

[Presidential Lecture]

A View of the Development of Im/Politeness Theories from an East Asian Language with Honorification*

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Keywords: im/politeness theories seen from Japanese, language with honorification, form and function

1. Introduction

This lecture is titled ‘A View of the Development of Im/Politeness Theories from an East Asian Language with Honorification’. What I mean by ‘an East Asian language with honorification’ is the Japanese language, which has an elaborate system of honorifics called *keigo* in Japanese. Honorification and related mechanisms of adjusting interpersonal ‘distance’ are, thus, important keywords (Takiura 2005); when discussing necessary and sufficient conditions for politeness theories to be fully compatible with Japanese, it is how they incorporate those formal elements that matters most. Seen from Japanese, the history of im/politeness theories looks like one of many challenges over the form and function of language, in terms of which we will have a better view of it, I believe.

The figure on the next page is an outline of my entire talk. As you can see, it is composed of two parts, i.e., domestic and international, which will be accompanied by an extra illustration and discussion. The five arrows with crosses represent the challenges that I will discuss. I will also display the pertinent part of the figure at the beginning of each section below. Now, we shall look at them on a one-by-one basis.

* This is the English version of my presidential lecture delivered at PSJ 2020. Later I gave a speech in English on the same topic for the 17th China Pragmatics Association, CPrA, in October 2021, of which this is the revised manuscript. I thank Professor/President Xinren Chen (陳新仁) and the members of the board. I would also like to thank my peer reviewer for her/his helpful suggestions from the reader’s point of view, and Professor/Chair of the editorial board Hiroaki Tanaka (田中廣明). Issues in sections 1 and 2 overlap with those in Takiura (in press). Of course, all the remaining errors are the responsibility of the author.

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 A History of 'challenges' in (Im)Politeness Research
 Masato Takiura©

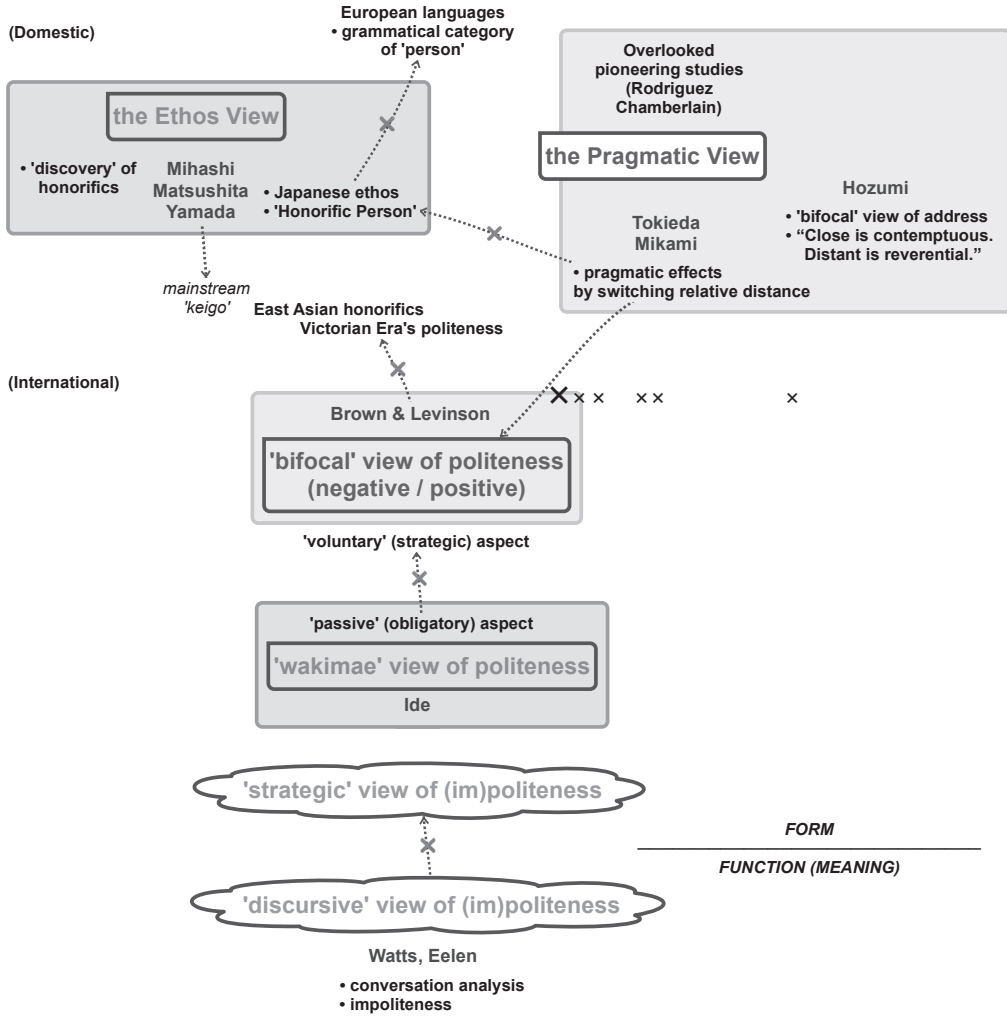
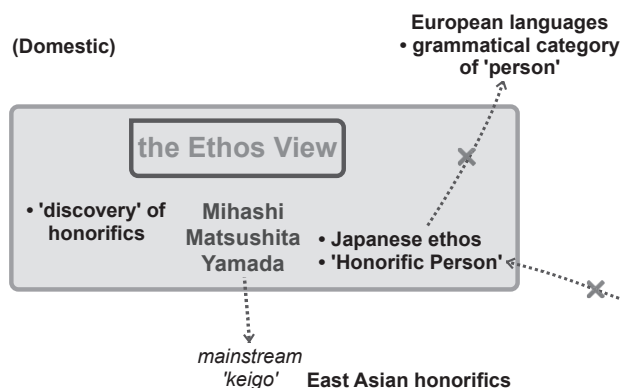


