Interpersonal Functions of the Polite Forms *Desu/Masu* in Japanese Conversations

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This paper investigates how native speakers of Japanese (NSJ) choose the *desu/masu* polite forms or non-polite forms in conversations when they first meet and how they change these forms within 30 minutes. The data consist of seven dyad or three-person conversations by male adult participants. Each speaker's use of polite and non-polite forms in the first five minutes and the last five minutes are counted and compared to see if any shift of forms occurs. At the same time, all speakers' rates of participation in each conversation are compared by counting their Pause-bounded Phrasal Units. Conversational data analyzed quantitatively shows how NSJ in successful conversations use polite forms when they first meet and start mixing non-polite forms as they get to each other know better. By analyzing unfavorable comments by some participants in the follow-up interviews, it can be seen that using non-polite forms in Japanese with someone who is not so close may not help build friendly relationships.

Studies in inter-language pragmatics have shown that second language speakers transfer pragmatic strategies of their native language in intercultural conversations and are misunderstood by speakers of other languages (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Kasper & Rose, 2001). This study is a part of group research projects which compare conversational styles of native speakers of Japanese (NSJ) and English (NSE) and examine causes of such misunderstandings by analyzing conversational data. We assume that there are cultural or social norms that a speaker of each language follows and transfers the norms when speaking with culturally and socially different speakers. The present study focuses on first encounter conversations to see how NSJ balance deference and closeness by investigating the uses of polite and non-polite forms.

Japanese language has a long history of elaborate honorific systems, but studies of honorifics in a Western linguistic framework started in the middle of the Meiji Era towards the end of the nineteenth century, apart from the seminal works by Portuguese and British scholars which were written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Since the late twentieth century, it has become customary to divide Japanese honorifics into three categories: *sonkeigo* (respect language), *kenjogo* (humble language), and *teineigo* (polite language). *Sonkeigo* is employed as a means of raising addressee status and *kenjogo* as a means of lowering it. *Teineigo* is used in formal occasions or among speakers who are not very close to each other (Hayashi & Minami, 1974; Kikuchi, 1994; Nakayama, 2003; Takiura, 2005). The present study focuses on the use of polite forms *desu/masu* and non-polite forms which belong to the *Teineigo* category.

In Japanese, there are two kinds of sentence final markers, the polite form *desu/masu* and the non-polite forms as illustrated in 1a and 1b.

1a. *Watashi ga ikimasu*. "I will go."
1b. *Watashi ga iku.* "I will go."

<div align="right">(Otsuka, 2009, p. 1)</div>

The polite form with *masu* (1a) is used in formal occasions, such as business meetings, conferences, lectures, public announcements, news reports, and such, or among speakers who do not know each other well. The polite form indicates distance of relationship as well as status or age differences. The non-polite form (1b) is used in casual occasions and used by speakers who are equal in status or age, and by those who are close to each other such as friends or family members.

As to the use of *desu*/*masu* polite forms and non-polite forms, Cook (1996, 1999) points out that they are not only speech level markers but are "indicators of distance and proximity" (Cook 1996, p. 4). As she points out, *desu*/*masu* are not just indicators of the level of politeness but show how the speakers react to ongoing conversational context. As Cook claims, it is important to see how conversation participants interact with each other in order to find how they use polite or non-polite forms in relation to how their distance or closeness changes. As Usami states, we cannot analyze polite forms or non-polite forms correctly out of context and it is necessary to examine them from a "discourse politeness point of view" (Usami, 1997, p. 241). Concerning the choice of polite and non-polite forms, Nakayama (2003) shows in her analyses of five hours of conversational data between a pair of NSJ, who met once a week for eight weeks, that the uses of polite and non-polite forms fluctuate because not all speakers become closer to each other in accordance with the time they spend together. Her research suggests that the shift from polite to non-polite forms may not happen just because the length of their contact increases.

Mimaki (2002) explains that two factors affect the choice of polite and non-polite forms in Japanese. One factor is "a social norm of language use" that each speaker is required to follow in society, and the other factor is the speaker's "personal politeness strategy" (p. 57) that she uses according to various contexts. In speaking in polite forms, NSJ generally add sentence final particles or tentatively switch to non-polite forms to decrease the formality often expressed by *desu*/*masu* polite forms, as shown in Table 1. The polite form with d*esu*/*masu* is indicated by (+), *desu*/*masu* polite form with sentence-final particles such as *ne*/*yo*/*ka* to decrease formality is indicated by (+'), and non-polite forms to express closeness or casualness is indicated by (0). In this paper, I combine (+) and (+') in Mimaki's classification as polite forms (+) and non-polite forms such as *da* forms, ending with nouns, or omission of predicates as (0).

