical and associated with power whereas indirectness might be the norm in communication in Japan. In Japanese interaction, saying no or expressing anything in a direct manner is too face-threatening to risk. Therefore, negative responses are often rephrased as positive ones such as "*soo desu kedo* (that's right, but)" or

"*soreha chotto*" ("it is a bit difficult"), which can be quite confusing for many non-native speakers of Japanese." (Takita 2010: 21).

Unlike the conceptual significance of *enryo* in traditional Japanese communication, *enryo* can also be seen as the social contract that allows rejection to be expressed indirectly to one another. Although the term *enryo*'s traditional concept is established and considered as empathic orientation as well as ambiguity and hesitation of self-expression, I argue that *enryo* can also function as an indirect way of saying 'no' to an offer or an invitation by accommodating others' feelings. For instance, when a speaker employs a traditional sense of *enryo*, he or she might refuse by politely saying "*tondemonai*". In this case, the speaker chooses an empathic orientation in response to an invitation to show concern for the other speaker's face. However, the non-traditional function of *enryo* can be employed differently by young people today. The speaker may use the same response "*tondemonai*" in order to show his or her desire not to be impeded by the speaker. In this sense, the speaker is using negative politeness to show his or her desire to be free from being imposed on. The latter function of *enryo*, therefore can be considered to be similar to the concept of negative face which represents a desire for autonomy, which fits the Brown and Levinson (1978) definition cited above.

DISCUSSION

After understanding the additional function of *enryo* which can be used to express rejection without losing the speaker's face, the question is "*Does the concept of non-traditional enryo help explain the concept of negative face in politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson?*" In order to analyze and understand the new concept of *enryo* and its relation to negative politeness in Japanese communication, we will first take a look at a conversation that took place after finishing a committee meeting of NPO in Japan. Nomura is the president and director of the committee, and Okano is one of the officers on the committee board. In the committee, they have a hierarchical relationship (with Nomura in the position of power over Okano), however, on a personal level, they are friends who occasionally have dinner together.

1. Nomura: *Okano san. Konya gohan dokkade goissyo shimasen ka?*
(Mr. Okano , why don't you come out to dinner with us somewhere tonight?)
2. *Okano: Iya iya, konya wa goenryo shitokimasu. (with smiles and giggles)*
(No, I will refrain myself from going out tonight).
3. Nomura: *Iya, sonna enryo shinaide kudasai yo.*
(Please feel free to join us).
4. Okano: *Iya, honto kyouwa kazokutono yakusoku ga aru node enryo sasete itadakimasu.*
(Really, I have a previous engagement with my family tonight, so I won't be able to go).
5. Nomura: *Aa soudesuka. Sorejyaa, mata jikai ni zehi.*
(Oh, I understand….then, let's definitely go next time).

As can be inferred from this conversation, Okano uses go*enryo shitokimasu* (I will refrain myself

from going out tonight) in line 2 to show his desire to be unimpeded by Nomura instead of using *enryo* as empathic orientation. Moreover, in line 4, Okano again uses *enryo sasete itadakimasu* (will refrain myself from going) to assert his desire not to be imposed upon rather than showing respect for the Nomura's space in response to his invitation.
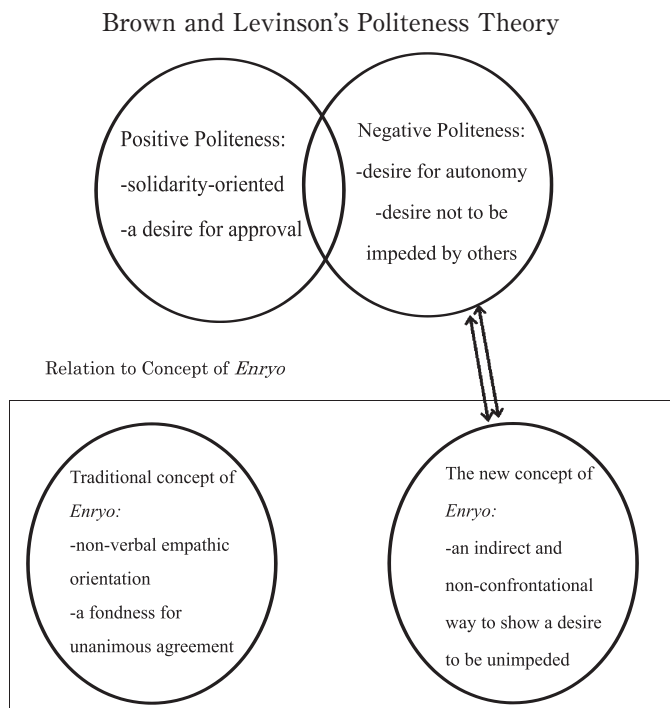
Rethinking the concept of negative politeness in Japan