Figure 1: History of Challenges

(Domestic)

2. The ‘Ethos View’ of honorification



The first issue that I must point out is why honorification did not appear as an academic subject in Japan until the end of the 19th century, even though the Edo era had already witnessed a rise of *kokugaku* (国学), or studies on ‘what it is to be Japanese’. In 1892, the first essay focusing on Japanese honorifics was written by a Japanese scholar, Yōya Mihashi (三橋要也). In the context of world history, the year 1892 holds a significant implication: Japan was about to enter the race to acquire colonies, and in the next 10 years, it would wage two international wars, the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05). Historically speaking, to Japan, it was the age of building a nation-state, and ‘what it is to be Japanese’ was a matter of serious thought. He closed his essay with these words in a dramatic and passionate tone:

In our country, many honorifics have been used both in writing and speaking, and this fact will be enough to demonstrate that, as foreigners have lauded it as decorum in a country of men of virtue (君子), from ancient times people have been more compassionate and conform more to decorum than in other countries, including China and Western countries. [...] I sincerely hope that our honorification will maintain the true value of our language, whether spoken or written, and eternally keep our country in this place of honour.

(Mihashi 1892; my translation)

Honorification was thus ‘discovered’ as a symbol of the Japanese ethos, and since most scholars of the next generation adopted this view, the Ethos View formed the keynote of the mainstream of honorification research.

Grammarians like Daizaburō Matsushita (松下大三郎) and Yoshio Yamada (山田孝雄) seemed even more enthusiastic than Mihashi about finding characteristics unique to the Japanese language, because they noticed that Japanese lacks grammatical categories such as case, number, and gender for nouns, tense and number for verbs, and person for both nouns and verbs, which many European languages have. They strongly wished to

find a grammatical category which would compensate for this lack. Matsushita believed that honorification was exactly what he longed for. He took the sentence below as an example, and explained how honorification worked grammatically (Matsushita 1923).

- (1) *Anata wa go-endan no koto ni tuite,*
 you TOP talk-of-marriage(Hon) GEN matter DAT concerning
o-tōsama ni nan to mōsiage asobasi
 father(HON) DAT what QUOT say(HON[Obj]) AUX(HON[Sub])
masi-ta?
 AUX(HON[Hr])+TNS(past)
 ‘What did you tell your father about the talk of marriage?’

