Usami, Mayumi (2000). *Discourse Politeness in Japanese Conversation. Some Implications for a Universal Theory of Politeness.* **Tokyo: Hituzi Syobo. Paperback ISBN 4-89476-143-8; 343pp. Price: £35.00/Japanese yen ¥6560.**

Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness has dominated research and discourse about politeness in linguistic pragmatics for the past few decades. The basic premise of Brown and Levinson's theory is that politeness in any culture can be explained in terms of a limited number of universal phenomena, namely the construct of 'face' and certain social variables (that is, power, distance and relative imposition of particular acts). The underlying assumption made by Brown and Levinson, and adhered to in varying degrees by proponents of their theory, is thus that politeness can explained within a universal theoretical framework. However, while Brown and Levinson provided some initial evidence to support their hypothesis using examples drawing mainly from English, Tamil and Tzeltal, a number of researchers argued soon after its republication in 1987 that this supposedly universal theory does not adequately account for politeness phenomena across all languages. In particular, honorifics in (Modern Standard) Japanese were held to be clear examples of the failure of Brown and Levinson's theory (Ide 1989; Matsumoto 1988). In spite of these attacks on the universal applicability of Brown and Levinson's theory to politeness across cultures, these seminal papers were greeted with little or muted critical response from those who continued to use it in numerous studies throughout the 1990s.

In recent times, however, there has been the emergence of scholars who feverently argue Brown and Levinson's theory *can* in fact be applied to the study of politeness in (Modern Standard) Japanese, with this claim constituting the main thrust of Mayumi Usami's recent monograph, *Discourse Politeness in Japanese Conversation*. Her thesis is that if one applies the insights of Brown and Levinson's theory to an analysis of politeness at the discourse level, rather than focusing only on utterances or short sequences of utterances, then successful comparisons of politeness systems across cultures can indeed be made, giving implicit support to Brown and Levinson's claim that their theory of politeness is universally applicable.

In order to examine discourse politeness in (Modern Standard) Japanese, Usami analyses a considerable amount of data, 72 conversations between unacquainted people, focusing in particular on the effects of age and gender, and it is this analysis that forms the bulk of this work. While there are numerous elements that contribute to discourse politeness in Japanese, Usami chooses to focus primarily on speech level shift and topic initiations. Her conclusion from this analysis is that "Brown and Levinson's theory

accounts for discourse behaviour better than sentence behaviour in Japanese" (p.225). In particular, her results support the hypothesis that politeness is indeed influenced by the social variable of power (P).

A number of very important contributions to the continuing debate about politeness theory are made in this volume, and while there has been a movement in recent times to reject Brown and Levinson's approach in its entirety, in particular by those who advocate the discursive approach to analysing politeness (Eelen 2000; Mills 2003; Watts 2003), this work illustrates that such a move might result in the neglect of crucial insights from research that is based in some way on Brown and Levinson's approach.

The first key insight is that politeness should be analysed at the discourse level, a point with support from the emerging discursive approach to politeness. However, Usami goes further than analysing longer sections of text in claiming that politeness arises from the discourse *as a whole*, and is not simply the summative effect of various politeness forms and strategies found at the utterance or discourse level (p.4).

A second potential contribution is the groundwork that is laid for investigating the 'norms' relative to which politeness arises. The social psychological approach to examining how politeness arises relative to 'norms' developed by Usami has the advantage of identifying more rigorously the discourse defaults that constitute these norms, or what she terms "unmarked politeness" (Usami 2004), a notion similar to the concept of "anticipated politeness" proposed by others (Fraser 1999; Haugh 2003; Terkourafi 2003).

A third innovation in Usami's work is her examination of natural language data gathered under controlled conditions. By focusing on a particular text type (that is, conversations between people meeting for the first time), she is able to reduce possible variables, at least according to Brown and Levinson's view, to differences in power (P), as the variables of social distance (D) and relative degree of imposition (R) remain constant across all the conversations. Yet the data which emerged appeared natural according to follow-up surveys where participants were asked whether they felt their speech was influenced by being recorded and so on. While arranging these recordings and transcribing the conversations was most likely a fairly time-consuming task, the data set generated is much richer than that obtained through more traditional methods, such as discourse completion tests. It also allows, more importantly, analysis of politeness at the discourse level.

The work, however, would benefit from more indepth linguistic analysis of actual examples taken from the data set, an issue that arises perhaps from space limitations more than anything else. There is somewhat of an over-reliance on interpretation of

politeness behaviour based on percentages and correlations, with few actual examples to exemplify particular conclusions. Many of the conclusions might have been enriched using actual examples drawn from the data set.

