



A sociolinguistic and sociocultural approach to attitudinal dispositions of graduated students toward the business Japanese language

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Abstract

Effective usage of nonverbal and verbal communication in Japanese such as gestures, mimics, silence and employing grammatical or lexical honorifics plays a significant role in determining the success of foreign language learners in obtaining their intended employment. This study examines the second language (L2) learning of politeness and social interaction in professional life within sociocultural and sociolinguistic competence in situ among those L2 learners of Japanese who took the sociolinguistics competence courses and those who did not. The main purpose of this study to exhibit the importance of employing Sociolinguistic Competence courses to the Japanese Language Education Curriculum in order to have students understand cross-cultural and sociocultural phenomena. In the Sociolinguistic Competence courses graduates do not only learn the theoretical sociocultural background of Japanese society and language. In addition, they familiarize themselves with various practical topics such as social manners, those pertaining to e-mail, the telephone, name cards (*meishi*), and even the seating orders used in Japanese business. The current study analyzed 80 participants who are graduated and are working with native Japanese speakers in their professional lives. Based on the study findings, implications for teaching sociolinguistic and nonverbal/verbal communication tools were explored.

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Keywords: Japanese Sociolinguistic, Japanese Honorifics, Business Japanese, Japanese ambiguity, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

The globalization of economies and expansion of mobility between societies has brought about the need for understanding the “other”. Particularly in professional (business) life, cooperation among individual(s) and group(s) of different cultural backgrounds (Sun, 2011) has become significantly important in order to sustain a successful daily work life.

As it is generally discussed and known, “Japaneseness” (Hendry, 1995, p. 130) in professional life has been criticized since the late 1970s and early 1980s by Japanese scholars from the viewpoint of ethnocentrism at work (Kondo, 1981), uchi/soto (inner-outer group) relationships in business life (Nakane, 1967, 1972), group consciousness in professional life (Inamura, 1979), etc. Although those kinds of behaviors in Japanese society have been weakening, they can still be seen today in professional life.

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Japan's significance to the world economy is well known both in Turkey as well as the rest of the world. Recently, it is known that the economic relationship between Japan and Turkey has been deepening. According to data from JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization), Japan's exports to Turkey climbed to US\$3.6 billion in 2012 from US\$2.7 billion in 2009. Needless to say, these economic relationships have had an effect on Japanese language education at our university, with steady enrolments in both Japanese Language and Japanese Business courses. A recent study (Özşen, 2014, p. 301) estimates that about 47.6 percent of all Japanese learners in Turkey elected Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Japanese Language Teaching Department (JLT Department hereinafter) in order to get a job with a Japanese Company in Turkey or an International Company after graduation.

Therefore, Japanese language in professional life has been becoming more important. Based on this reality, business Japanese education at the JLT Department and its outcomes from the viewpoint of language "both non-verbal and verbal communication" and social behaviors will be the focal points in this paper.

1.1. Literature review/Theoretical Background

1.1.1. Nonverbal and Verbal Communication in Japanese

Nonverbal communication is also a significant tool of communication as well as verbal communication. In this sense, the Japanese language has been widely investigated both in nonverbal and verbal communication acts. Especially for the L2 learners of Japanese this phenomenon can lead to many visible and invisible problems. For instance, silence in the Japanese language is one of the most unpredictable nonverbal communication forms with which unfamiliar foreigners suffer. In most situations the hearer, when faced with a silent answer, cannot determine whether it is a positive answer or a negative one. In a leading study, Lebra (2007) identifies Japanese silence in four dimensions – truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment and defiance. Lebra projects the historical background of silence and these four dimensions on a Buddhism base, which is now a concrete communicational tool of Japanese daily life. Sugiyama (Tekmen) (2003) states that in cultures for which silence has a meaning for showing respect, such as Japanese culture, speakers of that culture will immediately interpret silence as meaning respect, however, in cultures which lack this notion, silence would mean something else or nothing.