He pointed out that this sentence contains the most complex honorification possible because it involves ‘a possessive honorific, an object honorific, a subject honorific, and an addressee honorific’. Honorifics function as indices to show who is superior to whom, and make it quite easy to picture the hierarchical relationships among the participants of this sentence. This was to him a reflection of the Japanese ethos, or people’s consideration for others (思いやり), and finally he declared the following:

With no honorifics, the sentence above would be: ‘What did you tell your father about the talk of marriage?’, but this is only the Western way of saying things and, in the eyes of the Japanese, nothing other than a smattering of language, or something that people lacking in sympathy to others would say. People who use such language are an animal species that understand science; ‘science animals’ (科学獣), so to speak. (Matsushita 1923; my translation)

Yoshio Yamada also believed that Japanese honorification was unique among the world’s languages. Driven by a sense of determination, he published the first monograph on honorification in 1924, contending that the conditions of honorific usage reflected the system of the grammatical person. He wrote solemnly as follows:

Although it is needless to say that Japanese verbs do not have person, honorifics perform functions equivalent to it, and this should not be understood as a coincidence, but rather as a direct consequence of the use of honorification.

It is observed that honorification indeed has much to do with person distinctions of sentences. They correspond as follows: in principle, in first person sentences humble forms are used, in second person sentences respectful forms are used in regard to the second person, and in third person sentences general polite forms are used.

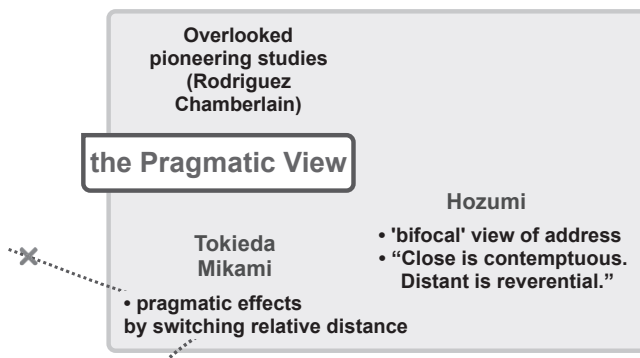
(Yamada 1924; my translation).

Thus, Yamada became known as an advocate of the Person View (人称説) of honorification. When it comes to the validity of the view itself, however, we unfortunately have

to say that it was invalid from the very beginning. Yamada (and Matsushita) regarded the distinction between participants of the speaker's side and those of the hearer's side as identical to that of the 1st and 2nd persons, respectively, in grammatical terms. However, those of the speaker's side can be any of the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd persons in reality, and the same is true for those of the hearer's side. That is why we have to say that the notion of the 'Honorific Person', so to say, was one thing, and person as a grammatical category was quite another.

What then made them ask for the moon, so to speak? My answer is that their 'discoveries' were a result of their challenges against European languages. Additionally, even though the Ethos View could only be an ideological position without the support of the 'Honorific Person', it is still alive in Japan today. In a public opinion poll held by the government in 2015, two-thirds of the respondents chose the option which said, 'In the future, rich expressions with honorifics should continue to be valued as traditional and beautiful Japanese'(Agency for Cultural Affairs 2016). This is the reality we see today.

3. The 'Pragmatic View' of honorification and address



Did anybody challenge the Ethos View? Yes. Two challengers appeared, both of whom were prominent linguists and grammarians, namely Motoki Tokieda (時枝誠記) and Akira Mikami (三上章). Before talking about them, however, we must take a brief look at far earlier studies which were conducted by Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century and had been overlooked starting nearly 300 years ago. The most outstanding work was João Rodriguez's *Arte da Lingoa de Iapam* (1604–08) (日本大文典), which was written in Portuguese. Since he was a Jesuit translator, it was only natural that he took an interest in the pragmatic aspects of honorifics and left behind detailed and precise descriptions of them. What deserves special mention is that he detected the 'relative' nature of usage conditions perfectly and accounted for those kinds of usages in which one reduces the degree of respect to the targeted participant when the hearer is even superior and in the highest rank. Unfortunately, Rodriguez wrote his book in re-