Table 1
Mimaki's Classification

(+)	(+')	(0)
Did you go to Kyoto yesterday?		
kinoo Kyoto ni ikimashita ka	*kinoo Kyoto ni ikimashita?*	*Kinoo Kyoto ni itta?*
Yes, I did.		
Ikimashita	*ikimashita yo, ikimashitakedo*	*itta, itta yo*
That's right.		
so desu	*so desu ne, so desu yo, sodesu yone,.soossu, soossu yo soossu yone, so desho*	*so, so da, so dayo,. soodane, soda yone soo yo soo ne soo yone do daroo*

(Mimaki, 2002, p. 58: Romanized and English translation added by Tsuda)

Aim of this Study

This paper aims to investigate how native speakers of Japanese (NSJ) choose polite forms or non-polite forms when they first meet, and how they shift these forms in 30 minute conversations. Analysis shows which forms NSJ choose when they first meet, and when or how they shift the forms in half-hour conversations. The paper also compares successful conversations and unsuccessful conversations to find a norm that NSJ follow in their first-encounter conversations and clarify the reasons why a conversation fails.

Data

The study is based on analyses of dyad or three-person conversations among Japanese male adults. The participants of each group are asked to start and maintain a 30-minute conversation after they meet for the first time. Conversational data* are shown in Table 2.

In analyzing the data, the paper not only makes use of recorded conversational data but also the participants' responses in the follow-up interviews, which are recorded or written down right after each conversation. The participants are asked if they thought the conversation went well, if they enjoyed the conversation, and if they had favorable impressions of other participants. Such follow-up interviews give valuable insight into speaker intentions, their feelings, and responses in analyzing the data.

Method

In identifying utterance boundaries where sentence final markers can occur, conversational data was divided into Pause-bounded Phrasal Units (PPU) (Maynard, 1993), in which the polite forms and non-polite forms are counted for each PPU. Back-channels, such as "aa," "un," "hai," and so on, are excluded in this analysis. PPU with *desu/masu* or *desu/masu* with sentence final particles (+ and +' by Mikami's classification) are classified as polite forms (+), and PPU without those are classified as non-polite forms (0) in this paper.

Table 2

Conversation No.	Language	Participant Codes		
No. 12	Japanese	J13	J14	J15
No. 13	Japanese	J16	J17	J17
No. 14	Japanese	J19	J20	J21
No. 15	Japanese	J3	J7	
No. 16	Japanese	J22	J23	
No. 17	Japanese	J24	J25	J26
No. 19	Japanese	J7	J8	

Occurrences of the polite forms and non-polite forms used by each speaker in the first five minutes (I) and the last five minutes (II) are counted and the ratios of each speaker's polite forms in (I) and (II) are compared to see if any shift of forms occurs.

Total numbers of PPU of each speaker in I and II are also counted to see how actively each speaker participated in I and II.

Results and Discussion

Conversation in which Non-Polite Forms Increased

In conversations No. 15, 16, 17, and 19, uses of non-polite forms by all participants increased. In the follow-up interviews of these conversations, all of them commented that they enjoyed the conversations and did not have any unpleasant feelings towards each other. Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 show the results of these groups.

J3 and J7 in No. 15 are businessmen in their 40s. In the first five minutes, J3 uses more polite forms and speaks far less than J7 as the difference of their PPU ratios shows. Towards the end of the conversation, both J3 and J7 use more non-polite forms and the PPU ratios become more even, which indicates that both J3 and J7 came to feel that it was acceptable to use more non-polite forms.

J22 and J23 are graduate students studying at different universities. In the follow-up interviews, each commented that he enjoyed the conversation. In the first five minutes, J22 uses less polite forms than J23, whose use of polite forms decreases drastically towards the end. They equally participated in the conversation from the beginning to the end. Since the data was recorded at J22's university, this subject may have felt more at ease and used less polite forms than J23 from the beginning of the conversation.

J24, J25, and J26 are graduate students of a university, but they do not know each other because they belong to different divisions. In this conversation, their use of polite forms varies from the beginning, but use of polite forms decreases in the last five minutes as each participant participates more equally.