On the other hand, verbal speech acts such as honorifics, politeness and ambiguous expressions have similar sentiments with which non-native speakers of Japanese struggle. Showing respect or being polite both in verbal and nonverbal communication can be thought as a perception tool, which is left to the speakers' free-will in many cultures. However, in Japanese even if the speaker has no will to show respect to the hearer; there is a cultural urgency, which automatically works in the speakers' mind and affects his/her speech and willingly or non-willingly, the speaker chooses the best proper expression (presumably an appropriate polite expression). Again in Sugiyama (Tekmen)'s study most of the L2 learners of Japanese had serious dilemmas with this notion of having to use polite expressions even to the people whom you do not respect" (2003, p. 255-256).

1.1.2. Cultural actors in Japanese Language

1.1.2.1. Contrastive Linguistic Perspective

From the perspective of linguistic typology there are four main types of honorifics (addressee, referent, bystander, situational), which are expressed according to the social status of the participants.

The most common and well-known theory is the T-V distinction theory, which presents in many Indo-European and some Asian languages and was introduced by Brown and Gilman (1960). T refers to the singular second person *tu* in Latin, V refers to the plural second person *vos* and almost everyone is familiar with this structure. It should be noted that Modern English has only the *you* form, which is derived from *ye* after the Norman Conquest. Therefore, before the Conquest, English had also T-V distinction.

Another, linguistic typology of honorifics is grammatical, lexical and both grammatical and lexical honorifics. For instance, T-V distinction is grammatical, on the other hand Asian languages like Javanese, Japanese or Thai consists of lexical honorifics that they have different nouns for the same object. For example, Thai has three lexical items for the word house depending on the situation.

The Japanese language has many and their usage in context varies in order to emphasize the rank or to show the social distance between the speaker and the hearer. There is no T-V distinction; however, as it is clear in (1), there is a grammatical object-verb agreement in some situations, which is used only for the politest or humblest expressions. Object honorification construction is discussed by Boeckx and Niinuma (2004) which is a special case of more familiar object agreement configurations and that Chomsky's (2000) government-like Agree relation.

- 1) a. Taroo-ga Tanaka sensee-o tasuke-ta
Taro-Nom Tanaka Professor-Acc help-Past
“Taro helped Prof.Tanaka.” (non-honorific)
- b. Taroo-ga Tanaka sensee-o o-tasuke(-)si-ta
Taro-Nom Tanaka Professor-Acc HP-help-su-Past
“Taro helped Prof.Tanaka.” (object honorific)

1.1.2.2. Socio-Linguistic Perspective

Another important notion in understanding Japanese speech acts is in-group (*uchi*) and out-group (*soto*) members distinction. Establishing identity within a group is an important issue in Japan. Sugiyama-Lebra uses “be like everybody else” (1976, p. 28) when she discusses collectivism and empathy in social relations in Japanese society. Therefore, as a Japanese individual, considering the “other” and managing the behavior and expressions according to himself/herself is one of the first things that a Japanese individual is supposed to do to establish or sustain relations. This effort shapes the language expressions as well. For instance, in a speech context *uchi* members are often (especially in business life obligatory) humbled, while *soto* members are honored. Honorifics, polite language and humble language usage become a keypoint to understand this social distinction, which is widely spread throughout the socio cultural atmosphere of Japan.

On the other hand, from the perspective of cognitive linguistics Tekmen (2012) states that the languages of Turkish and Japanese show similarities in which most politeness expressions cannot be explained by the Brown and Levinson (1987)'s politeness theory. They share some common facts under the Japanese term ‘keigo’ or Turkish ‘kibarlık’ for which factors such as human relations, situations and personal decisions affect the usage of politeness. However, as in Brown and Levinson's theory, all interactants have a face. Significantly, they identify the two relevant terms, namely ‘negative face’ and ‘positive face’ such as:

negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction- i.e. freedom of action and freedom from imposition

positive face: the positive consistent self-image or personality (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61)

This study agrees with Tekmen (2012) in that even though Turkish and Japanese have major differences in grammatical politeness, the Politeness Phenomena in both languages shows similarities both in socio linguistic and cognitive linguistic patterns. That is why learning keigo and using it in professional life for Turkish learners could be relatively easier if viewed through common factors.