ports to his headquarters, and so it had little influence on Japanese academia. I must quickly add here, however, that about 300 years later, B. H. Chamberlain, who was staying in Japan to teach at the University of Tokyo, took the opportunity to read a copy of Rodriguez's book in Paris, and reflected what he learned from Rodriguez in his own book on Japanese grammar, *A Handbook of Colloquial Japanese*. Chamberlain's book was published in 1888–1889, four years before Mihashi's first essay. It is regrettable, however, that we cannot find traces of Chamberlain's work in early research on honorification.

Thus, it was not until about 340 years after Rodriguez's book that Tokieda and Mikami independently discovered the same pragmatic nature of Japanese honorification. I will focus on Tokieda here. Strongly conscious of Yamada, he emphasised that honorification is not based in 'ethos', but in social indexing and people's linguistic awareness of it:

Therefore, what we understand from honorific expressions is not whether the speaker has the virtue of consideration for others or not, but whether he has the proper discernment to discriminate such [social] relationships, and how he does so. This may sound as if I were raising an unnecessary objection to the view that Japanese honorification reflects people's virtue of consideration for others, but, on the contrary, honorification cannot show its true value until such a view is overcome. (Tokieda 1941; my translation)

He was radical enough to insist that the recognition of relationships is not in and of itself respect for people, writing as follows:

The honorification of content words is not so much an expression of the speaker's respect as one of his discernment, which reflects his recognition of hierarchical or positional relationships between referents, and thus, it is anything but a reflection of respect itself. (Tokieda 1941; my translation)

My listeners/readers may well notice the term 'discernment', or *wakimae*, which would become popular in politeness research about half a century later with Sachiko Ide's (井出祥子) challenge to Brown and Levinson. Please also notice, however, that Tokieda and Ide used the same word, *wakimae*, in different meanings, in that Tokieda's point was in discussing the considerable pragmatic variation of uses depending on the awareness of human relationships (関係認識) of the speaker. To illustrate this, he compares the two sentences in (2).

- (2) [The speaker talks about/to a guest (one and the same person) who is inferior to himself.]
- a. [talking to a servant]
- X san wa ko rare-ta ka?
- Mr.X TOP come AUX(HON[Sub])+PERF SFP(qst)

- ‘Has Mr.X arrived?’
- b. [talking directly to the guest]
- Yaa, ki-ta ka.
- Hi come+PERF (plain) SFP(heu)
- ‘Hey, welcome!’ (Tokieda 1938)

In Tokieda’s mind, a decent theory of honorification must provide a clear explanation for the apparent contradiction between (2a) and (2b) that the speaker can treat an inferior guest with honorifics when talking to a servant, whereas he uses the plain (non-honorific) form when talking directly to the guest. He explains this in terms of the point-of-view movement (視点移動 [<重点の移動]): in honorification in modern Japanese, the speaker is supposed to move the honorific point of view to where the hearer is. Therefore, the choice of the speaker of (2) to use honorifics towards his inferior guest when talking to a servant makes sense because it reflects the servant’s point of view, in which the guest must be treated with honorifics. This kind of point-of-view movement is to him indispensable for properly understanding and accounting for the general usage conditions of Japanese honorifics. That is why he would not accept a definition of honorification in terms of the feeling of respect.

Tokieda’s theory of honorification should be appreciated as pioneering and could be called the Pragmatic Index View (語用論的指標説) of honorification, in that it was associated with conditions for using social indices. It is unfortunate, however, that scholars of the next generations were reluctant to accept his theory because of his denial of respect in accounting for honorification.

I regret that I cannot afford to discuss Mikami’s theory of Japanese honorification (Mikami 1942, 1955), but would like to emphasise here that both scholars looked at dynamic aspects of Japanese honorification, and their observations and speculations revealed that using honorifics is not a mere passive sociolinguistic obligation, but an active, and thus pragmatic, expression of the speaker’s recognition of the human relationships in question. In their challenge against the mainstream Ethos View, they undoubtedly gained an insight into the function of Japanese honorification.