J7, the same person as in No. 15, and J8 are middle-aged business persons. In this conversation, uses of polite forms by J7 and J8 decrease slightly, but PPU ratio shows that J7 spoke twice as much as J8. This recording was made in J7's apartment in Canada when J8 visited him. Their wives know each other well, but they were meeting for the first time. Since J8 is new to Canada he took a listener role and J7 a speaker role.

Table 3
(No. 15)

Time	Code	+	0	+ratio	Total PPU	PPU ratio
I	J3	20	5	80%	25	36%
I	J7	24	21	53%	45	64%
II	J3	24	29	45%	53	45%
II	J7	25	39	39%	64	55%

Table 4
(No. 16)

Time	Code	+	0	+ratio	Total PPU	PPU ratio
I	J22	17	21	45%	38	48%
I	J23	29	12	71%	41	52%
II	J22	21	31	40%	52	50%
II	J23	19	32	37%	51	50%

Table 5
(No. 17)

Time	Code	+	0	+ratio	Total PPU	PPU ratio
I	J24	45	30	60%	75	60%
I	J25	20	17	54%	37	30%
I	J26	10	2	83%	12	10%
II	J24	22	30	42%	52	38%
II	J25	16	36	31%	52	38%
II	J26	24	10	71%	34	24%

Table 6
(No. 19)

Time	Code	+	0	+ratio	Total PPU	PPU ratio
I	J7	31	35	46%	66	79%
I	J8	9	9	50%	18	21%
II	J7	29	44	40%	73	68%
II	J8	17	18	48%	35	32%

Conversations in which Non-Polite Forms Did Not Increase

Participants in conversations No. 12, 13, and 14 are graduate students who belong to the same university in the Kansai area of Japan. Although the aim was to record first encounter conversations, it turned out that J13 and J15 in No. 12, J17 and J18 in No.13, and J20 and J21 in No. 14, recognized each other's faces although they did not know each other well.

In No. 12, all three participants had favorable impressions of each other and enjoyed the conversation. Although J13's uses of non-polite forms increased, J14 and J15 used more polite forms in the last five minutes. In the follow-up interview, J13 said it was natural to speak in

Table 7
(No. 12)

Time	Code	+	0	+ratio	Total PPU	PPU ratio
I	J13	18	6	75%	24	26%
I	J14	28	24	54%	54	57%
I	J15	10	6	62%	16	17%
II	J13	22	18	55%	40	43%
II	J14	23	10	70%	33	35%
II	J15	17	4	81%	21	22%

Table 8
(No. 13)

Time	Code	+	0	+ratio	Total PPU	PPU ratio
I	J16	5	20	20%	25	23%
I	J17	10	37	21%	47	44%
I	J18	1	35	3%	36	33%
II	J16	4	16	20%	20	19%
II	J17	0	46	0	46	43%
II	J18	0	30	0	30	28%

polite forms since their conversation was recorded in a professor's office and this may explain their persistent use of polite forms.

In No. 13, J17 and J18 knew each other and spoke in non-polite forms. They also spoke in their local dialect. In the follow-up interview, J16 commented that he did not enjoy the conversation. He did not like the way J17 spoke in a high-toned voice and he would not speak like he did if he was speaking to a person whom he was meeting for the first time. J17 said he chose to talk first because he wanted to avoid silence. He was not aware that J17 and J18 were speaking casually while J16 was speaking politely. J17 mentioned that he made an effort to offer a topic for J16 to talk about towards the end of the conversation. J18 said he chose to use non-polite forms since he knew J17. He also commented that he felt uncomfortable about J16's use of polite forms.

In No. 14, J20 and J21 knew each other and spoke in non-polite forms from the beginning and they spoke in the Kansai dialect. J19 knew neither of them and he spoke in standard Japanese and used more polite forms. His reaction to the conversation was not very positive and he felt uncomfortable with the way J21 spoke. J20 said he enjoyed the conversation and he had favorable impressions of both J19 and J21. He was amazed at the way J21 disclosed various episodes about his university professors and courses. J21 said that he did not feel uncomfortable about J19's use of polite forms since he does not speak the local dialect. He said he spoke as he normally would and spoke in non-polite forms.