1.2. Research questions

As was discussed above, not only knowledge of Japanese language but also how to apply it to professional life is one of the most important issues for a learner of the language. For this reason, since 2010 the JLT Department has established new classes called “Sociolinguistic Competence 1 and 2” (SC1 & 2) for two semesters which are centered on and associated with Japanese business life. These lectures emphasize subjects such as the traditional structure of Japanese society, group and individual roles in Japanese culture, social identity, social distance, cultural behavior patterns and their relationship with Japanese language.

Therefore, this paper will discuss whether the Sociolinguistic Competence I and II courses have any reflection on cross-cultural communication of JLT Department graduates during business life in Japanese companies. The following research questions were designed to establish the flow of this paper.

R.Q.1. Is there any significant difference between the graduates who have taken the Sociolinguistic Competence Courses and those who have not in their perception of Japanese language ambiguity?

R.Q.2. Does internalization of Japanese behavior patterns such as *tatemae/hone* (Realself-facade) during business life differ by groups who have taken the Sociolinguistic Competence Courses and those who have not?

R.Q.3. Is there any significant difference between the graduates who have taken the Sociolinguistic Competence Courses and those who have not, in terms of having difficulties/troubles in their use of Japanese honorific expressions?

In this way, we expect to establish whether or not SC1 & 2 courses in the JLT department have any significant and literal influence on the “field”.

2. Method

2.1. Sample / Participants

Since 1998 there have been about 330 graduates from the JLT Department. Almost 200 of them graduated before 2010, and 130 after 2010. The target population of this study is a person who graduated from JLT Department and currently works at a Japanese company. As of 15th February 2014, as far as the researchers of this study could confirm, 160 graduates have been working at Japanese companies. A total number of 80 of them responded to the questionnaire. As a result of their responses, 57.5 percent of the participants were female, and 42.5 percent are male. Exactly half of them (40) graduated from the JLT department after 2010, which was the year the Sociolinguistic Competence courses first began. At the time of data collection, 68.8 percent of the respondents were working in the service sector such as airlines, tourism, education, commerce/trade, finance, and

journalism. On the other hand 31.2 percent of the respondents were working in the industrial sector. Most of them (82.5 percent) were working with Japanese staff in the same office. In addition, more than half of them (52.5 percent) always used Japanese at work, and 20.7 of them often used it at work. In addition, most of them had, in some capacity, been to Japan (0-6 months 43.8%, 6-12 months 11.3%, 1-3 years 16.3%, more than 3 years 8.8%). Furthermore, nearly all of them (97.5%) used English as a foreign language along with Japanese in their professional life.

Table 1. Basic Information of the Participants

		N	%
Gender	Male	34	42.5
	Female	46	57.5
Graduation Year	1998-2009	40	50
	2010-2014	40	50
Work Sector	Service	55	68.8
	Industry	25	31.2
Have Japanese colleague at office	Yes	66	82.5
	No	14	17.5
Have been to Japan	3 years or more	7	8.8
	1-3 years	13	16.3
	6-12 months	9	11.3
	0-6 months	35	43.8
	Never	16	20
Using Japanese at work	Always	42	52.5
	Often	23	28.7
	Sometimes	3	3.8
	Rarely	5	6.3
	Never	7	8.8

2.2. Instrument(s)

The data we used in this paper were collected through structured questionnaire form, which was composed of 26 questions. There were three sections. The first one was basic information such as age, income, marital status, etc. The second section of the questionnaire was about (cross-cultural) communication at work. In this section, the context of work that participants were supposed to do, difficulties and/or troubles that participants experienced during work life was explored. The third section of the questionnaire was about the attitudes of participants towards Japanese work life from the viewpoint of socio-cultural differences. In this paper, we will mostly use the data that were gained from first and third sections. In order to analyze the data SPSS 20 were used.