3.1. ‘Close is contemptuous. Distant is reverential.’ (近きは賤しく遠きは貴し)

There is another noteworthy figure whose name has hardly been recognised in Japanese linguistics, but his work may have been the most pioneering in politeness research in Japan. Nobushige Hozumi (穂積陳重) was one of the first legal scholars of modern Japan and is known as a drafter of the Civil Code in the Meiji era. As one of the earliest students dispatched abroad, he studied anthropology, sociology, and law in Britain and Germany. This led him to explore manners and customs as a foundation for laws.

In a study of *imina*, the posthumous name in the background of the practice of hiding the real name of a noble person, Hozumi appealed to an anthropological scheme of address based on the relative distance of human relationships. (As a matter of fact,

that was also his challenge against the opinions of *kokugaku* scholars of the Edo era, such as Norinaga Motoori (本居宣長.) By classifying types of address in terms of semantic functions such as ‘respectful’, ‘disrespectful’, and ‘endearing’, he gives an interpretation in which these functions are derived from the relative distance between interlocutors. This pragmatic mechanism is expressed in a short and simple phrase: ‘Close is contemptuous. Distant is reverential’ (Hozumi 1919). Although Hozumi did not directly mention Durkheim, an early French sociologist, his frame of reference has much in common with Durkheim’s, sharing a base in taboo theory (Durkheim 1912).

Therefore, we call Hozumi’s theory of address the Distance View. The passage below clearly shows how appropriately he understood the effects of relative distance on human relations, including impoliteness as well as politeness, and how it accounted for pragmatic, rather than semantic, functions of many different address terms in Japanese.

Similarly, usage of second person pronouns shows that avoidance-based address conveys deference, while calling someone directly by name is equivalent to a contemptuous or abusive address unless the speaker and the person focused on are in a close relationship, such as parents and children, husbands and wives, or close friends. Generally speaking, second person pronouns have usages of respectful avoidance: the closer an address form gets to the focused person, the more intimate, or otherwise disrespectful, the attitude it implies, and the more distant from him the more deferential or reverential the attitude it implies. Due to this principle, it is usual that different address forms are used depending on the speaker’s attitude towards the focused person, despite their proper meanings.

(Hozumi 1919; my translation)

One may readily notice that this bidirectional or bifocal framework is a perfect match for interpretation of functions of address based on Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987; hereafter referred to as ‘B&L’). The whole of Hozumi’s argument can be summarised as in Figure 2, and again, it may well be seen as a scheme of address in terms of the relative distance of human relationships.

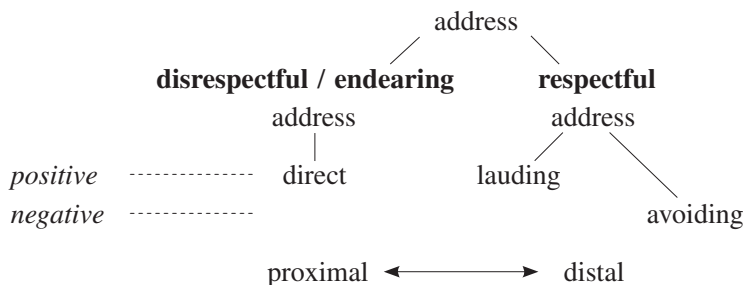


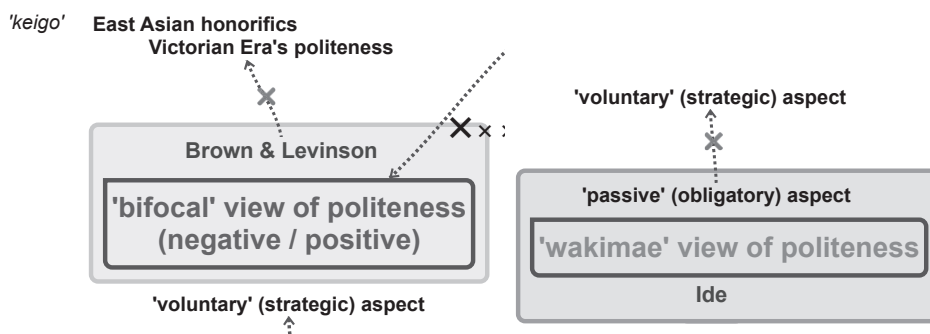
Figure 2: Hozumi’s Distance View of address

