

# Requests in Japanese: A study through e-mail messages

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Japanese people have often been cited as an example of being indirect in previous studies (e.g., Clancy 1986; Lebra 1976; Nakane 1970; Okabe 1983) and Japanese culture has been considered as a negative politeness culture, i.e., showing distance and deference (Brown and Levinson 1987). However, some recent studies (e.g., Fukushima 2000; Rinnert and Kobayashi 1999; Rose 1996) show that this is not always the case. That is, in these studies more direct requests were used in Japanese than in English.

Keeping the above in mind, this paper investigates requests in Japanese. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies, i.e., bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record strategies, were used to classify the data. The functions and payoffs of each politeness strategy are carefully examined and the classification of Japanese requests is considered. By including positive politeness strategies, which have been underspecified (Spencer-Oatey 2000; Pizziconi 2003: 1473), this paper attempts to fill the gap in politeness research. Analyzing the data, directness level and formality level, and such sociopragmatic variables as power, distance and imposition were considered.

Japanese university students served as the informants in this study. They collected e-mail messages, and they selected the e-mail messages containing requests which they thought they could make public. In this way, a possible ethical problem could be avoided. The reason why I use e-mail data is that written data are in this way collected through the written medium. In many previous studies, there was a mismatch between the data type (e.g., spoken data) and the medium (e.g., written), one example being a DCT. This limitation is overcome by using e-mail data. When a discussion over authenticity was conducted, spoken data have been the main concern. However, there are written authentic data, too. For example, letters, diaries and e-mail messages are written authentic data. Among them, e-mail messages were chosen, because it has become very popular to exchange e-mail messages and especially young people these days send e-mail messages very often.

The results show that bald-on-record strategies and positive politeness strategies were frequently used, especially when S and H are equal in power and when they are close. The use of bald-on-record and positive politeness strategies contradicts stereotypical belief that Japanese are indirect. The data collection method, i.e., using e-mail data, may have influenced the result that off-record strategies were not very much used. The data in this study give important implications about Japanese requests in present-day Japan.

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