2.3. Data collection procedures

This study was conducted from 15th February to 20th March 2014. The questionnaire was uploaded to the Internet. Then, the graduates were informed and asked to fill in the questionnaire in emails and messages via social media. The language of the questionnaire was Turkish.

3. Results

3.1. Does the ambiguity of Japanese Language make graduates' business life harder?

Aimai, which can be translated as “ambiguity”, is one of the cornerstones of Japanese society, language, and the communication process. As is largely known, due to the geographical and cultural conditions, Japanese society is a very tightly knit community (Davies & Ikeno, 2002). If one family member eats too much, another in the family eats less. Thus, everyone became very conscious of how they affected their neighbors and community members. That is why “Others” used to mean “Self” in particularly rural communities in Japan. In such tight communities as Japan's, it was key to get along together and work alongside each other. Even though several centuries have passed, it can be said that today the perception and behavioral patterns, and also the language expressions are still mostly evident. Most people consider the harmony of the group before the individual's demands, and still avoid expressing their ideas outwardly. Expressing feelings or asking for something directly may be considered as destructive behavior. Therefore, even saying “yes” or “no” can be a significant problem during conversation in today's Japan. In the present study, it was revealed that 67.5 percent of the respondents who did not take the Sociolinguistic Competence courses responded that *aimai* expressions and behaviors made work and communication more difficult. On the other hand, only 37.5 percent of graduates who took the courses thought that the usage of *aimai* expressions and behaviors made the work difficult. An independent-samples t-test was administered to compare the consideration of ambiguity between those two groups and it revealed a significant difference in the scores for the group who took the class ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 0.99$) and those who did not ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.14$) was also seen, $t(78) = 3.75$, $p < 0.001$. Thus, it can be inferred that graduates who took the Sociolinguistic Competence course had a tendency to comprehend and internalize the language and socio-cultural behavior patterns of Japanese.

Table 2. “Ambiguity of Japanese Language makes the work harder” by graduation year

	Graduation Year	
	1998-2009 (%)	After 2010 (%)
Strongly agree	14 (35.0)	4 (10.0)
Agree	13 (32.5)	11 (27.5)
Neither agree or disagree	9 (22.5)	10 (25.0)
Disagree	4 (10.0)	12 (30.0)
Strongly disagree	0	3 (7.5)
Total	40 (100)	40 (100)

Table 3. Comparison of the Graduate Groups Perceptions regarding the Ambiguity in Japanese

Graduation Year	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Before 2010	40	2.07	.99			
After 2010	40	2.97	1.14	78	-3.752	.000

3.2. Internalization of Japanese Behavior Pattern (Real-self and Facade)

Of course, this kind of concept is not unique to Japanese society, but it is instinctively being used in daily life in Japan. *Tatemaie* is a kind of behavior pattern that has been used in the notions of *omote*

and *ura*, literally front and back, and deeply related with in-group and out-group as Hendry points out (Hendry, 1995, p.46).

The collectivist idea of traditional Japanese society, the culture of living and working together (*kyôdôtai*) eventually makes the perception of the ‘good’ and ‘not good’ quite similar inside the group. Kato (2000) also emphasizes how important to understand each other through non-verbal communication tools. As a foreigner who works with Japanese (even in the home country), it is seriously important to comprehend the concept, in order to understand language they use and behavior they display, and to keep the professional relationship running smoothly. In some cases, people are expected to understand what the counterpart says only by his/her eyes as in a Japanese proverb/saying “*Me wakuchihodoni mono woiiu*” (eyes speak as much as the mouth does). Or in some cases, both in professional and social life, the group members are expected to understand each other even if there is no concrete interaction or written rules (*Anmoku no ryôkai*).