It is regrettable that this truly insightful discussion of Hozumi’s has not received much attention from linguists. This is partly because his study focused not on honorifi-

cation but on address, and partly because he was not a linguist but a legal scholar. Be that as it may, it is worth noting that the Pragmatic View of Tokieda, Mikami, and Hozumi shared a strong focus on the ‘bifocal’ aspects of pragmatic effects resulting from switching relative distance between participants, and thus their view should be quite compatible with bidirectional theories of politeness, with negative/positive, or distal/proximal, directions, like B&L’s. Hereafter, our discussion will turn to the international context.

(International)

4. B&L’s bifocal theory of politeness and criticisms of it



The introduction of ‘politeness’ into pragmatics in the 1970s to ‘80s ushered in a paradigm shift whereby pragmatics gained independence from semantics. Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness (1978/1987) examined people’s linguistic behaviours in face-to-face communication by employing an anthropological and sociological bifocal framework and seemed to provide a universal reference frame which could make it possible to compare languages with different preferences for politeness. In keeping with this, they extended the notion of politeness by adding a type, namely ‘positive politeness’. In a sense, this was a by-product of their idea of applying Durkheim’s distinction between negativity and positivity in religious rituals to linguistics, but there is another sense in which bringing up the concept of ‘positive politeness’ was itself a challenge against the old-style of understanding politeness. What did B&L challenge? One could imagine two modes of politeness: Victorian Era’s good manners in Britain and reverential ways of speech with honorifics in East Asian languages. As to the former, we can talk about Lewis Carroll’s Alice, who had trouble communicating with inhabitants there when she spoke in a very humble way, as she had always been told to, and only found herself understood and even accepted when she adopted precisely the opposite way of speaking. The norm in Wonderland was ‘hyper-positive’ politeness.

Our major concern is the latter type of language with honorifics such as Japanese. Its symbolic *keigo* was challenged, and what became of it? A counter-challenge was made immediately. Sachiko Ide (1989) made a critical argument in support of Japanese

honorification, emphasising that its practice is not of a strategic nature, but is in fact obligatory. Her claim was that when B&L used the word ‘politeness’, they meant only the voluntary aspect of communication, which she called the ‘volition’ mode, while Japanese people choose to use honorifics when they are expected to, and the normative and thus passive aspect becomes dominant in Japanese polite communication, which she called the ‘discernment’, or *wakimae*, mode. This challenge seemed to be taken seriously as a criticism by a non-Western languaculture and was accepted to a substantial extent in the international pragmatics community. As a result, the word *wakimae* is sometimes used as a technical term.

Now, I would like to discuss two issues. First, B&L’s point clearly lay in advocating the ‘bifocal’ view of politeness as opposed to ‘unifocal’ views. To put it plainly, their intention was to make it clear that the ‘positive’ aspect of communication reflects close interactions on a sympathetic basis, and so it follows that such positivity should be entitled to the name of politeness for close relationships. In this respect, Ide seemed to put too much emphasis on the contrast between voluntary and normative, or active and passive aspects of politeness, and as a result, there seemed to be a switch in the argument’s focus. Around 15 years later, to reconcile the conflict, Pizziconi (2003) pointed out that communication in every society has both ‘volition’ and ‘discernment’ aspects, and it is just a matter of degree which aspect is dominant in a languaculture, writing as follows:

Sharing a set of assumptions on, or having negotiated what constitutes ‘expected behaviour’ (rights and duties of the participants), allows all resulting marked uses to be exploited to convey other relevant meanings. In this sense, the need of *wakimae* (discernment) is vital in communication, regardless of the language.