In the past, Matsumoto (1988) challenged Brown's and Levinson's (1978) conceptualization of face. Matsumoto argued as follows:

> loss of face is associated with the perception of others that one has not comprehended and acknowledged the structure and hierarchy of the group…. A Japanese generally must understand where he/she stands in relation to other members of the group or society, and must acknowledge his/her dependence on the others. Acknowledgement and maintenance of the relative position of others, rather than preservation of an individual's proper territory, governs all social interaction. (Matsumoto, 1988: 405).

Therefore, Matsumoto implies that Brown and Levinson have ignored the social perspective of face and overly emphasized the notion of individual autonomy. While I support Matsumoto's position in terms of the importance of a social perspective of face rather than individual autonomy

Chart 1

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Positive Politeness:
-solidarity-oriented
-a desire for approval

Negative Politeness:
-desire for autonomy
-desire not to be
impeded by others

Relation to Concept of *Enryo*

Traditional concept of
Enryo:
-non-verbal empathic
orientation
-a fondness for
unanimous agreement

The new concept of
Enryo:
-an indirect and
non-confrontational
way to show a desire
to be unimpeded

in Japanese society, I argue that the new perspective of *enryo* used by a Japanese speaker as a desire to be unimpeded by others is very similar to the concept of negative face proposed by Brown and Levinson. As we have seen in the conversation by Nomura and Okano in the previous section, non-traditional concept of *enryo* is used not as a polite response to show care for the hearer's face, but as an indirect refusal to show the speaker's desire to be unimpeded. In this sense, it can be said that the non-traditional function of *enryo* shares a common concept with the Brown and Levinson's negative face. as it is shown in Chart 1.

CONCLUSION

While it is undoubtedly true that particular definitions of face are culture-specific, as many scholars have pointed out, Japanese notion of *enryo* as a face want provides evidence for a common phenomenon observed in negative face as suggested by Brown and Levinson. By reconsidering the concept of *enryo* from a new perspective, we can understand that there is an additional function of *enryo*, which serves as an indirect polite way to express refusal to an invitation or an offer.

The classic concept of *enryo* is described as an empathic orientation and hesitation of self-expression by minimizing frank expression, which can be seen to protect the hearer's negative face. However, people nowadays, particularly the younger generations, are using *enryo* more conveniently and more as a mean to show their refusal to an invitation. This might indicate that the younger generations in Japan are becoming more individualistic and less sensitive to empathic orientation toward others. Therefore, unlike looking at the collectivistic perspective of face argued by Japanese scholars in the past, the new concept of *enryo* can be said to be similar to the concept of negative face, since both negative face and *enryo* can be seen as the social contract that allows rejection to be expressed indirectly to others by satisfying one's desire to be unimpeded on an individual level.

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日本におけるネガティブポライトネス　—"遠慮"概念の再考—

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　本論文では，日本社会における"遠慮"の概念をネガティブポライトネスの視点から考察し，現代社会でいかに若者たちによって異なった概念で使用されているかを再考する。ブラウン＆レビンソンのポライトネス理論と比較対照することにより，どのように新しい"遠慮"がネガティブポライトネス方略として表現されているかを指摘する。

　日本の伝統的な親しい二者関係を基盤とする，思いやりや対人配慮の心性は失われつつあり，遠慮という言葉を若い世代は便利なポライトネス方略として採用している。本来，遠慮とは相手の要求を配慮するものとして協調的な概念で使われてきたのに対し，現代では自分の自己的な欲求（他者に邪魔されたくない，踏み込まれたくない欲求）を満たす目的で使われている。その欲求はブラウン＆レビンソンが提出したネガティブポライトネスの概念と非常に近い概念と言える。

　この共通点を分析することにより，いかに日本の現代社会において若い世代の人たちが異なった種類の人間関係を生きているかを指摘する。