As explained briefly above, those concepts and behavioral/linguistic patterns have been theoretically given to the students through “culture, history, society, linguistic” courses along with Sociolinguistic Competence courses particularly since 2010. Here we would like to test whether or not graduates comprehended the cultural concept and reflect it in their daily professional life. The data indicate that those respondents who graduated after 2010 show a higher level of *tatemae* behavior in their professional lives than respondents who graduated from 1998 to 2009. About 75 percent of the respondents who graduated after 2010 highlight that they do not express their negative feelings, ideas, comments concerning work, while 50 percent of the respondents who graduated from 1998 to 2009 say they do. When we conducted independent-samples *t*-test to compare the *tatemae* behavior of those two groups, a significant difference in the scores for the group who took the class ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.10$) and those who did not ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.13$) was also seen, $t(78) = 1.99$, $p = .049$. In other words, participants who took the Sociolinguistic Competence I and II courses have a tendency to internalize the Japanese-style behavior patterns more than those who did not take the courses.

Table 4. “I act as Japanese and undertake *tatemae*” by graduation year

	Graduation Year	
	1998-2009 (%)	After 2010 (%)
Strongly agree	6 (15.0)	13 (32.5)
Agree	14 (35.0)	17 (42.5)
Neither agree or disagree	11 (27.5)	4 (10.0)
Disagree	7 (17.5)	4 (10.0)
Strongly disagree	2 (5.0)	2 (5.0)
Total	40 (100)	40 (100)

3.3. Honorific Expressions in Business Life

Basically, honorifics in Japanese are mainly called *keigo* and there are four main categories: a) *sonkeigo* “respectful language”; b) *kenjôgo* “humble language” or “modest language,” and c) *teineigo* “polite language” which is used in neutral situations and most commonly used also in the daily life (i.e., with new friends or colleagues or with unknown people). The last category d) *bikago* “word beautification,” is also widely used in daily life especially with an honorific prefix “O” which is attached to a noun or a verbal noun (VN), however its usage is also very complicated in that some beautified words are lexicalized and without a beautification prefix a word’s meaning will change. For example, let us consider the verb “nigiru” (literal meaning: to hold). This verb’s lexical form is ‘nigiri’ which means “grip”. With the honorific prefix “o” nigiri becomes o-nigiri, which means a “rice ball”, however, without this prefix it retains its proto meaning “grip”. On the other hand, as with

some words such as the famous word “o-sake” which means “alcoholic beverage”, if the honorific prefix is omitted the basic noun “sake” still gives the meaning of “alcoholic beverage” nevertheless in its basic form, it can often sound insulting or harsh.

As it can be seen from Table 5, data indicate that only 15 percent of the respondents who graduated from 1998 to 2009 have problems using Japanese honorifics during professional life, while 37.5 percent of the respondents who graduated after 2010 experience similar problems. It is obvious that participants who did not take the courses have fewer problems in terms of Japanese honorifics. The results of the independent samples *t*-test indicates a statistically significant difference between the graduates from 1998 to 2009 ($M = 1.85$, $SD = .36$) and the graduates after 2010 ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.49$) in terms of having problems with using Japanese honorifics in professional life, $t(78) = 2.33$, $p = .02$.

It can be considered that the sociolinguistic courses did not work in terms of application of Japanese honorifics to the field. However, as a matter of fact, the background of this situation may be explained in a different way. In the Sociolinguistic Competence courses graduates do not only learn the theoretical sociocultural background of Japanese society and language. In addition, they familiarize themselves with various practical topics such as social manners, those pertaining to e-mail, the telephone, name cards (*meishi*), and even the seating orders used in Japanese business. This process reflects the student’s behaviors and perceptions, and raises the awareness of graduates regarding Japanese business life and manners. They become more careful of their behavior and expressions while establishing relations with Japanese. Since they are mostly aware of the importance of honorifics in professional life, this may also explain why participants who graduated since 2010 report that they have more problems in comparison with the rest.