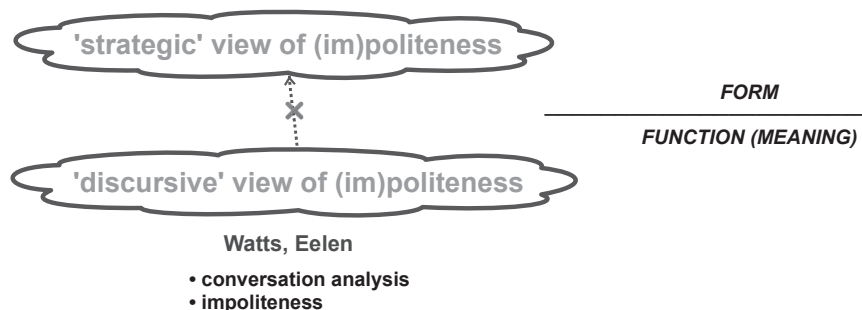
(Pizziconi 2003)

To take business etiquette as a typical example, even though it is something that one is supposed to care about in business, it would sound too strong to say, on this ground, that it is nothing more than normative and passive.

My second issue is concerned with what the term *wakimae*, or ‘discernment’, means. As noted in the previous section, it was originally introduced by Tokieda. Although its basic meaning is common to both Tokieda and Ide, referring to a state of recognition of social relations, the intended implications seem to differ considerably between them. Tokieda conceived of the term as a basis of social deixis which allowed his theory to grasp the dynamic aspects of polite/impolite communication with honorifics, and to be potentially bifocal. To Ide, the term meant something that one should obey as a token of one’s consideration for others. Her *wakimae* even made her look as if she stood with the Ethos View, irrespective of her intention.

Even though B&L’s theory has been exposed to a great deal of criticism by post-modernists, it seems to me that their idea of understanding human relationships in terms of bidirectional scale or relative distance remains valid as a reference frame.

5. The ‘Discursive Turn’ and post-modern approaches to im/politeness in Japanese



Around the turn of the century, all theories with strategic frameworks were challenged by post-modernists, including Watts and Eelen (e.g., Eelen 2001, Watts 2003). Since post-modernist approaches focus more on hearers' interpretation than speakers' intention, research thereafter has been conducted on the 'discursive' basis, which must include a major shift from form to function (after the terminology of historical pragmatics, e.g., Jacobs and Jucker 1995), thus resting more on conversation analysis (CA). This implies another shift of focus from politeness to impoliteness. Generally speaking, languages have a greater number of polite forms than impolite forms, and consequently focusing more on function is more likely to bring impoliteness into view. (Additionally, the truth is that people are not always kind.)

What this means seems quite different from Japanese, in that one cannot say anything in the language without paying attention to the form relating to interpersonal functions. In a somewhat different sense from early grammarians' views, honorification can be regarded as a grammatical category, seeing that one must always make a choice between honorific and non-honorific forms in predicates and other parts. It follows, then, that the post-modernist shift should not be 'from form to function' but 'to form and function'. As a matter of fact, the matter of how form and function become entangled and interact with each other in a given context should be of major interest when examining Japanese conversation in pragmatic terms.

As an illustration, considering an English text translated from Japanese will provide a better understanding of this aspect in the honorific language. In the next and last subsection, we will give this a try.

5.1. An illustration and discussion: A discursive conversation in Natsume Soseki's *Light and Darkness*

Natsume Soseki (夏目漱石) is one of the most well-known novelists in Japan, and the novel titled 'Light and Darkness', or *Meian* (明暗), is his unfinished posthumous work. I would like to look at a few fragments of conversation among three participants, two of whom are brother and sister, and two of whom are husband and wife, to show

what is needed to consider in terms of im/politeness. First, let me introduce the participants. The main character is Tsuda Yoshio, who has just undergone an operation for haemorrhoids, stays in bed, and wants the money that his sister has brought with her. Hideko, or O-Hide, is Tsuda's younger sister, who is angry at his arrogant attitude towards borrowing money from their father and wants him to apologise before taking her money. Nobuko, or O-Nobu, is Tsuda's wife, a wasteful person herself, who has hard feelings towards O-Hide and is looking for a chance to hit back against her.