For example, it was found in her analysis that unmarked utterances were found more frequently in conversations between younger and older interlocutors than in those between interlocutors of the same age. Usami thus argues that "the use of non-marked utterances might indicate the social distance between speakers" (p.165; see also pp.182-183), at least at the discourse level. However, according to Usami's coding system (pp.57-59, 136-139) the category of non-marked utterances includes not only word-level utterances and backchannels (e.g. *un* 'yeah'), but also trailing-off utterances (e.g. *Sore wa chotto…* 'that's a little bit…'). This means on closer examination these non-marked utterances actually have a variety of quite distinct functions, ranging from showing intimacy (e.g. the use of *un* 'yeah' rather than *ee* 'yes') through to showing tentativeness in asking questions (e.g. *onamae wa…?* 'your name…?'). This gives rise to the intriguing possibility that unmarked utterances have multiple functions at both the utterance and discourse level, something that warrants further in-depth analysis.

Another issue arising in this work is her counterargument to Japanese critics of Brown and Levinson's theory, in particular Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989). One of the key arguments underlying Usami's revival of Brown and Levinson's theory in studying politeness in (Modern Standard) Japanese is that the use of honorifics can be accounted for using the Brown and Levinson's formula for calculating the weight of a 'face-threatening act' (FTA) (that is, FTA $(W_x) = P(S, H) + D(S, H) + R_x$). In essence, it is argued that even if there is no 'imposition' involved in the act involved, if the P or D value is high, then the weightiness of the FTA will consequently be high, and politeness strategies are thus required (pp.21-22; see also Fukuda and Asato (2004: 1997) for another exposition of essentially the same idea underlying Usami's argument).

Yet there are problems with this kind of defence of Brown and Levinson's notion of face. What Usami is arguing, it appears, along with Fukuda and Asato (2004), is that politeness often (but not always) arises in (Modern Standard) Japanese due to differences in power or social distance between interactants. The problem with this line of argument is there is little room for Brown and Levinson's distinction between positive and negative face, as face is relegated to the role of an undifferentiated notion of 'positive social image' that can be lost or saved. These 'defences' of Brown and Levinson's theory are thus in fact misleading, as they amount to what appears to be a substantial revision of one of the most fundamental constructs underlying Brown and Levinson's theory. The fact that Usami rarely utilizes the notion of face in her

explication of examples of politeness in (Modern Standard) Japanese in the book also seems to imply that this key concept has been somewhat undermined through the discourse politeness approach.

Another somewhat controversial issue arises from Usami's (2002: 23) dismissal of folk or emic notions of politeness (e.g. *reigi tadashii, teinei* and related terms in Modern Standard Japanese) and face (e.g. *kao, menboku, taimen, mentsu* and related terms in Modern Standard Japanese) in her pursuit of a universal theory of politeness. There is little room in Brown and Levinson's theory for how the people actually involved in interactions where politeness arises perceive these events, and as preliminary investigations of the emic notions of politeness in Japanese indicate they are not equivalent to Brown and Levinson's notion (Haugh 2004), the conceptualisation of politeness is in need of more careful analysis. Moreover, while emic notions of face in (Modern Standard) Japanese appear to have some kind indirect relationship with politeness (Haugh 2005), Usami only notes that Brown and Levinson's notion of face differs from these emic notions without exploring their potential relationship to politeness in (Modern Standard) Japanese. This dismisal of emic understandings of politeness and face in Japanese is perhaps reflective of the fact that this work is based in a methodology that favours observer (second-order) over participant (first-order) interpretations, an issue that lies at the core of current debates about the future direction of politeness research.

Nevertheless, the power of Brown and Levinson's theory to inspire researchers to glean new insights into the nature of politeness across cultures is clear from the results of this study into discourse politeness in Japanese. Thus, while some researchers may themselves work in alternative paradigms, a necessary condition for continued evolution of the debate about politeness theory, it is worth remembering that in spite of flaws in Brown and Levinson's theory itself, empirical research based on it may have much to contribute to this debate. *Discourse Politeness in Japanese Conversation* is certainly an example of outstanding empirical work - which should prove useful to both learners and teachers of Japanese as well as scholars involved in politeness research in general – that should not be neglected in this rush to move beyond Brown and Levinson's model. In the process of the current paradigm shift in politeness theory, it would indeed be a great loss if much previous empirical work based on Brown and Levinson's model were to be neglected.

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