Table 5. “I have problems while using Japanese Honorific Expressions” by graduation year

	Graduation Year	
	1998 to 2009 (%)	After 2010 (%)
Have problem	6 (15.0)	15 (37.5)
Have no problem	34 (85.0)	25 (62.5)
Total	40 (100)	40 (100)

4. Conclusion

The present study revealed that Japanese usage of verbal and nonverbal communication tools and politeness strategy utterances (*keigo*) show significant differences between the graduated students from 1998 to 2009 and since 2010. This radical change in the curriculum shows that learning nonverbal communication tools has a positive effect on learners. Moreover, it can be seen from the analyses that learning non-verbal and verbal communication tools place pressure on the speaker’s decision and speech acts.

In conclusion, it could be confirmed that there are significant differences between the groups who took the courses and those who did not. The interpretation of research findings is restricted due to the number of contributors. However, from the data we introduced in this paper, and the experience we have earned in the field, nevertheless we conclude that courses such as those covering sociolinguistic competence, Japanese society, and Japanese culture, which focus on social and cultural mechanism of the language system, may have meaning in terms of comprehending and internalizing the Japanese socio-cultural, traditional behavior and language patterns, and applying those to professional life. Furthermore, the discussions on this paper might offer an initial insight into the sociolinguistics phenomena and curriculum development studies in Japanese language teaching fields. Additionally, as

researchers of this paper we would like to emphasize that the study is the first step and further research should deal with more detailed aspects related to graduates in their professional life.

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Japonca Öğretmenliği Mezunlarının İş Japoncasına Yönelik Tutumsal Eğilimlerinin Sosyolinguistik ve Sosyokültürel Analizi

Öz

Japonca'yı ikinci dil olarak konuşanlar için jestler, mimikler, sessizlik gibi sözsüz iletişim araçları kadar söze dayalı dilbilgisel ve sözcüksel kibarlık ifadeleri de mezuniyet sonrası profesyonel yaşamlarında önemli bir yer tutmaktadır. Bu çalışmada Japonca öğrenenlerin kibarlık ifadeleri ve sosyal iletişim becerilerini(sözlü-sözsüz) profesyonel iş hayatlarında etkili olarak kullanıp kullanamadıkları incelenmiştir. Özellikle çalışmamız, Japon Toplumunu, Japon Toplumsal Dil Becerileri gibi Japonca'ya Sosyolinguistik açıdan yaklaşan derslerin öğretim programına (Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart Üniversitesi Japonca Öğretmenliği Anabilim Dalı öğretim programı) eklendiği 2010 yılı baz alınarak bu dersleri almadan mezun olan ve bu dersleri alıp mezun olan öğrencilerin iş hayatlarında Japon meslektaşları ile iletişim kurarken zorluk yaşayıp yaşamadıkları hususuna odaklanmıştır. Bahsi geçen derslerde, mezunlar yalnızca dilbilgisel ve sözcüksel kibarlık ifadeleri öğrenmekle kalmayıp, e-posta yazım kuralları, telefonla konuşma kuralları, kartvizit değişimi ve hatta iş toplantılarında hangi düzene göre oturulacağı gibi Japon iş ahlakına dayalı kuralları da teorik ve pratik olarak öğrenmişlerdir. Çalışmamıza Japonlarla iletişim halinde bulunan ve halihazırda profesyonel iş yaşamında olan 80 mezun katılmış, ve sözlü / sözsüz iletişim kurallarının eğitiminin dil eğitimindeki faydaları üzerine sosyolinguistik açıdan yaklaşmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Japonca iş dili, Japonca kibarlık ifadeleri, sosyokültürel, sosyolinguistik, dil tutumları

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