Thus, we look at the two fragments below, which are different parts of the flow of conversation.¹

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- (i) O-Nobu peered at Tsuda, who still was silent.
O-Nobu: 'Please say something, dear.' [H~P]
Tsuda: 'What do you want me to say?' [P]
O-Nobu: 'Why, to say thank you, of course. [P] To say thank you to O-Hide for her kindness.' [P]
Tsuda: 'I don't like being burdened with a sense of indebtedness just to receive such a small amount of money.' [P]
 O-Hide defended herself in a somewhat annoyed tone.
O-Hide: 'But haven't I said just now that I'm not trying to make you feel indebted to me?' [H]
 O-Nobu did not alter her previous calm tone.
O-Nobu: 'That's why I'm telling you to stop being so stubborn and to say thank you. [H~P] If you don't like borrowing money, it's all right if you don't accept it. But just say thank you.' [H~P]
 O-Hide had an odd expression on her face. Tsuda indicated by his attitude that he wanted O-Nobu to stop saying such ridiculous things.
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- (ii) O-Hide: 'What should I do, O-Nobu? [H] Since Yoshio speaks the way he does, should I leave the money and go?' [H]
O-Nobu: 'I really don't know. [P] That's up to you to decide.' [H~P]
O-Hide: 'I see. And yet he says he absolutely must have this money.' [H~P]
O-Nobu: 'Yes, perhaps that's true for Yoshio. [H] But as far as I'm concerned, it's quite the opposite.' [P]
O-Hide: 'Do you mean you and he are entirely separate?' [P]
O-Nobu: 'No, not at all. Since we're husband and wife, we're very much united.' [P]

¹ To help the readers to grasp the connotations of exchanging im/politeness, I symbolise the speech styles as [H(onorific)], [P(lain)], and [H~P(Honorific~Plain)] at the end of each sentence.

O-Hide: ‘But, didn’t you just say’

O-Nobu did not allow her to finish.

O-Nobu: ‘But when it’s a question of something my husband positively needs, I’m quite capable of providing it.’ [P]

She then drew out from her obi(*) the check she had just received from her uncle on the previous day.

(*) a broad sash worn with a Japanese kimono

(Soseki, Natsume, *Light, and Darkness*, sections 106, 107, Kindle version).

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You probably have no trouble getting the idea that Tsuda always sounds impudent and arrogant, O-Hide is of strong will and behaves like a righteous person, and O-Nobu sounds quite tricky, pretending to reprove her husband and playing the fool with O-Hide at one time. This may be sufficient to follow the storyline, but taking form into account will enable you to realise that this is an ego battle, or a clash of the three egos.

Tsuda talks in plain, or non-honorific, style all the time, sounding overtly impolite or rude. O-Hide speaks in polite style all the time, as if politely preaching to her brother. So far, so good. The question is O-Nobu’s tactic way of using and shifting her styles of speech. In passage (i), she makes herself sound like a faithful wife by treating Tsuda with honorifics on the one hand, and on the other hand sound as if showing deference to her sister-in-law, O-Hide, by giving directions to her husband in plain style. In contrast, towards the end of passage (ii), she begins to downshift while talking directly to O-Hide, and change into plain form, finally using sentence-final particle *-yo* four times in a row, which makes her sound quite pushy.

Without consideration of form, the flux between politeness and impoliteness in Japanese would be difficult to grasp. I would like to add here that such a flux can be communicated by controlling the relative distance by switching honorifics on and off. That is why I would like to maintain that seeing how form and function interact with each other is of crucial importance in an honorific type of language like Japanese. This is a view of the im/politeness seen in an East Asian language with honorification, where form speaks as eloquently as function.

Abbreviations

(HON)	honorific	GEN	genitive
(HON[Sub])	subject (agent) honorific	PERF	perfective
(HON[Obj])	object (recipient) honorific	SFP(heu)	sentence-final particle (heuristic)
(HON[Hr])	hearer honorific	SFP(qst)	sentence-final particle (question)
		QUOT	quotative
AUX	auxiliary	TNS	tense
DAT	dative	TOP	topic

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