Table 9
(No. 14)

Time	Code	+	0	+ratio	Total PPU	PPU ratio
I	J19	3	9	25%	12	14%
I	J20	4	19	17%	23	27%
I	J21	3	48	6%	51	59%
II	J19	25	9	71%	34	34%
II	J20	0	16	0	16	16%
II	J21	0	50	0	50	50%

Analysis

Conversations which Followed a Japanese Norm

The results of No. 15, No. 16, No. 17, and No. 19 show that NSJ shifted their styles from polite to non-polite forms within half an hour of meeting. The participants spoke more casually with each other in the last five minutes, which is shown by the increase of the ratio of non-polite forms. They had more equal chances to speak in the last five minutes, which is indicated by the ratio of total PPU. These results correspond with their positive responses in the follow-up interviews; they thought the conversations went well, enjoyed the conversations, and had favorable reactions to other participants. The results suggest that NSJ start their conversations with polite forms when they first meet, and gradually start using non-polite forms even in a half an hour conversation.

Conversations which Deviated from the Norm

A seemingly unsuccessful conversation. In Group 12, although J13's ratio of polite forms decreases from 75% (I) to 55% (II), J14's and J15's ratios of polite forms increase in the last five minutes. In this conversation, three graduate students talk about Nara, where their university is located. J15 scarcely speaks in the first five minutes. In the follow-up interview, each participant in Group 12 said he enjoyed the conversation and did not have any unpleasant feelings towards the other speakers. They unanimously answered that they chose to speak in polite forms because they had not met before and moreover, the recording was made in a professor's office, which may have also affected their use of polite forms. In this conversation, a different factor as well as the relationship of the participants affected their use of polite and non-polite forms, which seems to explain why non-polite forms did not increase even though the conversation went smoothly.

Conversations full of colloquial forms and negative follow-up responses. The result of No. 13 seems to show that the use of non-polite forms and local dialect may be threatening to some conversation participants who do not know the other participants well. Although J17 and J18 have met before, J16 has never met them. A few minutes after they spoke in polite forms, J17 and J18 started speaking in a local dialect. They also mixed colloquial expressions often used by young Japanese in their conversation:

38. J18: *Hyakumeetoru mo aruka sareru koto nai na*
 "We are seldom required to walk 100 meters (to find a vending machine)."
39. J17: *Maji ka yo* (laugh)
 "Really?" (colloquial)

In this conversation, only J16 speaks mainly in polite forms and has difficulty participating in the conversation. In the follow-up interview, he comments that he could not get along well with J17. J17 comments that he spoke a lot trying to avoid silence and pauses. He adds that he should have given J16 more chance to participate. J18 also realized that J16 was left out of conversation but did not know how to invite him in to their conversation.

Results

Analyses of successful Japanese conversations in the data show that NSJ choose to use polite forms when they speak to others when they first meet and they start mixing non-polite forms within half an hour. In the conversations in which the participants responded positively, participants had more equal chances to speak in the last five minutes even when a particular speaker led their conversation in the beginning. Adult NSJ seem to consider it appropriate to use polite forms for first-encounter conversations and gradually mix non-polite forms, and to make an effort to provide appropriate topics so that every participant is given a chance to talk.

In one conversation, the participants were affected by the place where the conversation took place and they made a conscious effort to use polite forms because they thought it appropriate to use polite forms even after they got to know each other better and enjoyed their conversations, as they were in a professor's office.

In conversations in which one or more participants gave unfavorable comments in the follow-up interviews, the person seems to have been left out because other participants spoke in non-polite forms from the beginning and he did not think it appropriate to use non-polite forms with people he did not know well. Non-polite forms can bond conversation participants when all the participants regard their use as appropriate, but it may keep a speaker from participating in conversations when he is not ready to speak in non-polite forms. Shift of forms involves negotiations with conversation partners and they need to monitor how their strategies are accepted when they shift from polite forms to non-polite forms.

In order to understand the use of polite forms and non-polite forms more fully, it is necessary to analyze the data qualitatively to investigate in what conditions the conversation participants choose polite forms or non-polite forms and what kind of sentence final particles are added, as shown in Mimaki's (2002) analysis. Such analyses will be able to clarify what triggers the shift of forms in more detail, but these analyses are beyond the scope of the present paper and the author thinks that qualitative analyses of the data will be essential in her future research.

Notes

*The conversational data was collected as a part of JACET Politeness Research Group project which started in 2003. In this study, only Japanese conversations by NSJ are used.

This paper was presented at the IAICS 2009 in Kumamoto as a paper for the panel entitled "Differences in Conversational Styles between Japanese and North American Speakers Formal and Informal Styles, Participation Organization and Topic Development."

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